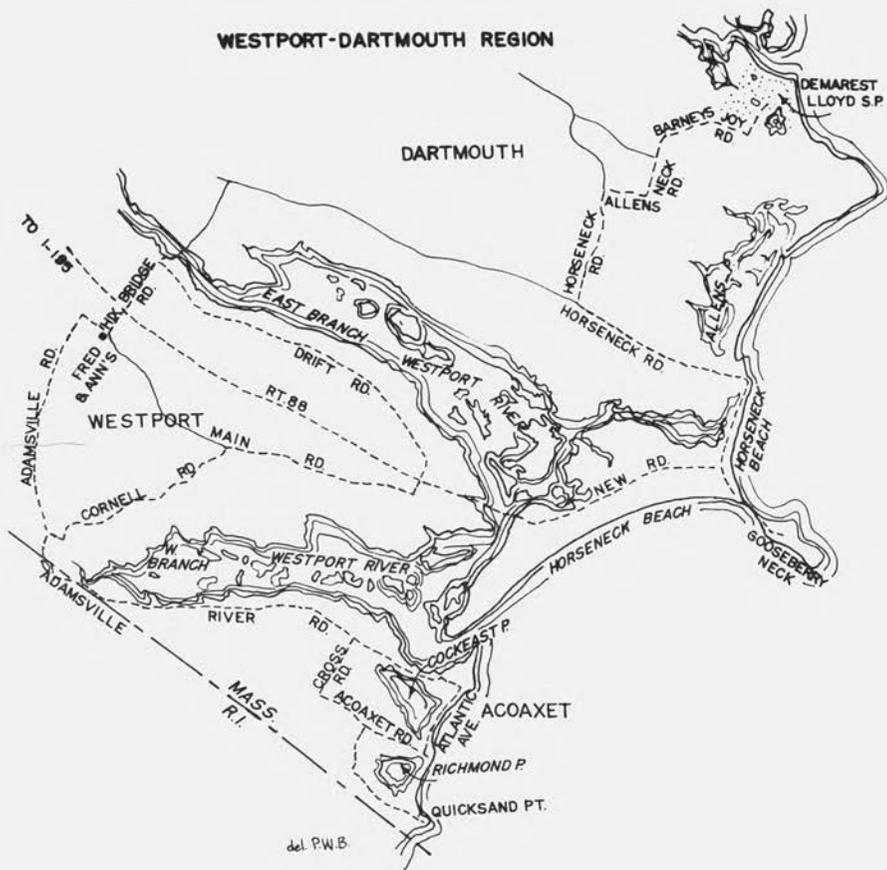


WESTPORT-DARTMOUTH REGION



BIRDING IN THE WESTPORT-DARTMOUTH REGION

Wayne R. Petersen, Abington

Massachusetts has long been known for its ecological diversity. Habitats run the gamut from modest, spruce-topped mountains in the northwest to the unbroken sandy strands of Cape Cod. Rolling interior hills flank the fertile flood plains of the Connecticut River Valley. In the northeast is the Merrimac River, with its wide estuarine mouth, so important to our birdlife, in historic Newburyport. The rocky seashore of Essex County provides a fine coastal plain. Offshore, some of the richest waters in New England swarm with myriads of marine forms. With such diverse habitats all within about a two-hours' drive, it is little wonder that Massachusetts offers fine opportunities to the birder interested in seeing a variety of species.

Moreover, Massachusetts lies at the range limits of a number of species of eastern North American birds. For a few, such as the Gray-cheeked Thrush and the Arctic Tern, this state constitutes a southern boundary. A greater number, however, reach the northern periphery of their ranges here. Birds in this group include Clapper Rail, Carolina Wren, White-eyed Vireo, Hooded Warbler and Seaside Sparrow. For the local bird-finder wishing to become familiar with some of these southern forms, few areas exist finer than the region along the western shore of Buzzard's Bay, near Westport and Dartmouth.

To reach the Westport-Dartmouth area from the north, take Rte. 24 into Fall River, where signs will direct you to I-195 East. After about two miles on I-195, turn south toward Horseneck Beach on Rte. 88 which leads into the heart of the Westport region.

Along this highway are extensive low Red Maple swamps interspersed with stands of Tupelo trees. In the drier areas, the slopes are covered with several species of oak and hickory, American Holly, Sassafras and a few Slippery Elms. These, along with many less common species, all typify the southeastern coastal-plain flora characteristic of the Upper Austral Zone, here seen at its northern fringe.

The best path to follow in this area will vary considerably depending upon the season. Since the region can be of interest at all times of the year, the following remarks will describe in a general way some of the areas which the writer has found most lucrative over the years.

Taking Hix Bridge Road to the right off Rte. 88 will bring you to an intersection in front of Fred and Ann's Restaurant. Again to the right several hundred yards north at Central Village, you will see Adamsville Road on the left. Follow this road west all the way to Adamsville, Rhode Island (near a small mill pond), where River Road will be seen on the left. River Road quickly re-enters Massachusetts and parallels the West Branch of the Westport River all the way to the little beach community of Acoaxet.

Both Adamsville Road and River Road take the bird-finder through fine birding habitat. The countryside is rural, with scattered dairy farms, old stone walls, secondary woodlots, brushy hedgerows and overgrown pastures. Here and there are pockets of both Red and White Cedar, the latter containing many of our interesting native orchids and carnivorous plants.

At selected stops along Adamsville Road, it is not at all uncommon to hear the husky songs of breeding White-eyed Vireos or the buzzy voices of Blue-winged Warblers, anytime from late spring through midsummer. Wood Pewees, Crested Flycatchers, Tufted Titmice, Veeries, Black-and-White Warblers and Ovenbirds are almost certain to be among the morning chorus in this area.

Once on River Road, the brushy thickets along the shore of the river nearly always have a Carolina Wren or two; and vireos of several species can often be heard singing at the same time. During the winter these same thickets are likely to hold a surprising variety of semi-hardy winterers -- all the mimics, Hermit Thrushes, blackbirds, towhees and a good variety of sparrows. The river itself contains a number of islands, many of which are marked by the bulky and conspicuous nests of Ospreys, certainly one of the ornithological highlights of the region. The Ospreys are easily observed from late March through early fall, but are at their best during the breeding season, when they can be seen bringing fish to the nestlings. There is often quite an array of herons and egrets wading in the shallows; and the Yellow-crowned Night Heron is as regular here as anywhere in Massachusetts. From late fall through early spring, the islands often provide perches for various species of hawks; while the river waters serve as a feeding area for Mute Swans and a variety of ducks, including Gadwalls, Canvasbacks and the three species of merganser.

Throughout the summer the wooded slopes on the opposite side of the road serve as home for a pair of Broad-winged Hawks; and most of the common breeding warblers can generally be heard singing, especially early in the morning. On these same slopes the patient listener may occasionally hear the ringing song of the Hooded Warbler, a rare summer resident in the area.

At the end of River Road, Cockeyeast Pond will be found on the right. In the winter months and in spring, this pond generally holds Mute Swans, Canvasbacks and, rarely, a Redhead. The brushy tangles at the north end of the pond are excellent habitat for Willow Flycatchers, Carolina Wrens, White-eyed Vireos and an occasional pair of breeding Yellow-breasted Chats.

Beyond Cockeyeast Pond lies a rocky shingle beach, which runs west to Quicksand Point. Offshore in season one can generally see both cormorants, loons, Horned Grebes, eiders and scoters. Small groups of Purple Sandpipers feed on the wave-washed rocks. Barrow's Goldeneye, Harlequin Duck and King Eider have all been recorded here from time to time. The beach itself, along with that of nearby Richmond Pond, often has Piping Plovers and flocks of ground birds in early spring. House Finches (!) and Savannah (Ipswich) Sparrows frequent the adjacent dune areas.

To bird along the East Branch of the Westport River, the visitor should return through Adamsville and then turn right on Cornell Road. At the intersection with Main Road, turn right again and follow it (see map) until Rte. 88 is reached, near where the bridge crosses the river. The Horseneck Beach Reservation, which is immediately beyond the bridge, is usually swarming with sun worshipers during the warmer months; but the extensive salt marshes and Pitch Pine barrens behind the beach often produce birds of interest. The salt meadows hold nesting marsh sparrows, and a diligent search can sometimes produce a Clapper Rail. The pine barrens contain many large, dead trees, which frequently serve as winter hawk perches. Great Horned Owls have been known to breed in old Osprey nests in this area.

At the western end of Horseneck Beach is a small, grassy peninsula called Gooseberry Neck. The tiny ponds and surrounding thickets there make this area particularly attractive to migrant shorebirds and landbirds, especially after the passage of a cold front in September or October. In late April and early May, a prolonged, southeasterly storm can push phalaropes onto shore in this area, sometimes in spectacular abundance. Such recent stragglers as the Ruff, American Avocet and Swallow-tailed Kite all testify to the merits of this choice spot.

At the eastern end of the beach, the road turns north and becomes Horseneck Road. Almost at once, Allen's Pond will be seen below the farm on the right. Here, the adjacent salt meadows support a large colony of Seaside and Sharp-tailed Sparrows, and Clapper Rails are regular. Few Seaside Sparrow colonies in Massachusetts are so readily accessible as this one. In spring and summer, many herons and an occasional Glossy Ibis feed in these marshes, while Least Terns are a common sight over the pond. In the fall, Peregrine Falcons may be seen harrying the many waterfowl that concentrate on Allen's Pond, including such fancy species as Whistling Swan and European Wigeon.

Continuing north along Horseneck Road, the bird-finder will pass many inviting woodlots and brushy swales, all with birds much like those described for the Acoaxet area. The farmlands in this area should be inspected closely for Red-shouldered Hawks, which surprisingly still remain regular in this part of Massachusetts. Also, several stations exist in this section for breeding Hooded Warblers.

About a mile beyond Allen's Pond, take the right fork of Horseneck Road and follow it until Allen's Neck Road appears on the right. Allen's Neck Road eventually becomes Barney's Joy Road, which leads to Demarest Lloyd State Park. This small reservation includes dry Pitch Pine and oak woods, a freshwater pond that is good for ducks, and a fine shingle beach with extensive flats at low tide. Piping Plovers are regular here all summer, and Savannah and Grasshopper Sparrows usually breed in the short grass field behind the beach. At dusk, Great Horned Owls can often be heard hooting in the woods along the Slocum River. Other breeding birds of this general area in recent years have included Barn Owls, Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, Lawrence's Warbler and, possibly, Red-headed Woodpeckers. Late in the fall, large flocks of Canada Geese, Ring-billed and Bonaparte's Gulls, Dunlins and Sanderlings gather on the flats at low tide; and during the winter months, both Golden and Bald Eagles have been seen hunting the river and its adjacent marsh islands.

While this description touches upon some of the more productive spots in the Westport-Dartmouth area, it is by no means exhaustive. Its objective is to stimulate the interest of potential visitors, so that they may discover for themselves why this region is one of the truly unique birding districts in eastern Massachusetts.

MUTE SWANS

Wayne Hanley, Massachusetts Audubon Society

On a recent railroad trip along the Connecticut shore, we noted at least two swans on every stream headed into Long Island Sound.

When we returned to the office, we received a note from a correspondent in South Yarmouth who mentioned that Mute Swans "seem to be turning up more and more frequently on the Bass River and small ponds."

Indeed, Mute Swans are turning up more frequently. If we all live long enough, we'll probably see them wintering along the Maine coast.

The Mute Swan is the huge white swan one sees as it sails sedately across the pond on many New England town commons. It is a European bird which was brought to America as poultry. Supposedly domesticated, the Mute Swan became an ornament on the ponds of the wealthy who summered on Long Island, New York.

When E. H. Forbush wrote a review of the birds of New England in 1925, the only swans he mentioned were the Whistling Swan, which breeds in the Arctic and occasionally becomes lost and wanders above New England on the way to Chesapeake Bay, and the Trumpeter Swan, a western bird that rarely has appeared in New England and for many years was an endangered species. He also noted that a Whooper Swan of Europe reputedly had been shot in Washington County, Maine, in 1903, but that he could find no trace of the specimen.

Forbush was spared the mention of a Mute Swan, for there was none wild in New England at that time.

In 1955, Ludlow Griscom could refer accurately to the Mute Swan as a "rare vagrant" in Massachusetts. He commented that the birds occasionally flew into the Commonwealth from an active colony in Little Compton, R.I.

Although Mute Swans had bred for several years in Connecticut, the first recorded nesting in the wild in Rhode Island was reported from Briggs Marsh in Little Compton in 1948. It was the nucleus of the active colony Griscom referred to. By 1965, the wild swan population in Rhode Island had risen to 416 birds.

At the moment, it is doubtful that anyone has accurate figures on the wild Mute Swan population in New England. It is known, for instance, that at least 300 birds now live on Martha's Vineyard. When an ice sheet covers the east branch of the Westport River in Westport, there must be at least 300 wild swans feeding at the leading edge of the ice. As the correspondent noted, there are wild swans on the Bass River. And the birds abound in Rhode Island and Connecticut wherever salt water keeps river shallows open.

So far as anyone knows, the New England population arose from domesticated Mute Swans that escaped from Long Island estates. There is a good possibility, however, that some of the birds escaped from captive flocks held by New Englanders. For instance, at Durham, N.H., there is a pair of Mute Swans that produces a few young. To date, none seems to have survived the gosling stage.

Mute Swans lay two to eleven eggs and if the nest survives raccoon raids or some game warden tiptoeing out to destroy it, the young still must grow fast enough and large enough to escape snapping turtles. Once Mute Swans mature, they can take care of themselves--and very well, too.