

## BIRDING ON THE BOLTON-LANCASTER FLATS

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Perhaps no other locality in Worcester County has a richer ornithological history than the Bolton-Lancaster Flats. The birding here is exciting and diverse, particularly considering its inland location. Least Bittern, Ruff, Cattle Egret and Glossy Ibis have all been observed here. On one occasion this spring a record number of 35 Glossy Ibis circled the area but chose not to land. Worcester County observers will generally tell you that if you cannot find a whole day to go to Plum Island, the next best thing to do is to visit the "Bolton Flats," as they are called for short, even though most of them lie in adjacent Lancaster.

Evidently, detailed observations in this area began in the early 1800's. By the middle of the nineteenth century a natural history museum had been formed in Harvard, Mass. A detailed review of its activities would probably reveal prominently the names Holbrook, Jillson, Wheeler, Phelps, and Green. Jillson, in particular, did much collecting around Bolton, and numerous skins prepared by him found their way to the Museum of Comparative Zoology around 1870 upon the demise of the local natural history society.

James L. Peters spent many hours on the flats as well as near his home in Harvard, and he made a strong effort to revive the club in this century. Many of his skins from this area also lie in the M.C.Z.

Near the turn of the century Col. John E. Thayer studied and collected on the flats, particularly in Lancaster, assembling in the course of his life a gigantic collection of skins, eggs, and nests. Until last summer the Thayer Bird Museum was still operated in Lancaster, and for twenty-five cents one could view the last of the famous Thayer dioramas. These have since been moved to the Worcester Science Center--the building in Lancaster being absorbed by Atlantic Union College. Long ago the huge Thayer skin collection went to the M.C.Z., and the Thayer Hall of Birds can be seen today at the Peabody Museum in Cambridge.

Enough historical background. Let's get to the flats. They are located between and adjacent to the Still River and the Nashua River at their confluence in the village of Still River. This, incidentally, is also the access point to the newly created Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge (via an old tank road on the Fort Devens Military Reservation). Much of the riverbank and marsh downstream or through the reservation in Ayer will be incorporated into the new refuge. The Bolton Flats, at approximately 230 feet above sea level are very subject to periodic flooding. At times in the spring, both sides of Route 117 (see map) may appear to be one vast lake. Birding conditions on the flats are highly variable depending on the water conditions. The more water flooding the fields, the better the birding.

The best general access route into the area is a dirt road that leaves Route 117 right at the Bolton-Lancaster town line. A power transmission line parallels this road. Watch for shrikes and hawks. To the east of this road is a large cattle ranch, owned by Hycrest Farms, that is covered with "No Trespassing" signs. If the water is down and the Angus cattle are on the flats, one should proceed with caution. The west side of the access road is divided into smaller privately owned farms. The entire area offers superb birding when favorable water conditions properly coincide with migrations. For example, in the third week of May it is possible to record Dunlins, Dowitchers, Yellowlegs, peep, many herons, ducks, and even Black Terns. In March and April, waterfowl counts can rival those from Great Meadows to the east. Indeed, there may even be some interchange or commuting between the two areas--though Gadwalls are almost unknown on the Bolton Flats.

By virtue of their inland location, the flats furnish good early shorebirding. Pectoral Sandpipers are very reliable in early to mid-April. High counts of Common Snipe are possible (they also nest here). Certain species have occurred on dates considered unusual for Massachusetts, such as Solitary Sandpipers in early April and Semipalmateds in late April. The two Ruff records previously referred to were also in April.

It would be misleading indeed to classify the Bolton Flats region as a dependable worder spot--which it certainly is not. Success there can be as erratic as some of the birds that visit it. The date, weather, and time of day must all be considered in determining the most appropriate time to visit the area.

Early morning is generally the most favorable time to see the highest counts--before the flocks have been disturbed. When approaching along the access road, use extreme care not to flush birds from the pools ahead. It is easy to do this and very frustrating when it happens. If you should lose everything, you can often catch up with most of the birds by following Route 110 downstream along the Still River. Usually the birds will resettle in this area when disturbed. There have been times when I have driven back and forth between the two areas playing hide-and-seek with a flock of teal before finally getting a good observation.

There are many other flooded fields in the spring, downstream from the confluence of the north and south branches of the Nashua River. These areas are approachable by car on Center Bridge Road and Neck Road in Lancaster.

Another interesting spot nearby is an alder, red maple, and cattail swamp across Route 110 from the Industrial School for Girls in Lancaster. A road threads its way through the area (not drivable) and can be very rewarding. In 1968, both Willow and Alder Flycatchers could be heard here within calling distance of each other.

The entire region of the Bolton-Lancaster Flats offers superb wildlife management potential, and this alone may generate more interest in the area in the future.

