

Map, J. Heywood, 1994

FRANKLIN PARK: FORGOTTEN GEM OF THE EMERALD NECKLACE

by Thomas Aversa

Franklin Park, located in the Roxbury/Dorchester/Jamaica Plain section of Boston, is unfamiliar territory to many residents of the metropolitan area. Although most people are aware of Franklin Park Zoo, few have ever visited the zoo or the city's largest park, primarily because of the perception of the area as a dangerous place. Actually, the park is relatively crime-free and well patrolled by several different police forces and by the Boston Park Rangers. The park also is heavily used by joggers and walkers. This article may help to dispel some of the concerns about birding in the area and to provide some information for those who are interested in exploring this unique urban region.

Franklin Park has been undergoing a renaissance in recent years, and residents of surrounding neighborhoods have been using the resources within this scenic square mile of mixed-oak woodland with ever-increasing frequency. In addition to a golf course, a first-rate zoo, a "schoolboy" stadium, tennis courts, baseball fields, and miles of walking trails, the park offers excellent opportunities for birding and nature study. The fact that the park borders Forest Hills Cemetery and the Boston State Hospital grounds and is just across Forest Hills from the Arnold Arboretum makes the entire area a virtual wildlife oasis amid the surrounding urban sprawl.

Originally called West Roxbury Park, Franklin Park was designed by Frederick Law Olmsted and was to be an integral link in Boston's "Emerald Necklace." Work commenced in 1886, and the 490-acre park was completed by 1896. Although Olmsted designed the park strictly as scenic open space, bureaucratic pressure mandated recreational additions over the years.

The best birding in the park is during spring and fall migration. Winter can also produce some interesting birds, such as lingering waterfowl and raptors, including Cooper's Hawk, which is regular during the season. Although fall cold fronts often result in impressive passerine flights, this article will focus on spring migration.

Since its inception in 1989, an annual spring migration census conducted between April 10 and June 2 has tallied 134 species. Table 1 shows the results of this census and indicates the rich diversity of species that can be found in the park. The data are based on only one observer's records compiled over nearly 400 hours of observation. Franklin Park attracts an array of migrants similar to that of the immensely more popular Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge. However, it generally offers a more natural ambiance than that of the cemetery. My hope is that this article may attract more birders to the park so that its full birding potential may be realized.

There is a lot of habitat in Franklin Park, and there are many different ways to cover it. Where you begin your birding tour may depend on where you enter the park. If you are driving, the best parking areas include the access road (which leads to Scarsboro Pond) behind the Shattuck Hospital and the zoo parking lot on Pierpont Road. When driving from Forest Hills to Blue Hill Avenue, the access road will be your first right, and the parking lot your first left off Circuit Drive. To reach Franklin Park by public transportation, use the MBTA Orange Line. From the Forest Hills station you can either take the Number 16 bus, which will drop you at the zoo entrance, or walk the half mile up to the west end of the park at the Morton Street rotary. Another option is to get off the Orange Line at the Green Street station and walk east on Green Street, up the hill a quarter-mile to where it enters the park and becomes Glen Lane. Use the accompanying map to help you bird the area of your choosing. The park is crisscrossed by innumerable paths and trails, but it is very difficult to get lost. Remember that you will have to work your way around the golf course, which can get very busy during weekends. The text that follows highlights some of the best birding areas in the park, designated by the numbers 1-12 on the map and in parentheses in the text.

Zoo Grounds

Several of the best birding locales are found on the zoo grounds. The only way to bird this area is by entering Franklin Park Zoo (open daily 9:00 A.M. to 4:00 P.M.). Besides birding, one may also enjoy the various zoo exhibits, including "A Bird's World" and the "African Tropical Forest." Here you can test your global birding knowledge while enjoying a variety of exotic species. The African Tropical Forest is a one-acre enclosure where free-flying birds are able to exhibit their natural behaviors amid African mammals, including gorillas, warthogs, and bongos. Admission to the zoo is \$5, or one can purchase a Commonwealth Zoological Corporation (CZC) membership card for \$25 (annual fee for an individual). The CZC membership is good for admission to the Franklin Park and Stone zoos. Call 617-442-2002 for details.

Some of the most interesting wild bird species tend to turn up on zoo grounds. A Bird's World and its waterfowl pond (1) have hosted some especially unusual birds including Kentucky Warbler, Lincoln's Sparrow, and a Redhead that spent the latter part of May 1989 in the company of the zoo waterfowl. The ubiquitous oaks and the willows near the pond provide habitat for the resident Northern Orioles and migrating warblers. The African Tropical Forest and Rock Garden with its associated brushy habitat (2) are the most consistently productive areas in the zoo. Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, Lincoln's Sparrow, and a variety of warblers have been regularly found here. More remarkably, a Wild Turkey was seen here in May 1992. The hedge behind the Rock Garden can be jammed with passerines on a day when the right meteorological conditions exist

to produce a good migration. The hemlock-oak woodlot north of the African Tropical Forest consistently harbors a flock of warblers, thrushes, and other passerines, and is particularly good late in the day when these species use the hemlocks for cover. The Hooves and Horns area (3) has also produced interesting birds, such as Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and Eastern Bluebird. Glen Lane (4), the service road between Children's Zoo and A Bird's World, can provide a quiet walk and often some migrant flocks. Gray-cheeked Thrush and Red-headed Woodpecker have been observed here.

Playstead Park and the Wilderness

The open woods west of Playstead Park and White Stadium can also be good for birds (5). Although the census has not turned them up here since 1989, Red-headed Woodpeckers were regular here during the early 1980s. Mourning Warblers and good numbers of Swainson's Thrushes frequent these woods. Large numbers of Herring and Ring-billed gulls feed on the ball field in the early morning.

Moving southwest from Playstead Park, the adventurous birder can follow one of many paths over the Roxbury pudding stone outcroppings, across two paved roads, and into the Wilderness area. This 100-acre tract is the most undeveloped region of the park. Olmsted intended for this area to provide a typical example of a New England woodland. Indeed, there is almost always a pocket of birds here. Although especially exceptional in the fall, spring birding in this area tends to be average. The picnic area (6) and Wilderness ravine (7) are the best spots. Warblers are the principal attraction, with twenty-three species found here during the census period, including Cape May and Mourning warblers. The pudding stone outcroppings are also very attractive to thrushes. Modest numbers of Hermit and Swainson's thrushes and Veery are regularly found here as their numbers peak sequentially through the spring migration.

Ellicottdale

A small stream runs through the Wilderness area and goes underground at the Williams Street entrance to the park. Following it upstream will bring you to the Ellicott Arch. Under the arch, Eastern Phoebes are perennial nesters. Beyond the arch, watch and listen for warblers in the oaks on the right as you cross the ball field to the Ellicottdale Woodlot (8). This small, swampy patch of poison-ivy-infested woods is one of the finest birding areas in the park. A good variety of birds, including Swamp Sparrow, Northern Waterthrush, American Woodcock, and Alder Flycatcher, occurs here with some regularity. A Kentucky Warbler was also found singing here in late May 1991. Because a spring that feeds the area remains open in cold weather, this site can also produce surprises in winter.

Table 1. Spring Bird List, Franklin Park

Common Loon	R	Barn Swallow	C	Mourning Warbler	R
Double-cr'ted Cormorant	C	Blue Jay	A	Common Yellowthroat	C
American Bittern	R	American Crow	A	Wilson's Warbler	F
Snowy Egret	R	Fish Crow	U	Canada Warbler	F
Green-backed Heron	U	Black-capped Chickadee	A	Scarlet Tanager	C
Black-cr'ned Night-Heron	F	Tufted Titmouse	A	Northern Cardinal	C
Canada Goose	C	Red-breasted Nuthatch	R	Rose-breasted Grosbeak	F
Wood Duck	R	White-breasted Nuthatch	C	Indigo Bunting	F
American Black Duck	A	Brown Creeper	U	Dickcissel	R
Mallard	A	House Wren	U	Rufous-sided Towhee	F
Redhead	R	Winter Wren	R	Chipping Sparrow	F
Common Merganser	R	Golden-crowned Kinglet	C	Field Sparrow	R
Turkey Vulture	R	Ruby-crowned Kinglet	C	Savannah Sparrow	F
Sharp-shinned Hawk	R	Blue-gray Gnatcatcher	U	Fox Sparrow	R
Broad-winged Hawk	R	Eastern Bluebird	R	Song Sparrow	A
Red-tailed Hawk	C	Veery	F	Lincoln's Sparrow	U
American Kestrel	U	Gray Cheeked Thrush	R	Swamp Sparrow	U
Merlin	R	Swainson's Thrush	C	White-throated Sparrow	A
Ring-necked Pheasant	C	Hermit Thrush	U	White-crowned Sparrow	R
Wild Turkey	R	Wood Thrush	U	Dark-eyed Junco	C
Northern Bobwhite	R	Gray Catbird	A	Bobolink	F
Killdeer	R	Northern Mockingbird	C	Red-winged Blackbird	A
Solitary Sandpiper	R	Brown Thrasher	F	Common Grackle	A
Spotted Sandpiper	F	Cedar Waxwing	C	Brown-headed Cowbird	F
American Woodcock	R	European Starling	A	Orchard Oriole	R
Ring-billed Gull	A	White-eyed Vireo	R	Northern Oriole	A
Herring Gull	A	Solitary Vireo	C	Purple Finch	R
Great Black-backed Gull	U	Warbling Vireo	C	House Finch	F
Rock Dove	A	Philadelphia Vireo	R	American Goldfinch	C
Mourning Dove	F	Red-eyed Vireo	F	House Sparrow	A
Eastern Screech-Owl	R	Blue-winged Warbler	R		
Great Horned Owl	C	Tennessee Warbler	F	List based on 386	
Chimney Swift	C	Nashville Warbler	F	observer hours over five	
Ruby-th'ed Hummingbird	R	Northern Parula	C	years (1989-1993)	
Belted Kingfisher	R	Yellow Warbler	C	occurring between	
Red-h'ed Woodpecker	R	Chestnut-sided Warbler	F	April 10 and June 2.	
Red-bellied Woodpecker	R	Magnolia Warbler	C		
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker	R	Cape May Warbler	U	Abundance reflects	
Hairy Woodpecker	F	Black-t'ed Blue Warbler	U	total number of birds	
Downy Woodpecker	C	Yellow-rumped Warbler	A	seen during the period.	
Northern Flicker	A	Black-t'ed Green Warbler	C		
Olive-sided Flycatcher	R	Blackburnian Warbler	F	A = abundant (more than	
Eastern Wood-Pewee	F	Pine Warbler	U	400 individuals)	
Yellow-bellied Flycatcher	R	Prairie Warbler	R	C = common	
Alder Flycatcher	R	Palm Warbler	C	(76—399 individuals)	
Willow Flycatcher	R	Bay-breasted Warbler	U	F = fairly common	
Least Flycatcher	U	Blackpoll Warbler	C	(20—75 individuals)	
Eastern Phoebe	C	Black-and-white Warbler	C	U = uncommon	
Great Crested Flycatcher	C	American Redstart	C	(8—19 individuals)	
Eastern Kingbird	C	Ovenbird	F	R = rare	
Tree Swallow	F	Northern Waterthrush	U	(less than 8 individuals)	
N. Rough-w'ged Swallow	F	Kentucky Warbler	R		

Schoolmaster Hill

Northeast across the golf course is Schoolmaster Hill (9), one of the highest points in the park. Centrally located, the hill provides a wonderful view of the surrounding area. Stone ruins, dating back to 1890, add a touch of archeological history. Ralph Waldo Emerson lived on this slope while teaching in Roxbury; hence the moniker. This hill, with its weedy slope, regularly attracts open-country species. Indigo Buntings and Bobolinks are found here annually. More surprising was the discovery of a singing male Dickcissel on June 2, 1993.

Scarsboro Area

South across the golf course is the other high point in the park, Scarsboro Hill (10). Although almost completely surrounded by the golf course, the hill still harbors birds. A walk down the hill to Scarsboro Pond (11) can actually take quite a while if the migrant flight is heavy. This area is also the stronghold of resident Red-tailed Hawks. An ill-fated and particularly unruly female that caused trouble attacking the local citizenry in 1990 and 1992 was removed from this area at the request of the Parks Department. However, only four days after she was gone, her mate was seen in courtship flight with a new female, and by 1993 this pair produced a chick. These fearless hawks typically provide excellent opportunities for up-close viewing. Great Horned Owls also nest in this area and apparently regard humans as a benign element in their environment. The open oak woods with its scattered hemlocks and white pines provide excellent habitat for migratory songbirds, and species such as Gray-cheeked Thrush and Mourning Warbler have been found here on occasion.

Scarsboro Pond is probably the best single area in Franklin Park to go birding if your time is limited. This man-made pond, which is crossed by two bridges, regularly hosts the greatest variety of species. Northern and Orchard orioles, Red-winged Blackbirds, Warbling Vireos, Great Crested Flycatchers, and Eastern Kingbirds all nest here. The Orchard Orioles often appear after the census period and are thus underrepresented on the checklist. Some of the most unusual birds found here have included American Bittern, Spotted and Solitary sandpipers, Red-bellied Woodpecker, and Olive-sided, Yellow-bellied, Least, and Willow flycatchers. Huge flocks of warblers, predominantly Yellow-rumped Warbler, haunt the south side of the pond in early May.

South from the pond across the service road toward the Boston Parks Department facilities is a large white pine grove (12), which abuts Morton Street. Great Horned Owls nested here in 1991, and a second pair of Red-tailed Hawks bred here in 1989. This grove and the young hardwood stands adjacent to it can also be hopping with migrants on favorable days. Most of the common migrant species of eastern Massachusetts have been noted in this area, periodically in good numbers.

This article highlights some of the most productive birding areas in Franklin

Park. Migrants, of course, may be found anywhere, and other parts of the park may certainly be productive. The northeast corner near the relic bear dens and the southeast woodlot along Blue Hill Avenue also provide interesting habitat, but are not the safest parts of the park and should therefore be avoided. I hope this text will encourage readers to investigate this underused "gem." For further information contact the author at 617-325-8692. The Boston Park Rangers (617-635-7383) offer spring bird walks on the first four Sunday mornings in May.

THOMAS AVERSA, a long-time zookeeper and amateur field ornithologist, has been birding Franklin Park intensively for six years. As a specialist in birds and reptiles, he currently works in the African Tropical Forest in the Franklin Park Zoo. Tom attributes his interest in birding to the late Dr. L.M. Bartlett, who he met while a student in wildlife biology at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. He is a regular contributor to eastern Massachusetts bird sightings reported in *Bird Observer*. Tom would like to thank Wayne Petersen and Steve Arena for reviewing an earlier version of this article.

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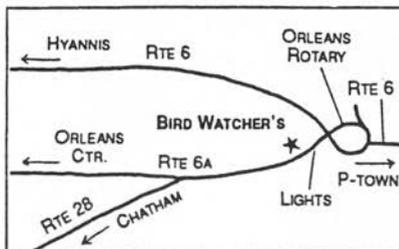
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