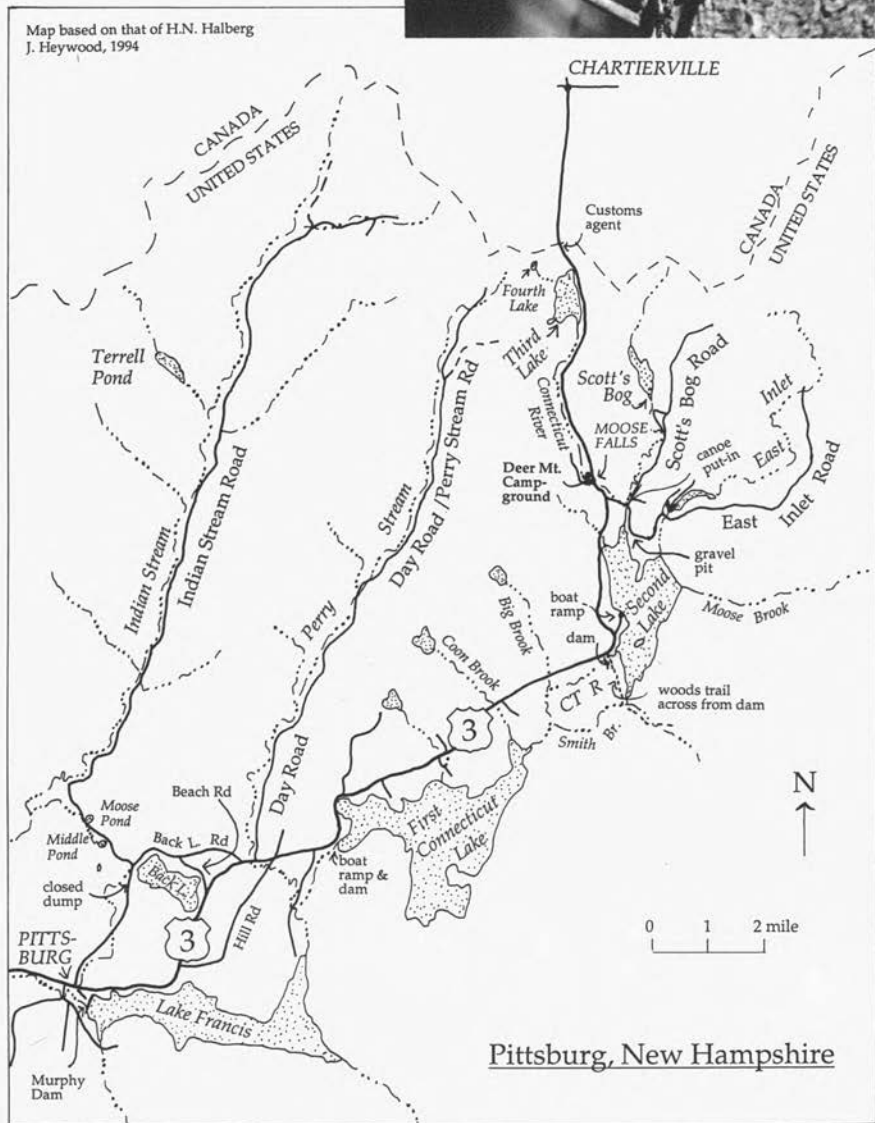


Black-backed Woodpecker
 Pittsburg, NH
 Photo by Robert A. Quinn



FINDING BIRDS IN PITTSBURG, NEW HAMPSHIRE

by Robert A. Quinn

In the wild northern tip of New Hampshire is a land of low-level spruce and fir with some of the most sought-after birds in the northeast: Spruce Grouse, Gray Jay, Black-backed and Three-toed woodpeckers, and Boreal Chickadee. It is the untamed headwaters of the longest river in New England, and although not pristine wilderness, it is wild country that echoes to the call of loons, coyotes, and boreal birds. Join me for a brief look at some of the most fascinating birding this side of Canada.

Pittsburg, New Hampshire, at the tip of Coos County (pronounced Ko-oss), is an isolated land of truly independent Yankees. Pittsburg is about 135 miles north of and three hours driving time from Concord, New Hampshire. During the Indian Stream Rebellion of 1832 the locals left the Union and set up their own sovereign nation. It is a place of bogs, moose, an undisturbed remnant of the primeval boreal forest (the Norton Pool tract), Cape May Warblers, snipe, eagles, Ospreys, and an abundance of other interesting critters. It is a land of superlatives. Its 300 square miles dwarf any other township in the eastern United States. It is so far north that it is bordered by Canada, not Vermont, to the west. It has the best boreal birding in the state under the easiest conditions, and it has some of the finest scenery anywhere (at least when it is not raining).

The elevation is the reason for the good boreal habitat. Pittsburg village, which is in the southern part of the township, is at 1300 feet. The elevation rises steadily as you head north from the village on Route 3 to the Canadian border, where the elevation is 2360 feet. Several mountains in the area top 3500 feet; the highest mountain, Stub Hill, stands at 3607 feet.

I will focus on the nesting birds and how, when, and where to find them. I want to emphasize that boreal birding is usually hard work because the terrain and habitat can be daunting. Most boreal birding is done by ear, and the birds in Pittsburg do not always sound like the recordings you may have listened to. So, forewarned with that knowledge, bring your long johns, your rain gear, and your bug dope, and let us begin our exploration of this fascinating area.

The best time to visit for nesting birds is from mid-June until early July. During this time you will find the greatest variety of species. The spring migrants will have finally made it on territory, and the boreal residents should have young that are noticeable in one way or another. Over the past sixteen years I have run a Breeding Bird Survey route in Pittsburg each June that has averaged seventy species and has a cumulative total of about 110 species. You can expect to find about one hundred species in a weekend if the weather cooperates.

For this article I will focus on the best and most accessible places and leave the more obscure areas for you to explore on your own. The region from Second

Connecticut Lake northward is the best for boreal birds, and any suitable habitat is worth exploring.

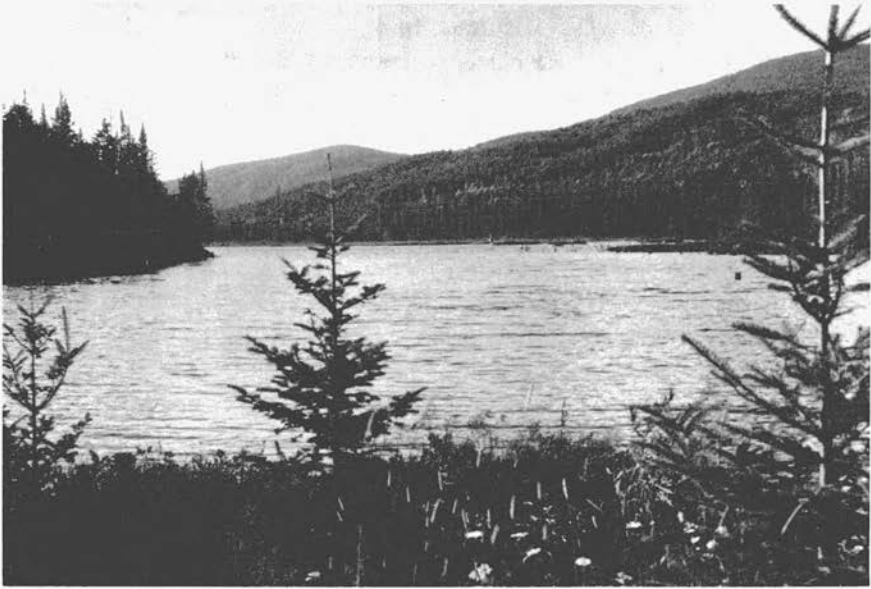
Deer Mountain Campground and Points North

I recommend that you stay at the Deer Mountain campground, which will be the central locus for this article. (However, there are many alternatives; see the accommodations section later in this article.) It is a picturesque, although primitive, camping area nestled in dense stands of spruce and fir with the juvenal Connecticut River flowing through it. In past years both Black-backed and Three-toed woodpeckers have nested in the campground. Almost any North Country specialty can be found: Bay-breasted, Cape May (rare), and Blackpoll warblers; Rusty Blackbird; Gray Jay; and Black-backed Woodpecker. Proceed approximately sixteen miles north of Pittsburg village on Route 3, past the Second Connecticut Lake, to the well-marked (but isolated) campground on your left. Please note an unmarked dirt road on the right about one-half mile south of Deer Mountain for future reference.

The main, or upper, camping area is just off the highway. Just behind that is a lower camping area of about six campsites where a wide but unmarked trail at the far edge of the clearing leads in about a quarter of a mile to what I call the Moose Falls Flowage, a small impoundment of the Connecticut River. The woods along this trail are good for most boreal species, and the pond is a good place for Rusty Blackbird. It would be easy to spend a full morning just in the vicinity of the campground.

Scott's Bog and East Inlet

Considered by many the best all-around area in Pittsburg, Scott's Bog and East Inlet have a good variety of boreal land birds and waterbirds. A series of well-maintained logging roads lead to, and pass by, several man-made impoundments and good spruce-and-fir habitat. Head south on Route 3 from Deer Mountain campground about one-half mile to the above-mentioned unmarked dirt road, now on the left. It is the only road in the area. Drive about a quarter-mile off Route 3, and cross a bridge over a small river (the mighty Connecticut!). Once across the bridge the Scott's Bog Road goes left, and the East Inlet Road goes right. Go left, and walk or drive slowly down the Scott's Bog Road, checking the various habitats as you go. Blackpoll, Magnolia, Parula, and Yellow-rumped warblers are common (the Blackpolls are often singing a trilled version of their song); Swainson's Thrush, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Winter Wren, American Redstart, and White-throated Sparrow are other common species here. Boreal Chickadee, Gray Jay, and Black-backed Woodpecker are all fairly regular along this road but cannot be expected. Ravens are usually overhead, and Osprey, Northern Harrier, and other hawk species are sometimes seen here.



Scott's Bog, Pittsburg, NH

Photo by Robert A. Quinn

The more open and wetter areas commonly have Alder, Yellow-bellied, and Olive-sided flycatchers, Nashville Warbler, Lincoln's Sparrow, Rusty Blackbird, and Common Grackle. If you are there at dawn or dusk, Common Snipe and Common Loon (from the nearby Second Connecticut Lake) are usually heard. Some of the rarer possibilities include Tennessee and Wilson's warblers in swampy alder thickets, Mourning Warbler in two- or three-year-old cutover areas with abundant raspberry bushes, Bay-breasted and Cape May warblers in the tops of tall spruces, and Philadelphia Vireo in the alders along the streams.

Many more common species, such as American Robin and Cedar Waxwing, will be seen as you progress down Scott's Bog Road. After approximately 3.5 miles a rough gravel road to the left (passable for jeeps) leads down to the dam at Scott's Bog. Scott's Bog is more of a pond than a bog, but it does have marshy edges that might have Rusty Blackbird or rails. The most common ducks are Wood Duck, Black Duck, Mallard, Ring-necked Duck, and Hooded Merganser. The more unusual waterfowl that nest in Pittsburg include Blue-winged and Green-winged teal and Common Goldeneye, and these ducks should be looked for on any of the smaller ponds.

It usually takes two to three hours of birding to get to Scott's Bog. Next, head back on Scott's Bog Road the way you came, watching for species you may have missed on the way up, until you reach East Inlet Road. It is usually better to drive rather than walk the East Inlet Road because it has more traffic and is much longer than the Scott's Bog Road. The best technique is to stop when you

see some likely looking spot or some good bird activity. One interesting area is about one-half mile down the East Inlet Road, where there is a small gravel pit on the right as the road makes a ninety-degree turn to the left. Walk through this gravel pit and through the woods a short distance to the edge of the river as it enters Second Connecticut Lake. This is a good place for a variety of warblers and waterbirds, and a great place for moose at dawn.

An excellent spot for boreal residents is farther down East Inlet Road. In about a mile from the gravel pit, you will pass on the left the dam forming the pond at East Inlet (worth a check for moose—again, early morning is best). Then go approximately two miles, watch for a very wide clearing on the left, and park there. Follow this wide clearing, which looks like a power line right-of-way without power lines, for about a half-mile, bearing right at a fork. Be alert for anything because this area is where I finally found my first New Hampshire Spruce Grouse, a female with chicks. Boreal Chickadee is reasonably common (but hard to see) in the spruces. After about a half-mile from the road, you should notice the land sloping down to the right with denser spruce and fir habitat. You can plunge into the tangle of trees, and head for the swampy lowlands, or stay along the logged area. If you go into the woods, make sure you have landmarks to follow for your return because it is easy to get lost. When you are finished in this area, head back the way you walked in. You can drive farther on the East Inlet Road, which goes on for many more miles, or head back toward Route 3. Whatever you choose to do, stay alert for more interesting species, moose, and logging trucks.

Fourth Connecticut Lake

Route 3 north of Deer Mountain campground takes you past several wetlands (west of the road and somewhat distant) and Third Connecticut Lake (always worth checking for waterbirds) until you reach the height of land at the Canadian border. Here is the starting point for one of the most interesting walks in the region—to the origin of the Connecticut River at Fourth Connecticut Lake. The lake is actually a small bog pond surrounded by starkly pointed spruce and fir. To get there, you have to sign in and out with the United States Customs agents. They will direct you to the beginning of the trail, which is up the hill behind the customs house. A short but steep trail along the international border leads to the jewel-like Fourth Connecticut Lake, which is protected by The Nature Conservancy. The lake is surrounded almost entirely by tall, dark conifers, thereby providing a truly wilderness setting and habitat for many boreal birds. Rusty Blackbird is regular here, and it is fun to gently explore the boggy rim of this small glacial tarn. As with so many of the trails in the Pittsburg area, return the way you came, and please be careful on the few steep and slippery sections.

To appreciate the geography of Pittsburg, take a very short drive into the

nearby Canadian town of Chartierville, and then look back. You will see the dramatic rise in elevation along the length of the Pittsburg township to the international border.

Areas South of Deer Mountain Campground

Second Connecticut Lake Boat Ramp. About four miles south of Deer Mountain campground on Route 3, watch for a sign on the east side for the road to the New England Power Company's public boat ramp, which is about one-quarter mile down a gravel road (go right at the only fork). The boat ramp provides a nice view of Second Connecticut Lake, where you should see Common Loon and Common Merganser. Other waterbirds are possible, and Ring-billed Gull is likely (and probably nests around the lake but there is no proof yet). Head back out to Route 3, and a little farther south, you will come to the Second Connecticut Lake dam and another place to scan for waterbirds. You can cross the dam where there is a trail that goes for miles on the other side that I have never explored but might be worthwhile. Please let me know if you check it out.

First Connecticut Lake Dam and Boat Ramp. About six miles south of the Second Connecticut Lake dam on Route 3 is the First Connecticut Lake dam and another spot to look for waterbirds.

Perry Stream/Day Road. About 1.5 miles south of the First Connecticut Lake dam, the Perry Stream crosses Route 3 just north of the Back Lake Road. This location is a good spot for Common Snipe and Savannah Sparrow. Turn right immediately before the stream onto Day Road, a well-maintained gravel road on which you can drive for miles. It has a variety of habitats and has been a reliable place for Boreal Chickadee the past few years. Some good boreal habitat lies along the first few miles of Day Road, but I personally have never gone much farther than that, although it is probably worthwhile to explore.

Back Lake Road. A hundred yards south of Day Road, Back Lake Road forks to the right off Route 3. For the first mile or two Back Lake Road traverses an area heavily logged but still good for birding, especially for Mourning Warbler. When you get to Back Lake itself, there are limited views of the water, but there may be Osprey or Common Goldeneye.

Indian Stream Road/Middle and Moose Ponds. Continue on Back Lake Road about one-half mile past the junction of Beach Road, which comes in on the left just before you first see the lake, and watch for an unmarked dirt road on the right (if you reach the recently closed dump, you have gone too far on Back Lake Road). This unmarked gravel road is somewhat rough but goes by two interesting small ponds (Middle and Moose ponds) that may have Common Goldeneye; once a Palm Warbler was discovered in this area during the breeding season. Continue on through to Indian Stream Road, only a half-mile or so past Moose Pond, stopping wherever it looks interesting. Turn right onto

Pittsburg, New Hampshire, Breeding Bird List

| | | |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|---|
| Common Loon | Eastern Phoebe | Ovenbird |
| Pied-billed Grebe | Great Crested Flycatcher* | Northern Waterthrush |
| American Bittern | Eastern Kingbird | Mourning Warbler |
| Great Blue Heron | Tree Swallow | Common Yellowthroat |
| Green Heron* | Rough-winged Swallow* | Wilson's Warbler (R) |
| Wood Duck | Bank Swallow | Canada Warbler |
| Green-winged Teal* (R) | Cliff Swallow | Scarlet Tanager (R) |
| Black Duck | Barn Swallow | Northern Cardinal* |
| Mallard | Gray Jay | Rose-br'ted Grosbeak (V) |
| Blue-winged Teal (U) | Blue Jay | Indigo Bunting (V) |
| Ring-necked Duck | American Crow | Chipping Sparrow |
| Common Goldeneye (U) | Common Raven | Vesper Sparrow (R) |
| Hooded Merganser | Black-capped Chickadee | Savannah Sparrow |
| Common Merganser | Boreal Chickadee | Fox Sparrow* |
| Osprey (R) | Red-breasted Nuthatch | Song Sparrow |
| Bald Eagle* | White-breasted Nuthatch | Lincoln's Sparrow |
| Northern Harrier* | Brown Creeper* | Swamp Sparrow |
| Sharp-shinned Hawk* | House Wren* | White-throated Sparrow |
| Cooper's Hawk* | Winter Wren | Dark-eyed Junco |
| Northern Goshawk* | Golden-crowned Kinglet | Bobolink |
| Broad-winged Hawk | Ruby-crowned Kinglet | Red-winged Blackbird |
| Red-tailed Hawk | Eastern Bluebird | Eastern Meadowlark |
| American Kestrel | Veery | Rusty Blackbird |
| Spruce Grouse | Gray-cheeked Thrush* | Common Grackle |
| Ruffed Grouse | Swainson's Thrush | Brown-headed Cowbird |
| Virginia Rail* | Hermit Thrush | Northern Oriole* (R) |
| Sora* | Wood Thrush (R) | Pine Grosbeak* |
| Killdeer | American Robin | Purple Finch |
| Spotted Sandpiper | Gray Catbird | Red Crossbill* |
| Common Snipe | Brown Thrasher* | White-winged Crossbill* |
| American Woodcock | Cedar Waxwing | Pine Siskin* |
| Ring-billed Gull* | Starling | American Goldfinch |
| Mourning Dove | Solitary Vireo | Evening Grosbeak |
| Black-billed Cuckoo* | Philadelphia Vireo (R) | House Sparrow |
| Great Horned Owl | Red-eyed Vireo | |
| Barred Owl | Tennessee Warbler | * Likely but not confirmed breeders |
| Whip-poor-will* | Nashville Warbler | R = rare |
| Chimney Swift | Northern Parula | U = uncommon |
| Ruby-th'ed Hummingbird | Yellow Warbler | V = variable |
| Belted Kingfisher | Chestnut-sided Warbler | |
| Yellow-bellied Sapsucker | Magnolia Warbler | List compiled by the author from sightings reported in the Audubon Society of New Hampshire quarterly publications over the past forty years and from sightings reported by Fred Scott, Vera Hebert, Tudor Richards, Dennis Abbott, the author, and others. |
| Downy Woodpecker | Cape May Warbler (R) | |
| Hairy Woodpecker | Black-th'ed Blue Warbler | |
| Three-toed Woodpecker | Yellow-rumped Warbler | |
| Black-backed Woodpecker | Black-th'ed Green Warbler | |
| Northern Flicker | Blackburnian Warbler | |
| Pileated Woodpecker | Palm Warbler* | |
| Olive-sided Flycatcher | Bay-breasted Warbler | |
| Eastern Wood Pewee | Blackpoll Warbler | |
| Yellow-bellied Flycatcher | Black-and-white Warbler | |
| Alder Flycatcher | American Redstart | |
| Least Flycatcher | | |

Indian Stream Road, taking careful note of the landmarks so you can find the intersection of this unmarked road and Indian Stream Road on your return. Indian Stream Road is another long gravel road with mixed habitats, but overall it has more southern birdlife, such as Great Crested Flycatcher and Yellow Warbler, than the previously mentioned spots. In about eight miles it leads to Terrell Pond, another pond formed by a small dam. Spruce and fir trees surround the pond, and it is probably a good birding spot in the early morning, but I have not been there at that time. If you are going to go this far, either have a detailed map or follow the tire tracks of all the fishermen.

Pittsburg Village, Lake Francis, Murphy Dam, and Points South. Carefully retrace your route until you reach Back Lake Road, which is paved, and take a right (past the closed dump). Back Lake Road takes you directly into Pittsburg village at the junction of Route 3. The village often has such scarce "southern" species as House Wren, Brown Thrasher, and maybe even a Northern Cardinal. Curiously, it can also be one of the better spots for Evening Grosbeaks because they frequent yards with feeders. The most interesting feature in downtown Pittsburg is the nesting Cliff Swallows on the school building almost in the center of town. Heading south from town on Route 3, you go through some farmlands that are fringed with spruce and fir and can yield such combinations as Gray Catbird, Bobolink, Northern Goshawk, and Cape May Warbler.

Canoe Trips

There are many possibilities for canoe outings, but my two favorite outings are East Inlet (the pond) and the young Connecticut River where it flows into the Second Connecticut Lake. (In both cases, paddling is easy with no strong currents.) Dawn is the best time to avoid other boaters (mainly fishermen). To put in at East Inlet, drive out the East Inlet Road about two miles off Route 3 to where the dam and boat ramp are on the left. Once you put in and get around the first point of land, you will be approaching the "Moose Pasture" on your left. The Moose Pasture is a large boggy area that is interesting botanically (orchids, pitcher plants, and the squishy, bouncy, bog mat) and has birds such as Lincoln's and Savannah sparrows and maybe Gray Jay, Boreal Chickadee, Spruce Grouse, and Black-backed Woodpecker. The Moose Pasture is posted around its edges by The Nature Conservancy boundary markers.

Waterbird possibilities include Pied-billed Grebe, either teal species, Osprey, American Bittern, Common Loon, Virginia Rail, Sora, Ring-necked Duck, and possibly Common Goldeneye. Moose and deer are common.

The Connecticut River from the first bridge on the East Inlet Road (just off Route 3) down to the Second Connecticut Lake is a favorite paddle of mine at dusk. The easiest put-in site is just upstream from the bridge. The species variety is small, but the wailing of loons, the winnowing of snipe, and the

howling of coyotes (sometimes) as the inky darkness settles over the lake are, to me, the true voices of the North Country.

Other Areas

Space does not permit a discussion of many other interesting areas such as Magalloway Mountain (a likely Gray-cheeked "Bicknell's" Thrush site), the Norton Pool (contact The Nature Conservancy, 2 1/2 Beacon Street, Concord, NH 03301, for more details), South Bay Bog, Cedar Stream, Boundary Pond, Hall's Stream, and others. Do not hesitate to explore these areas on your own.

There are some excellent outlying areas of interest if you have a few extra days, such as Dixville Notch, the East Colebrook farmlands, and Lake Umbagog.

Specialty Species

Spruce Grouse. Spruce Grouse is present throughout the area in the proper habitat but range from hard to almost impossible to find. Writing in 1959, the Halbergs, after eight years of June visits, said, "We must quote the reports of others . . ." when talking about this species. In 1993 I saw my first Spruce Grouse in Pittsburg in sixteen years of June visits. Do not go there expecting to see this species! However, they may be easier to locate earlier in the spring while they are courting and are sometimes seen along roadsides (although the snow can be quite deep into May and sometimes even early June).

Three-toed Woodpecker. This species may be harder to find than Spruce Grouse, but some observers have had some luck along the wide power-line-type clearing two miles north of East Inlet dam in recent years (see East Inlet section). I have never found this species in Pittsburg. It apparently requires old-growth thick spruce, so another possibility would be to thoroughly explore the Norton Pool area (see "Other Areas"), which is an extreme physical challenge because there are no trails, and the number of fallen trees makes walking or hiking extremely difficult.

Black-backed Woodpecker. At last, a species that you are likely to see if you spend several days in the area. They are often found in last year's logged areas or burned-over sites. In June their nestlings are noisy, so nests can often be found. The nests are usually low to the ground and can provide an excellent opportunity to observe this relatively tame species. I have seen this woodpecker dozens of times, frequently more than one individual at a time, and on at least four occasions there was a nest that I could observe from the comfort of my car. The nest hole is fairly distinctive with its beveled lower edge, and the birds normally chip all the bark off the trunk for about a foot above and below the hole. Hairy Woodpeckers have very noisy nestlings too, so you may have to watch several nest holes before finding your quarry.

Gray Jay. The Gray Jay is believed to be declining but is still usually

found during visits of more than a day or two. They are usually seen perched in the tops of spruce or fir, although they can be seen almost anywhere. In my experience they do not come in begging for food as their camp-robber reputation would make you think, but they are rather tame. Most of my sightings have been in the East Inlet and Scott's Bog area. The fledged young of Gray Jays are black and can confuse you the first time you see them. These dark juveniles can usually be seen by mid-June.

Boreal Chickadee. This rather common bird can be missed quite easily and is difficult to see most of the time. Usually located by its short, nasal call, the Boreal Chickadee is outnumbered by Black-capped Chickadee almost everywhere except in the thickest spruce or fir habitats. Like the Spruce Grouse, the Boreal Chickadee may be easier to locate before June, when it becomes less vocal. Any stand of spruce trees is potential habitat, and I have recorded it every year.

Finches. Notoriously erratic, even up here, the numbers of Purple Finch, American Goldfinch, Evening Grosbeak, Pine Siskin, and Red and White-winged crossbills vary considerably from season to season and year to year. Look for them most often during an excellent cone season and listen for them all the time.

The "Why Not" Species. Some traditionally more northern species have been recorded in Pittsburg in June or July on rare occasions and might be more regular than we realize. These species include Pine Grosbeak (at least two sightings), Fox Sparrow (one), Palm Warbler (one), and Black Tern (several).

Then there is the "Wouldn't it be really exciting and maybe even possible" list of species that might be lurking out there, such as Solitary Sandpiper, Bohemian Waxwing, Yellow Rail, Boreal Owl, and Great Gray Owl. There is always a chance, so keep looking.

Additional Notes

To enjoy yourself in Pittsburg it is best to follow the Boy Scout motto—"Be Prepared."

Weather. Coos County is much colder and wetter than southern New England, with fierce thunderstorms common in June and July. Morning temperatures are often in the forties and sometimes in the thirties. Lightweight gloves and winter clothes are recommended for those who do not like the cold. Rain gear is essential, and you should expect to use it. If you use a tent, make sure it does not leak.

Bugs. The nightly chill is not enough to eliminate black flies, no-see-ums, and mosquitos, which usually are at their peak when the breeding birds are at theirs (mid-June). The bugs are at their worst when the nights are warm (thankfully not very often).

Private Lands. The most important note is that almost all of this country is

privately owned, and we are guests of the timber companies who are very generous hosts. PLEASE OBEY ALL SIGNS, RESPECT ALL GATES, AND REMEMBER THAT LOGGING TRUCKS HAVE THE RIGHT OF WAY ON THE LOGGING ROADS. The trucks will not slow down or get out of your way. That is your job, and it really is in your best interest.

Moose. A very serious subject. Read and believe the signs. Whenever you see a moose while driving, slow down. They are highly unpredictable, as are the tourists that go to Pittsburg just to see them. Be careful, and be especially watchful at night. Driving at normal speeds at night can be an invitation to disaster.

Maps and Compass. Maps are essential even if you do not leave sight of your car; a compass is also essential if you go more than a short distance off any road. The best maps are 1) Roads and Trails, Connecticut Lakes Region, compiled by Ross Hunter, 2) the *New Hampshire Atlas and Gazetteer* by Delorme, and 3) the various USGS topographic maps of the area. The Ross Hunter map should be purchased as soon as you arrive in Pittsburg because it is large, colorful, and the best local map.

Accommodations. In addition to Deer Mountain campground, there is another state-run campground at Lake Francis State Park, and there are many private campgrounds, lodges, and cabins. For further information write to North Country Chamber of Commerce, P.O. Box 1, Colebrook, NH 03576, or to Connecticut Lakes Tourist Association, P.O. Box 38, Pittsburg, NH 03592.

In closing, I hope that you take the opportunity to visit this enchanting land of the pointy trees, and if you do I would be thrilled to hear what you saw or for any helpful comments about this article.

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ROBERT A. QUINN is a native of New Hampshire. He has birded through forty-eight states in the last twenty years. He worked for the Audubon Society of New Hampshire (ASNH) for nine years, becoming their first staff ornithologist. He continues as a volunteer for ASNH, serving as president of the Council of Chapters and as a trustee of the board. He has led dozens of field trips including trips to Georgia, Florida, Texas, and Trinidad. He is editor of the summer season for *New Hampshire Bird Records* and has a keen interest in the nesting status of birds in the state. He has recently formed his own natural history services business, Merlin Enterprises, and lives with his wife and two children in Canterbury, New Hampshire.

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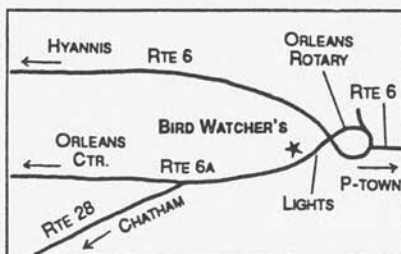
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