

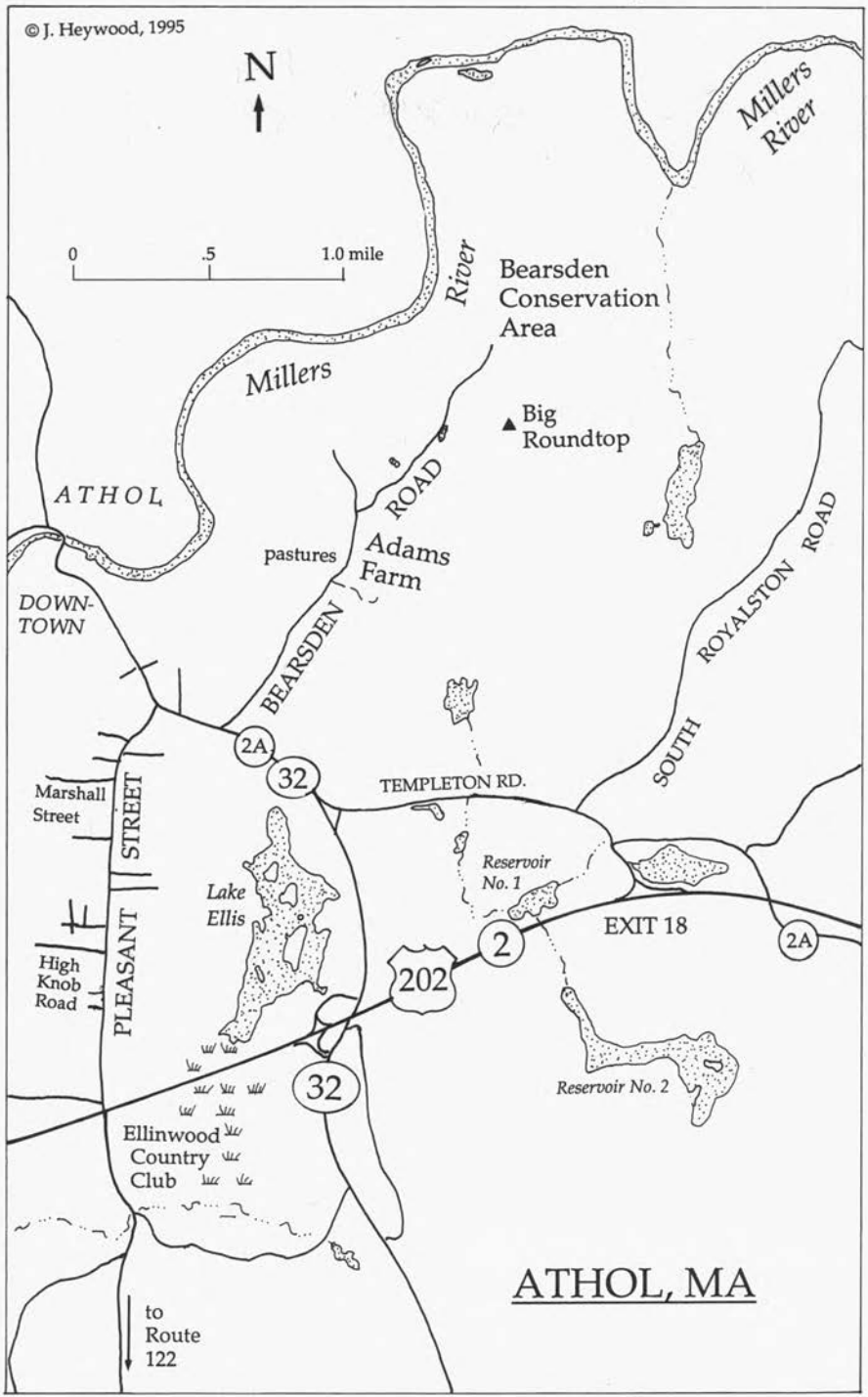
ATHOL'S WINTER SPECIALTIES

by Dave Small and Bill Fregeau

The town of Athol is known in birding circles more for exporting enthusiastic twitchers than as a birding destination. The area hosts the Athol Bird and Nature Club, which was established in 1963 as a diverse group of natural history enthusiasts. The 100-plus member club provides programming and field trips in astronomy, geology, herpetology, botany, entomology (lepidoptery), and of course birds. For more than a century bird sightings from the area have been recorded in numerous publications, from Bagg and Eliot's 1937 work, *Birds of the Connecticut Valley in Massachusetts*, to Veit and Petersen's 1993 *Birds of Massachusetts*, not to mention *Bird News of Western Massachusetts*, *Bird Observer*, and *The Chickadee*. This brings us to one of the problems of being an Athol birder: the identity crisis. Athol and Royalston are the most northern and western extremes of Worcester County. Orange and Warwick are on the northeastern fringe of Franklin County. Geographically, all these towns lie within the Connecticut River basin. But reporting species can fall to *Bird Observer* to the east, *Bird News of Western Massachusetts* to the west, and *The Chickadee* for Worcester County reports only. This minor problem does not deter us from lots of time in the field, with many club members frequently assisting traveling birders in search of Common Ravens, Bald Eagles, Wild Turkeys, winter finches, and vagrants such as Varied Thrush (two in 1994) and Sandhill Crane.

This article focuses on two areas. One is well known to the many birders who searched for Pine Grosbeaks and Bohemian Waxwings last winter. The second is the area's best bet for finding wintering Common Ravens and Wild Turkeys.

Athol is located forty-five minutes west of Route 495 off Route 2. The trip on Route 2 west from the Boston area is quite picturesque. Passing between Mount Wachusett to the south and Mount Watatic to the north, you soon find yourself climbing the hill country of northern Worcester County. Topping the hills in Templeton, you get a spectacular view to the north of Mount Monadnock in New Hampshire, framed by a valley of conifers. It is at this point that you will notice the stations on your car radio beginning to fade, and you start to drop into the Millers River basin. Route 2 narrows here to two lanes and two-way traffic, so be careful. Take Exit 18, which is the first Athol exit. At the end of the ramp, take a left onto Route 2A toward Athol. Proceed 1.5 miles, and take a sharp right turn onto Bearsden Road, which is opposite the Athol Memorial Hospital.



Adams Farm

Proceed 0.7 mile up Bearsden Road, where the pastures of Adams Farm will appear on the left. Stop near the blue trash can, also on the left, to view the area. Raptors, such as Red-tailed Hawk, Cooper's Hawk, and Sharp-shinned Hawk, are winter residents. A Rough-legged Hawk spent several weeks here in December 1993. This is the area best known for finding Common Ravens throughout the winter. The reason for the abundance of these birds is the daily supply of remains from the operation of the slaughterhouse at the farm. The "gut pile" is usually located opposite the farmhouse in the field in front of you. Large numbers of House Sparrows, House Finches, and starlings help keep the accipiters fed. Tree Sparrows, Dark-eyed Juncos, Tufted Titmice, and Northern Cardinals are among the birds regularly at the feeders located on the right side of the road before the farmhouse. Wild Turkeys can be found in any of the pastures around this section of Bearsden Road. The best area is beyond the slaughterhouse on the right. In warmer seasons, Turkey Vultures gather in large numbers.

Continue along Bearsden Road following the signs for about three-quarters of a mile to the Bearsden Conservation Area.

Bearsden Conservation Area

The Town of Athol is fortunate to have had many farsighted individuals concerned with the protection of the rural character of this community. The Athol Conservation Commission oversees more than 1500 acres of meadow and forest land. The nearly 1000 acres of the Bearsden Conservation Area is the largest of these holdings. The area is located in the northeastern part of Athol and borders Phillipston and Royalston. The fast-moving Millers River cuts through this magnificent area, providing one of the most famous fly-fishing waters in the state and a great white-water canoe run from South Royalston to Athol. Many trails and roads crisscross the area, providing many opportunities for hiking, biking, and cross-country skiing.

As you enter the conservation area, Paige Cabin sits on the hill above the road on the left. This rustic cabin is available free for overnight use by adult-supervised groups or individuals by contacting the area manager, Elwin Bacon, at 508-249-2004. The small pond on the right yields good songbird migrants in season. Proceed to the main parking area. From here the trail system winds through oak, pine, and hemlock forests. The trail opposite the parking lot brings the traveler to Big Roundtop (site of many great hawkwatches), with spectacular views of Mount Monadnock, Mount Wachusett, and Mount Greylock, to name a few. Hiking or skiing the trails may produce raptors including Northern Goshawk, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Northern Saw-whet Owl, Barred Owl, Pileated Woodpecker, Wild Turkey, and winter finches. The river may hold Common Mergansers or Bald Eagles. The black bears of Bearsden are on the comeback.

There are very few records from 1924 through the 1980s, but reports have increased in the 1990s, with three separate reports of bear activity in the fall of 1994.

Return to Route 2A. Take a right, and proceed 0.3 miles to Pleasant Street. Turn left in front of the old fire station.

Pleasant Street and Ellinwood Golf Course

Pleasant Street has long been one of the best wintering areas for songbirds in Athol. Bird feeding is a common activity. The picturesque homes are landscaped with mature plantings of ornamental trees and shrubs providing both food and shelter to winter-weary birds. Wintering songbirds have included all the winter finches, Cedar and Bohemian waxwings, Eastern Bluebird, Brown Thrasher, and Rufous-sided Towhee. Marshall Street, 0.3 mile up on the right, has several mountain ash trees worth a look for waxwings or Evening Grosbeaks.

After exploring Marshall Street, return to Pleasant Street, and continue up the hill 0.6 mile to High Knob Road, also on your right. Turn onto High Knob Road, where the first house on the left (blue split ranch), the home of Bill and Jan Fregeau, is the area's best bet for winter finches. If Evening Grosbeaks, Pine Siskins, or Common Redpolls are reported in numbers from Athol, these feeders should be checked. Cruising the neighborhood for additional feeder birds is often productive.

Return to Pleasant Street, and continue along it for another 0.7 mile to the bridge over Route 2 (this is 1.6 miles from the Route 2A/Pleasant Street intersection). Crab apples, crab apples, crab apples—search the crabs, and you may be rewarded with flocks of Cedar Waxwings, Pine Grosbeaks, Bohemian Waxwings, Eastern Bluebirds, American Robins, and others. The bushes are located on both sides of Route 2 and even under the bridge. Park near the bridge, and just look around. The overgrown field on the right is filled with crab apples, multiflora rose, and bittersweet. This has been one of the main areas to explore. On December 6, 1994, a Bohemian Waxwing was observed, raising hopes for a repeat of the 300 Bohemians and equal number of Pine Grosbeaks a year ago. There are many more trees on the opposite side of the road behind the houses bordering the golf course. These can be scoped from the road. This area, including the country club, is private property. Respect the privacy of landowners, and do not enter these areas without permission of the residents.

Continuing on Pleasant Street beyond the Route 2 bridge, bear right just after the Ellinwood Country Club. Proceed for three or four miles until you reach Route 122. A left turn will take you east past Harvard Pond to the intersection of Route 32A. A right turn south on Route 32A will lead you toward Hardwick and the eastern gates of Quabbin. A right turn on Route 122 will lead

you west past the entrance to the Women's Federation State Forest and Route 202 and south to Quabbin's west valley.

DAVE SMALL is president of the Athol Bird and Nature Club and a member of the Massachusetts Partners in Flight State Working Group. He is a supervisor at the Metropolitan District Commission Quabbin Reservoir and has been a birder for thirty years, recently spending field time on butterflies and dragonflies.

BILL FREGEAU is on the Board of Directors of the Athol Bird and Nature Club. He is an independent businessman and has been birding for thirty years. He has recently spent field time on locating and documenting owl populations in the North Quabbin area.

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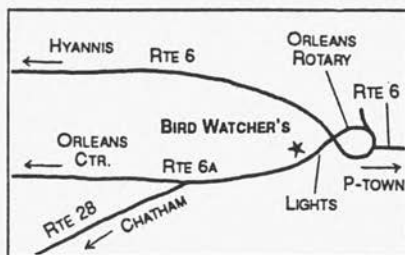
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