

BIRDING THE NASHUA, NEW HAMPSHIRE, AREA

by Ralph Andrews

Nashua, New Hampshire, is not known as a hot spot for finding birds. In fact, for most Massachusetts birders it is more acclaimed as one of those Merrimack River mill towns that impede travel to the really exciting places in central and northern New Hampshire. However, for those of us who live along the state line, there are some interesting places to find birds at all seasons. These places are only an hour from Boston and provide some interesting bits of history as well as new landscapes to explore—all before the first tollgate.

Once a part of Dunstable, in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Nashua is located where the Nashua River, flowing northeast from central Massachusetts, joins the Merrimack River on its way south from the White Mountains. Much of its human history, as well as its current birding interest, is focused along those rivers. Various tribes of Penacook Indians traveled along the rivers and settled where the fishing and hunting were good. With gradual expansion of European settlements, the rich floodplains were cleared for farming. The rivers became early transportation corridors, and the smaller tributaries supplied power for businesses such as sawmills and gristmills. Eventually, the Industrial Revolution brought dams, industries, railroads, and pollution. Finally, highways became the favored route of transportation and reduced the riverfront activity. Vegetation returned to vacated lands—and so did the birds. Great strides in cleaning up the polluted rivers have again made them attractive for people as well as for birds.

Although the Nashua area does not offer the rich variety of birdlife found on the coast or some of the specialties found to the north, its habitat diversity permits respectable lists of birds at all seasons. Christmas Bird Counts (CBC) have been conducted for thirty years, and species totals have been in the low sixties in recent years. Some open water on the rivers allows a surprising variety of waterbirds to linger, and the resident flocks of urban Mallards and Canada Geese often include species such as Hooded Merganser, Wood Duck, Northern Pintail, Gadwall, and Green-winged Teal. Spring migration provides the best birding, reaching a peak about the third week of May, when a daily list of 100 species is quite attainable. Breeding birds include several northern species that are scarce or absent south of the border.

As in most urban areas, good birding spots are often small, and access may be difficult. Two excellent places are Greeley Park and Mine Falls Park. Greeley Park was a family farm donated to the city of Nashua in 1881 for recreational use. It lies on both sides of Concord Street, the northward extension of Main Street. Typical of parks, it has expansive lawns, ball fields, woods dominated by large white pines, and few interesting birds. However, about 0.3 mile north of the park, a right turn onto Hills Ferry Road leads to the Boston and Maine

railroad tracks and a portion of the park bordering the Merrimack River. Just across the tracks, a dirt road leads through a stand of large pines to a boat ramp—one of very few along the river. This dirt road is not maintained in winter, but in other seasons a canoe trip on the river can provide delightfully peaceful birding.

A foot trail leads along the crest of the steep riverbank, where one can look down into the large trees arching out over the river. Spotted Sandpipers and Green Herons frequent the shores in summer, and Bald Eagles cruise the river in winter. Pine Warblers and Red-breasted Nuthatches are breeding species in the pine forest. The path now ends at a fenced area enclosing a water-treatment plant and several wells. This is the site of a former creosoting yard. Unfortunately, much of the creosote soaked into the ground and eventually to the river. For several years it has been a Superfund (hazardous waste) site where groundwater is pumped and cleaned. Meanwhile, the once-open field between river and railroad has been growing back to forbs, shrubs, and thickets of gray birch that attract many birds, including Vesper Sparrow, Field Sparrow, Indigo Bunting, Prairie Warbler, and Brown Thrasher. Walk back along the fence to the railroad tracks, and follow them north for about one mile to a scenic wooded site where Pennichuck Brook enters the Merrimack River. Trains are infrequent along this line.

Mine Falls Park is located along the Nashua River close to the heart of the city. The 325-acre area was acquired in 1969 and has become popular for many kinds of outdoor recreation. The name derives from early lead mines located near the falls at the west end of the park. In the early 1800s a dam above the falls diverted water to a three-mile long canal to provide power for the mill yard via a thirty-six-foot drop. Most of the park lies between the canal and the river and is served by a seven-mile network of trails, which pass under busy Route 3. Despite being bisected by the highway, with a small hydroelectric plant at one end and a historic mill yard at the other, and bordered by a high school, a mall, and ball fields, the park has a diversity of habitats and often provides excellent birding. Because of competing uses, birding is best early in the day.

There are several access points with adequate parking space (except during ball games). The main entrance is at the end of Whipple Street. Take Exit 5E-A from Route 3 northbound, go east one block on West Hollis Street, turn north (left) onto Simon Street, then left again on Whipple Street (no street sign). Coming southbound on Route 3 is trickier because the intersection is complicated. You may have to maneuver so as to be westbound on Hollis Street.

Once you have parked at the main entrance to the park at the end of Whipple Street, cross the canal on the footbridge, and turn right onto the canal levee. This provides good viewing of the shrubs along the canal and the trees along the slope toward the river. Eventually, there is an excellent view of the Cove, an old oxbow lake bordered by marshes, which are inhabited by beaver,

muskrat, otter, and mink. It is a great place to see waterfowl, including Ring-necked Ducks in April, when the ice melts. Ospreys and herons are regular visitors. The trail follows a narrow border between the wetlands and the mill buildings to the river. Northern Rough-winged Swallows nest in cracks of the old buildings, and Yellow Warblers and Warbling Vireos nest in the riverside trees. Follow the river, including the loop around the soccer fields, back to your car.

Another good access point is Lincoln Park, at the end of Coliseum Avenue, which is just 0.3 mile west of Exit 6 of Route 3, a left turn off Broad Street. Park, cross the river on the footbridge, and proceed to the canal through towering pines where Pine Warblers and Black-throated Green Warblers nest. From here a loop trail to the left enables you to cover the area downstream to Whipple Street, while a loop to the right takes you upstream as far as the dam, where the canal begins with a larger body of water known as the Mill Pond, which has a boat ramp and commuter parking lot.

Another boat ramp behind the Public Works garage off Route 111 (Hollis Street) 0.2 mile west of Route 3 and immediately above the dam, is another point of access and a good place to launch a canoe. Above the falls and dam, the river is wide and bordered by skeleton forests of dead trees. These were killed when the dam was elevated about a decade ago. They are extensively used by flickers and other woodpeckers as well as by Tree Swallows and other cavity-nesters. They also provide exposed perches for a variety of hawks, herons, and flycatchers. You can paddle upstream among the trees and stumps to Runnell's Bridge on Route 111, where rapids maintain open water for ducks in winter. Absent a canoe, you can drive west on Route 111 about 3.5 miles southwest from Exit 5 to this bridge. Cross the bridge, and then turn right onto Depot Road and almost immediately right again to a small parking area overlooking the rapids.

Also just off Route 111, about 1.8 miles southwest of Exit 5 on Route 3, is the Nashua landfill. Look for the sign on the left as you drive west on Route 111. In winter a few Iceland and even Glaucous gulls can be found among the large flocks of Herring and Great Black-backed gulls. Red-tailed Hawks are regular, and other raptors, including Bald Eagle and Snowy Owl have been seen. Turkey Vultures can be found most of the year, and a Black Vulture was present for the 1994 CBC. Flocks of Horned Larks and Snow Buntings often use the cleared ground in periods of deep snowfall. Although birding is discouraged in the work area, it is possible to drive to the recycling bins and scan the birds with binoculars or scope. However, the landfill is closed from Saturday noon through Sunday.

A few miles west of Nashua on Route 130 is the rural town of Hollis. Although now changing to suburban housing, much of it remains as farmland and woods. Two special areas for seeking birds are Beaver Brook Association

and Silver Lake State Park. Beaver Brook is a private conservation organization with about 1700 acres of lands in southwestern Hollis and adjacent Brookline. Established in 1964, its educational activities emphasize nature study and demonstration of forestry and wildlife management practices. Nearly thirty miles of trails and forest roads access a variety of habitats, including headwater streams with beaver ponds, vernal wetlands, rocky outcrops and woods, and laurel-covered hillsides. Birding is good at all seasons, but best during May. Nesting box programs attract about thirty pairs of Wood Ducks and Hooded Mergansers, as well as many pairs of Eastern Bluebirds.

Several access points have trailhead parking. Some of the favored birding trails can be reached by Ridge Road. Go west on Route 130 for 5.5 miles to Route 122. Take a left on Route 122, and go about 0.9 mile south to Ridge Road. About one-half mile down Ridge Road, turn right and follow the signs about 0.5 mile down a dirt road to the Brown Lane Barn, which is surrounded by a variety of habitats and is therefore a great place to compile a list of migrants. It is a good place to watch American Woodcock perform on April evenings, and Ruffed Grouse and Barred Owls are often heard. Broad-winged Hawks, Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, Wood Thrushes, and American Redstarts are among the summer residents. A short walk leads down to Beaver Brook, where Swamp Sparrows, Alder Flycatchers, and Blue-gray Gnatcatchers are found.

Returning to Ridge Road, a half-mile down Ridge Road is Maple Hill Farm ("Office" on the map), which serves as headquarters for the Beaver Brook Association and the site of attractively maintained gardens. Birds that have nested nearby include Red-bellied Woodpeckers, Yellow-throated Vireos, Blue-winged Warblers, and Indigo Buntings. Winter Wrens and Louisiana Waterthrushes are regularly heard along the road leading down to Beaver Brook.

Continue south on Ridge Road past fields, where meadowlarks and Bobolinks still breed, to Worcester Road (0.7 mile), and follow it around an extensive beaver-created swamp to the junction with West Hollis Road (1.3 miles) at the Nissitissit River, a delightful pristine stream in a largely protected greenway. Park here, and walk along an old railroad bed that follows the river from its source at Potanipo Lake to its junction with the Nashua River in Pepperell. The railroad functioned primarily to bring ice to Boston prior to refrigeration early in this century. A short walk along the rail trail leads between the beaver pond and the river. The pond is an excellent place to see Wood Ducks and Hooded Mergansers, and Ring-necked Ducks have lingered through May. Pied-billed Grebes and American Bitterns nest in the bordering marshes but are more likely to be heard than seen. The trail continues into woods dominated by large white pines. Although birds are not abundant, Pileated Woodpeckers, Hermit Thrushes, Yellow-rumped Warblers, and Pine Warblers can be found during nesting season.

Other good access points to Beaver Brook lands are along Route 130,

locally known as Proctor Hill Road. About 0.7 miles west of the Route 122 junction, on the south side of the highway, just before the Diamond Casting Company, is a small drive-in parking area. Trails lead along the brook and are popular for winter skiing. The Northern Saw-whet Owl has been found there, and it is a good area for Scarlet Tanagers, Black-throated Green Warblers, and Least Flycatchers in summer.

Nearly a mile farther west, there is a parking area along the north side of the highway. From here, a trail leads to the Wildlife Pond, a managed impoundment where waterbirds can be found. Beyond the pond, trails lead through some rugged terrain, where mountain laurel makes impenetrable thickets on rocky outcrops. Northern Ravens, Turkey Vultures, and Red-shouldered Hawks have been found there and summer warblers include both waterthrushes and Black-throated Blue, Canada, and Blackburnian warblers. A few Great Blue Herons nest on one of the beaver ponds-

Another Hollis area with woodland trails and some good birding potential is Silver Lake State Park, on Route 122 about 1.2 miles north of the Route 130 junction. The lake has a sandy beach and is a popular bathing and picnicking place in summer but is generally poor for birding. However, from the southeast corner of the parking lot, across the highway from the lake, a footpath connects to roads that traverse the adjacent Town Forest. Although the little-used area supports a diversity of woodland birds, it is even more distinguished for some of its interesting postglacial landscapes. These include Dunklee Pond and neighboring kettle ponds, a superb esker, and a bog with small black spruce trees. White-throated Sparrows and Dark-eyed Juncos have been seen here in summer.

An alternate access point to Town Forest can be reached by driving 0.7 mile north of Silver Lake State Park on Route 122, bearing right on South Merrimack Road (no street sign) for another half-mile to the intersection of Farley Road, and immediately parking on the right at the entrance to a gated woods road that is a short walk to the east end of Dunklee Pond.

RALPH ANDREWS, who lives in Nashua, has been an active birder since his youth in Ithaca, New York. He retired from a forty-year career as a wildlife biologist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1992. The last seventeen years were with the regional office in Boston. He has been active with the Audubon Society of New Hampshire, for which he now serves as a trustee. He has also been a long-time coordinator of birding projects, such as the local CBC and the New Hampshire Breeding Bird Atlas in the Nashua area. He is the current president of the Beaver Brook Association.

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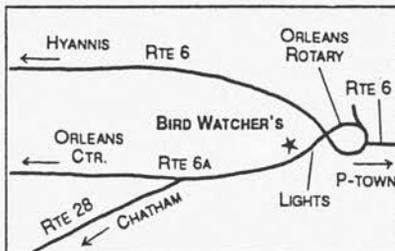
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