

DEAD CREEK WMA, ADDISON, VT

by Terry Hall

Several carloads of birders had pulled into the Viewing Area along Route 17 to scope the thousands of Greater Snow Geese, looking for their smaller cousin. "Got a Ross' front and center at 150 feet and beyond the Barnacle!" came the cry. Later that month at the same spot, an incredulous group witnessed a large, long-winged bird nearly land with the geese, then fly slowly to the east towards the Green Mountains. Someone yelled, "That was a Northern Gannet!" Later that fall, two local birders were looking over these fields, now snow-covered and with few geese remaining, and spotted a Snowy Owl—with a dark-morph Gyrfalcon in hot pursuit!

These events took place in the fall of 1996 at Dead Creek Wildlife Management Area in Addison, Vermont, and illustrate the appeal of this Champlain Valley birding spot. One of sixty wildlife management areas administered by the Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation, Dead Creek consists of 2850 acres of marsh, woodlands, cultivated farmland, and dry fields. Located entirely within Addison County, Dead Creek itself flows north in three branches from Bridport for about 8 miles until the branches merge into a series of impoundments created to form the Dead Creek Waterfowl Area. This wetland extends north for another 9 miles until it joins Otter Creek west of the "city" of Vergennes. Bordered and crossed by numerous roads, most notably VT Route 17, and with several public access roads ending at the water's edge, the area can be birded easily by automobile.

No formal trail system exists, but many areas are accessible for walking. It is also possible to canoe most of the Creek, allowing closer approach to wildlife. Generally, signs indicate areas off limits to vehicles or walking, or private land if posted, so the birder can assume that entry is permitted in any area without such signs. All of the Management Area is surrounded by private land, which may or may not be posted. Discretion should always be used when entering any area that looks private, but most Vermont land owners are birder-friendly and will give permission if asked.

A retired University of Vermont professor, Bob Fuller, is credited with the creation of the Dead Creek WMA back in the 1950s. The area is managed primarily to enhance waterfowl breeding and resting. Hunting is allowed in certain areas, and fishing, wildlife study, and other forms of recreation are encouraged. At present, the State is preparing a broad-based management plan to accommodate Dead Creek's many uses, consumptive and non-consumptive alike. Interpretive displays, viewing areas, and raised platforms are either being planned or have been completed along Route 17 to provide the public easier access to the fall spectacle of Snow/Canada Goose migration stopover.

Also of interest to birders are irregularly-scheduled drawdowns of one or two of the impoundments as a management tool to enhance the growth of certain plant species critical to waterfowl. First begun in 1974, drawdowns over the years have produced most of the total 38 species of shorebirds on the Vermont list, including Whimbrel, Buff-breasted Sandpiper, and Wilson's Phalarope. Since the last drawdown, in 1994, the permit process has become more complicated, but state managers have assured me that drawdowns will continue in the future.

Birding is a year-round proposition at Dead Creek, and this article will offer directions and expected species for each season. Directions to the best birding spots will be given from a starting point at the blinker light on Route 22A at the south edge of the small city of Vergennes, just past a bridge over Otter Creek. Vergennes is just off Route 7 twenty miles south of Burlington, and the town is bisected by Route 22A. A useful resource for visiting birders is the Ninth Edition of the Vermont Atlas and Gazetteer, published by DeLorme in 1996, as the Dead Creek area as described in this article is shown entirely on map 38. Older editions use a different grid system and do not show road names; I will indicate the names in this article as they appear on the road signs, even if they differ from the Atlas (as sometimes happens).

Summer

As summer approaches, fields and hedgerows along West and Slang Roads offer visiting birders a look at some unusual breeding birds. West Road can be reached from Route 22A: marked by a sign 2.4 miles from the blinker light in Vergennes, it runs west for 2.2 miles to the Stone Bridge (a new gate blocks access over the bridge), then left to a dead end and turnaround loop at 2.5 miles. Alternatively, approach this area from Slang Road by going right at the Vergennes blinker, passing unmarked Basin Harbor Road at 1.4 miles, and turning left on Slang Road at 2.9 miles. Slang Road intersects unmarked West Road at a "T" intersection 1.4 miles south of this point.

Grasshopper Sparrows, often somewhat colonial, change nesting locales from year to year, but with good conditions their buzzy songs can be heard somewhere along West Road, as can the beautiful song of the Vesper Sparrow. In some years, Bobolinks can be so numerous that their constant singing obscures more subtle songs. Early morning is a good time to listen for the plaintive whistle of Upland Sandpipers, which are known to nest in the larger fields in this area. The Loggerhead Shrike, a bird probably gone from Vermont, last nested along the fencelines of Slang Road. One can only hope for its reappearance here, as it has been nearly fifteen years since the last sighting.

Also worth a summer visit is the Brilyea Impoundment. (The name "Brilyea" will not be seen on any signs, and along with the "Farrell" and "Stone Bridge" accesses, will be referred to in this article but are no longer marked as

such.) To reach the Brilyea Impoundment, go south from the blinker light on Route 22A in Vergennes for 5.8 miles to the double blinker in Addison. Turn right (west) on Route 17 and proceed past the Headquarters buildings at 1.0 miles to the concrete bridge over Dead Creek at 2.4 miles. Immediately after the bridge, go left (south) onto an unmarked dirt road, the access to the Brilyea area. This road goes south along the marshy creek for 0.7 miles, past a parking area on the right, and at this point is blocked by a closed metal gate. Before the gate, the road forks left and continues over a bridge and raised dike (marked as a dam on the map) to the end, a turnaround parking area at 1.0 miles with a second closed metal gate.

These two gates block the lanes off to vehicles, but the birder can walk down either side of the impoundment, picking up mixed habitat nesting species such as Pileated, Downy and Hairy woodpeckers, Great Crested Flycatcher, Eastern Wood-Pewee, both cuckoos (Yellow-billed is rare), Wood Thrush, Cedar Waxwing, Red-eyed Vireo, several warblers, Field Sparrow (local), Baltimore Oriole, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, and many others. Each lane leads deep into the habitats, and the east path is shown on the Atlas map as continuing all the way out to the Nortontown Road after about a mile (I have never walked the whole way). The westerly path passes through a wooded area, a gated pasture, along a raised dike past two small impoundments, and further into woodlands. These lanes are fruitful in any season except winter, and will be discussed again in later sections.

Another productive walk for the summer birder is along Town House Road, a small dirt lane off Nortontown Road. A gravel road, Nortontown Road runs 4.1 miles between Route 22A and Jersey St., bisecting all three branches of Dead Creek. Go south on Route 22A from the double blinker at Addison for 1.8 miles, then right (west) on Nortontown Road. After 1.4 miles, the road dips down and crosses the East Branch, then climbs, and at 1.7 miles Town House Road is a left (south) turn. This road soon passes a lane to a farm to the east, then continues into the most southerly section of the Management Area. Don't try to drive all the way in, but park along the side out of the way and walk. This area has been good for sparrows (especially Grasshopper and Vesper), Bobolink, Upland Sandpiper, and many other grassland and edge birds. Not as frequently birded as West or Slang Roads, this section could produce surprises (Loggerhead Shrike or Henslow's Sparrow?) for a careful and very lucky observer.

One last summer birding technique is worth mentioning: canoeing through the marshy waterways of the Creek itself. The broader impoundments are often a bit sterile, but even the edges of these can be explored by canoe. There are places to launch a canoe or rowboat in the Brilyea access, along Route 17, at the end of West Road at the Stone Bridge area, and also in the "Farrell Access." To get to the Farrell Access road, continue west along Pantown Road beyond the

bridge, to the Panton four corners at 4.3 miles from the blinker on Route 22A. Turn left (south) here along Jersey St. for 2.6 miles (do not bear right anywhere; go straight) to a dirt road on the left with a Fish and Wildlife Access sign. This lane leads through the fields, crosses a raised dike, and dead-ends after about 0.75 miles at a turnaround on the west bank of Dead Creek. This is a good place to put in a canoe and go either north to the Stone Bridge impoundment or south to the bridge over Route 17 and Brilyea. In summer, this area may hold unusual waders such as Glossy Ibis, Little Blue Heron, Snowy and Great egrets, perhaps even a Tricolored or Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, in addition to the common marsh birds. A word of caution here: summer birders should come prepared with insect repellent, sun screen, and a broad-brimmed hat!

Fall

Fall migration can be the most exciting time in the Dead Creek area, but shorebirding is dependent on the drawdown of one of the impoundments. Two gates control the levels, one at the dam in Brilyea, the other under the Stone Bridge at the end of West Road. In an effort to allow seed germination of plant species utilized by waterfowl, water levels are lowered slowly, starting in July, and the moist edges are soon covered by new growth. As the plants go to seed, water levels are allowed to rise again in September so that by fall the waterfowl can dabble in the lush shallows. This period coincides with shorebird migration; by August, if conditions are right, these new mudflats teem with birds. The feeding frenzy continues right into October, when water levels are usually back to normal, and late migrants such as American Golden-Plover, Long-billed Dowitcher, and Dunlin may be on the scene. If a drawdown is scheduled, the word gets out early and we prepare to monitor it closely. Several strategies are useful and will be discussed in some detail.

It appears impossible to predict when and where birds will drop in once suitable habitat shows, so frequent visits are the key. At the Brilyea impoundment, which has been lowered most frequently, one must check several areas that are some distance apart and cannot be viewed from one spot. A walk down either the east or west paths, beyond the red metal gates, is necessary to view the shallower spots; on the west side in particular, you will come to an arm of the creek just beyond the pasture and before the dike area. Here numerous old stalks of flooded bushes are used by shorebirds as shelter from predators. Careful searching may yield peeps or phalaropes hiding in this growth.

The further up this arm, the drier it gets, as this area drains first. A walk along the edge of this impoundment can be a good way to see the entire pool, but be VERY careful to avoid deep mud and stay on the dry edges. Back down toward the dam, the water is deeper, forming many pools along the edges. It was here a pair of American Avocets spent over two weeks in 1994, along with yellowlegs, Stilt Sandpipers, both Red-necked and Wilson's phalaropes, and

Baird's Sandpipers. Keep an eye out for raptors, especially Merlins and Peregrine Falcons, harassing these shorebirds. Studying a flushed flock can result in a quick view of a good bird, like the Curlew Sandpiper that was seen only briefly and then disappeared for good.

As fall progresses, the emphasis changes from shorebirds to waterfowl, and the Viewing Area (a half-mile gravel pull-out along Route 17) becomes center stage. By the middle of October, a buildup of geese is evident, with Canada and Greater Snow Geese making up the bulk of the birds. A mixture of alfalfa, weeds, and corn fields provides the geese with ample food, and the large pond behind the fields offers a roosting area at night. A farm with pastures and more cornfields is set just behind this area, to the south, and then in all directions there are many more fields of all descriptions interlaced with woodlots, hedgerows and white pine groves.

Over the years, the numbers of Canada Geese appear to be declining, and Snow Geese now far outnumber them. Data from neck bands on many of the snows indicate that these birds arrive mainly from northeast Canada via the St. Lawrence flyway; apparently they are spending less time in Quebec and more in the Champlain Valley, on both sides of the lake. Once the number of Snow Geese grew to several thousand, it was only a question of time before the first Ross' Goose was found, an immature bird in late October of 1990. A first for New England, this species has been annual ever since. Two years ago a very rare blue-phase bird was carefully studied and photographed. Usually fewer than ten birds are counted each year, never all together, but scattered among the thousands of Greater (and Lesser) Snows. Their arrival and departure changes each year, but the best time to look seems to be late October into early November. Once found, their presence is noted on the Vermont Rare Bird Alert or internet list services. In 1996, a Barnacle Goose put in a brief appearance here, its origin unknown, but quite possibly the same bird seen the previous spring in the Champlain Islands. Rarely, a Greater White-fronted Goose is found, usually in the company of Canada Geese.

The flocks of geese usually scatter by midmorning and will visit the many neighboring farm fields to forage, only to return in late afternoon to feed again and prepare to roost. A drive throughout the rest of the area is usually pointless unless no geese are along Route 17, but one other area worth checking is nearby Gage Road, down behind the farm visible to the south of the Viewing Area. Gage Road leaves Route 22A 0.9 miles south of the double blinker in Addison, goes west down the hill, and dead-ends just past the farm. Often the goose flocks can be scoped from this area, and Ross' Goose has been seen here more than once. Hunters are numerous here, however, and have permission to set up decoys in these fields. Respect the hunters' rights, giving them wide berth and never walking into these fields, which are private and outside of the boundaries of the Management Area.

It is never necessary to walk into any fields to view the geese, and in fact it is not permitted under any circumstances. The geese are usually relaxed and will feed close to the fenceline along the Viewing Area, as this area is off limits to hunting and the birds seem to know it. Walking into the fields to get closer, allowing dogs to run free, or engaging in any noisy activity can put additional stress on the birds, which are in need of rest before continuing their migration. A good plan is to be here in the afternoon, search for the Ross' (or just enjoy the spectacle), and then perhaps witness the incredible sight (and sound!) of ten thousand Snow Geese as they pick up at dusk and all try to land on the pond!

This many waterfowl is an attraction for more than birders, and each fall predators appear, adding excitement and suspense. Bald Eagles are regular, and Golden Eagles are nearly annual, most often in November. Golden Eagles may stay a week or more, preying on the geese, and are easily watched from the Viewing Area. Other fall birds here include late shorebirds like American Golden Plover and Upland and Pectoral sandpipers. I am amazed that Sandhill Crane is not seen here more often than it has been. Cranes have been seen recently to the north along Slang and West Roads, but given the vast area of suitable habitat, especially cornfields, it is easy to see how one or more could be missed each year. Perhaps a visiting birder will spot one for us Vermonters. Good luck!

Winter

Winter at Dead Creek can be bleak and cold, but exciting as well. Most of the geese head south when the area freezes or when the food supply is depleted. With luck, a few Snow Geese will remain until mid-December to be counted on the first weekend of Christmas Bird Counts. If Lake Champlain is still wide open, the usual scenario for December, then huge flocks of Canadas with fewer numbers of Snows will remain on the Lake and feed in whatever fields in the area still have corn. But at this time of year, the birder's attention turns to wintering raptors and open country birds. The Ferrisburgh CBC is noted each year for its raptor list: 1996 was no exception, as a record ten species of hawks were found (not all at Dead Creek, but any one of them could have been). Oddly, Peregrine was the only miss (twelve or more pairs nest in Vermont), and the Golden Eagle seen earlier in the fall had departed, but following are the numbers found in the count circle December 21st: Bald Eagle (9), Northern Harrier (9), Sharp-shinned Hawk (6), Cooper's Hawk (5), Northern Goshawk (2), Red-tailed Hawk (49), Rough-legged Hawk (30), American Kestrel (1), Merlin (2) and Gyrfalcon (1). After the Golden Eagle had left, a dark-morph Gyrfalcon was seen several times harassing the few geese left near the Viewing Area along Route 17, and then after some snow fell in November, a Snowy Owl was seen there also. Two different gray-morph Gyrfalcons were seen later and throughout the winter, and even a white-phase bird was noted a couple of times

in Cornwall, to the south of Dead Creek. Perhaps the highest concentration of Rough-legged Hawks anywhere in the East is to be found here, with both color phases easily found. Of course these birds are spread throughout a much larger area than just Dead Creek, but if one were to spend time just within the area described in this article, then any of the above species can be expected.

Other possible owls include Great Horned, Long- (rare) and Short-eared, Saw-whet (rare at Dead Creek) and Eastern Screech-Owl. Nearly impossible to find in Maine, New Hampshire or even other parts of Vermont, the screech-owl often ranges up into the Champlain Valley, perhaps reaching the most northerly part of its range in New England here. Most of these owls can be located by either playing tapes at night (Great Horned, Saw-whet or Long-eared), in the daytime (Eastern Screech) or by waiting until dusk for Short-eared. During the winter of 1996-1997, up to four Short-eared Owls were regular at the intersection of Slang and West Roads, especially in the north-east corner. Unless conditions are brutally cold or windy, they will come off the roosts, sit on posts or snags, and then take flight over the fields and hedgerows as it gets darker.

The second good reason to visit this area in winter is to see large flocks of open country birds using the fields and roadsides throughout the valley. Horned Lark (which breeds here), Snow Bunting, Lapland Longspur, and sometimes Common and Hoary Redpoll can be found, sometimes in impressive numbers. A recent ban on the spreading of fresh manure on snowy farm fields in winter has caused some changes in distribution of these birds. Concern for runoff of nitrates into Lake Champlain is the reason for the ban, but without such spreading, Snow Bunting and Horned Lark flocks often do not have a good place to forage if snow is recent or deep. Then, the birder must cruise the roads (gravel or paved), as the flocks will gather at the edges where the plows will have scraped down to dirt and grass.

An excellent route to follow is to start down the Nortontown Road from Route 22A south of Addison, turn right (north) on Jersey Street for 1.2 miles to Route 17, and go on Route 17 for 0.8 miles to where Jersey Street again heads off to the north at the curve in West Addison. Continue 6.0 more miles all the way to Panton (turn right at the "T" at unmarked Goodrich Corners), then east toward Vergennes. This long loop should yield many flocks; look over the fields for windswept areas cleared of snow where the birds may find food. Without snow it is usually difficult to find anything unless one is lucky. If it is a "redpoll year," flocks of dozens and sometimes many hundreds can be seen in early winter, foraging in weedy fields before the snow gets too deep. Look especially for alfalfa or similar crops, as these finches will go after small seeds and can be found in constant motion, swirling around from field to field. Just as with Snow and Ross' geese, the larger the flock of Common Redpolls, the better the chance of finding one or more Hoarys in the crowd.

Spring

Spring is a marvelous time to visit Dead Creek for the first time, and this location provides many Big Day and Birdathon groups with marsh birds and many other species; the Brilyea Impoundment (see directions under "Summer") offers a "one-stop-shopping" experience for the pre-dawn crowd. To experience the birding at its best, one should be here long before sunup and spend time listening and walking the access road between Route 17 and the dam. At this hour one can hear Pied-billed Grebe, American and Least Bitterns, Green Heron, Black-crowned Night-Heron, Sora and Virginia Rail, Common Moorhen, American Woodcock, Common Snipe, Black Tern, Eastern Screech-Owl, Great Horned Owl, plus the usual array of spring migrants and resident species. It is not unusual to check off eighty species if conditions are good. A record-setting Big Day count in Vermont is 150+ species, so almost 60 percent of the total is possible here.

In woodlots surrounding these marshy areas, orioles, grosbeaks, wood warblers, thrushes, flycatchers, and woodpeckers are all possible, but to get another group of birds, one should head back out from the Brilyea access, turn right (east) on Route 17 and go 0.3 miles to the marked Viewing Area. Glass the fields and small ponds for grassland and hedgerow birds, many of which will remain to breed: Blue-winged Teal, Turkey Vulture, Northern Harrier, Red-tailed Hawk, American Kestrel, Ring-necked Pheasant (probably released), Killdeer, Spotted Sandpiper, migrating Solitary, Least, and Semipalmated sandpipers (other peeps are possible), Horned Lark, Eastern Bluebird, Vesper, Savannah, Grasshopper, White-throated, and White-crowned sparrows, Bobolink and Eastern Meadowlark. In another 0.3 miles, a short access road, heading north (left) and marked "Wildlife Area," offers more of this habitat.

Three other areas are worth mentioning here for the Spring birder, the first one right near the Brilyea access road; to the north across Route 17 and about 150 feet to the west, an old gate in the fenceline leads to a rutted lane through the field and scattered trees, past some beehives into a "peninsula" of higher ground surrounded by cattail marsh. Be prepared for muddy, wet conditions here as whatever lane there was disappears into the long grass. Walk in about one hundred yards and head to the edge of the cattails on either side. Both bitterns, rails, Marsh Wren, Swamp Sparrow, and Common Moorhen can be heard readily. The judicious use of tapes may help bring these birds into view. A probable King Rail was heard (but never seen) here in 1994, and its call taped; the identification could have been more certain had not a specimen of Clapper Rail been obtained here some years ago! Managers have tried to enhance Black Tern nesting here by churning through the cattails with a machine on loan from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, called the "cookie cutter," which opens up pools in the dense cattails. Perhaps this year the terns will utilize this spot again, as they did before the cattails took over.

A more reliable spot for Black Tern is along Panton Road, to the north. From the blinker on Route 22A in Vergennes, go right (west) 1.4 miles past Basin Harbor Road (not presently marked), continue past Slawg Road on the left at 2.9 miles to the concrete bridge over Dead Creek at 3.3 miles. Park on either side of the bridge in one of the pulloffs (often busy with fishermen) and walk to the bridge. Unless the water levels are too high, Black Tern usually shows up here first and will nest to the north; they will perch on old duck blinds and often cruise back and forth across the bridge, allowing close views. If water levels are low, the shallower edges may contain shorebirds (a black Ruff stayed here over a week one late summer). Look here for all five swallow species in early spring and listen for Willow Flycatcher along the drier brushy margins.

Directions and accommodations

A final word on logistics should help the visiting birder enjoy this area of Vermont. From southern New England, the area is best reached via I-93 or I-91 to I-89 to the Burlington area. Birders from western areas could use Route 7 all the way to Vergennes, or the Northway (I-87) from the Albany, NY area, and over the Champlain Bridge into Vermont on Route 17 at Chimney Point. Services are readily available, including gas and food, right to Vergennes, and even locally near Dead Creek. Two options for lodging depend on the season. In summer (after Memorial Day), camping is available on the Lake Champlain shore a couple of miles south and west of Dead Creek, along Route 17 at D.A.R. State Park, or a few miles north of this at Button Bay State Park. Both sites are marked on maps, and should cater to drop-in campers or tenters.

Out-of-season facilities include motels, which abound in the Burlington or Middlebury areas but are scarce near Vergennes itself, and a number of area bed-and-breakfasts. Restaurants can be found in Vergennes; the Bridge Family Restaurant, now open all year, is the intersection of Routes 17 and 125, near the Champlain Bridge. Sandwiches and drinks are available at several country stores near Dead Creek: Burnett's Country Store at the Panton Four Corners, the West Addison General Store 3.7 miles south-west of Brilyea on Route 17, or the Addison Four Corners General Store where the double blinker light is on Route 22A.

Vermont Bird Alert in Woodstock—802-457-2779—provides current information on sightings. Feel free to contact me on the internet; my Email address is terryhall@aol.com. A comprehensive Web Site is maintained by Scott Morrical at the University of Vermont:

<http://www.uvm.edu/~smorrica/sightings.html>.

George "Terry" Hall resides in Shelburne, Vermont. Having lived in Alaska for 17 years, Terry has birded across the country many times and boasts an ABA area life list of nearly 750 species. A past member of the American Birding Association's Board of Directors, he currently serves as Seasonal (Fall) Editor for *Records of Vermont Birds*, sits on the Vermont Bird Records Committee, and leads tours throughout New England. He has co-authored several articles and notes on bird-finding in Alaska, including first North American records of Siberian House Martin, Red-breasted Flycatcher, and Gray Bunting.

Bird Observer Workshops _____

In its continuing series of workshops on bird identification, behavior and conservation, Bird Observer is pleased to offer summer program for 1997, led by Wayne R. Petersen, field ornithologist for the Massachusetts Audubon Society.

TERNs WITH A TWIST:_____A workshop on Massachusetts terns

Massachusetts is geographically situated on the Atlantic Coast in such a way that it lies at the southern terminus of the range of the Arctic Tern and the northern terminus of the range of Forster's Tern, and also hosts some of the largest colonies of Common and Roseate terns in the Western Hemisphere. In addition to supporting five breeding tern species, plus the Black Skimmer, the Bay State is a premier locality in which to study sternids.

Exhibiting some intriguing identification problems, migration mysteries, and breeding behaviors, terns also represent one of the most conspicuous and controversial wildlife management problems in the Commonwealth. In this workshop, these various topics will be investigated, and a field trip to Cape Cod will afford participants an opportunity to observe a variety of Massachusetts tern species.

Lecture: Friday, July 25, 1997, 7:30-9:30 PM
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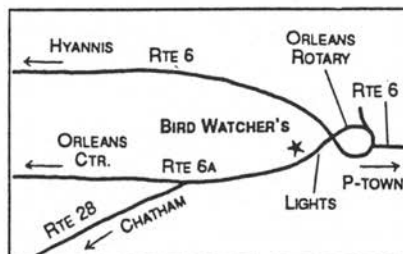
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