

## LOOKING FOR WHERE TO LOOK: MAPS FOR BIRDING

by Marjorie W. Rines

I've only been birding for about eight years, but I've been a map nut my whole life. There's pleasure in looking at places from above as if you were flying, savoring the features of the land, imagining what it looks like on the ground. When I started birding, I found a whole new reason for buying more maps. I needed road maps of every town in the state, just in case I wanted to chase a rarity reported in some obscure location. But I also needed other types of maps to tell me what the road maps can't.

Topographic maps, or topos, can be one of the best tools a birder can use when looking for new birding locations. They literally show the "lay of the land." Woods, marshes, open areas, and cities are shown in different colors and textures. Hills and mountains are described by contour lines. Parks, recreation areas, and perhaps best of all, sewage treatment plants, are all outlined, just waiting for the enterprising birder to discover them.

A good way to start is at home. It might be tempting to go for the topo of a favorite hot spot, but you've already discovered the hot spot. What you want is to find new places. First, find your street on the map. If you live in an area where houses are close together, the background color of the map will be gray or red, telling you that individual buildings are not shown, but otherwise you may be able to find a black box representing your own home. Now look for habitat nearby.

If you are an urban dweller, this may be a little more of a challenge than for the rural or suburban birder, but it is surprising where you can find suitable birding habitat. Since property in urban areas is at a premium, virtually all undeveloped areas are likely to be public or "semi-public" property, so the urban birder can actually have advantages over the rural birder who has to be concerned over trespassing. Most areas in a city will appear in the red or gray that signifies "built-up area," but any place where there is a break in this background, showing green, white, or blue, has potential for birds. Parks, cemeteries, and school campuses often cover large areas with mixed habitat. Pay particular attention to wet spots within these areas. These can get overgrown and are not always obvious from a walking tour, but in season they are magnets for herons, Eastern Kingbirds, Warbling Vireos, several warbler species, and orioles. If the area is marshy, you could even find bitterns and rails.

In winter, the urban birder can even have an advantage over the rural birder at ponds and streams. Because of warm microclimates and effluents, urban water sources seem to stay open longer than those further afield; the result can be a winter birding bonanza. Look for dabbling ducks, herons, and even an overwintering warbler or two.

Even if the map doesn't show a green spot, certain "semi-public" structures can be clues to pockets of habitat nearby. Churches, schools, shopping centers, industrial parks, and railroad tracks sometimes have adjacent scrub and trees, and while you probably don't want to make a special trip, it's worth checking out a few close to home. Such places can be surprisingly productive during passerine migration. A tired warbler who is flying over a city when he's ready to land doesn't insist on much foraging area. You will run into the occasional "no trespassing" sign, but for the most part these are areas that are open to the public within reason.

Farther afield in the suburbs or country, you have a lot more options. One of my favorite areas for birding is under powerlines. These areas are periodically clearcut by the utility companies to maintain access to the towers. Yes, this does contribute to the forest fragmentation we know can be so harmful to woodland species, but since powerlines are there, we might as well enjoy them. The low growth is ideal for species such as Brown Thrasher, Prairie and "winged" warblers, Common Yellowthroat, Indigo Bunting, and Field Sparrow. (See "Forest-powerline edges, Clearcutting, and Bird Communities" in this issue.) Under one short section of powerline that I discovered by topo, I found a Yellow-breasted Chat and a breeding Golden-winged Warbler within a one-week period in June 1996.

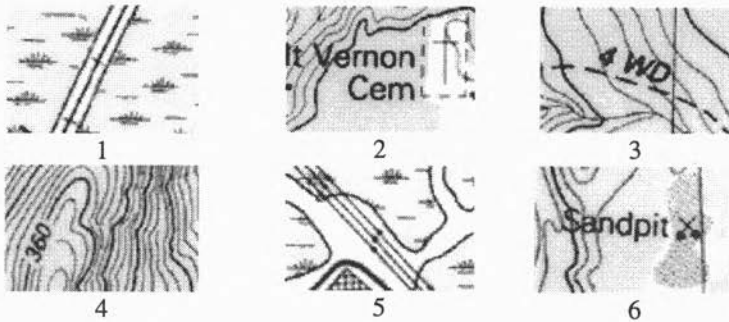
Many of these powerlines abut woods where thrushes, warblers, and tanagers can be seen and heard. The view of the sky is largely unobscured for a good view of raptors flying overhead. Powerlines on topos are indicated by parallel lines (solid or dotted) punctuated by dots representing poles or towers. The color and texture of the background can give you clues to its accessibility. For example, if the background color is blue, expect to get wet—or better yet, look for a different section of the powerline to explore.

Gravel pits or sandpits are shown on topo maps as pink areas with tiny crossed shovels. As private property, many are inaccessible, and others are simply devoid of interest; however a few can offer interesting birding. A steam shovel, working on a hill of sand, leaves a cliff that makes an ideal place for a Bank Swallow colony. Abandoned gravel pits often have the low, scrubby vegetation that encourages species mentioned under power lines. In June 1997, I was exploring a gravel pit where I had seen a Vesper Sparrow a few years ago, and was delighted to discover a singing Clay-colored Sparrow.

Smaller airports and airstrips must keep grassy areas from growing into brush, and it is generally most economical to mow only once or twice a year. This results in excellent habitat for grassland species. Many Massachusetts birders are familiar with the airport on the Plum Island turnpike in Newburyport, where Upland Sandpipers can be found, and the Turner's Falls airport in Gill is known for its breeding Vesper and Grasshopper Sparrows. Look for labeled airstrips on topo maps, but be aware that not all are open to the public. Even if

you can't actually enter airport land, careful listening or scoping from a good vantage point can yield a good bird.

A major element of "topography" is, of course, elevation. Topo maps show changes in elevation with contour lines. The further apart they are, the more gradual the slope. If you're looking for a pleasant walk without a lot of scrabbling up hills, this is useful information. However, tightly bunched lines showing a steep hill can give clues to habitat and hence bird species. Worm-eating Warblers, for example, are partial to steep, wooded slopes with good undergrowth. You might be lucky enough to discover your own breeding pair.



1. A Marsh is indicated by "grass tufts," shown here with a railroad bed that may provide access. 2. A cemetery (shown by a cross) can offer semi-public space for birding in an urban area. 3. A trail or dirt road is shown as a dotted line. 4. Contour lines show the change in elevation. This example, with lines very close together, indicates a steep hill. 5. Powerlines are often a good place to look for species partial to short vegetation. 6. Sand and gravel pits are indicated by "crossed shovels."

When you see an expanse of solid green, this indicates a wooded area. This does not always mean solid woods, but can be mixed woods and open areas. If you see an area that piques your interest, look for a label. If it is a wildlife management area, park, or recreation area, it will generally be marked as such, and you can feel relatively sure that it will be accessible. Conservation areas sometimes have no access paths, but look for dotted lines which indicate trails. Even if a wooded area is unlabeled on a map, it may be accessible for birding and merit checking out. Because the "wooded area" symbol can cover a wide variety of habitats, it is impossible to predict species by just looking at the map, but exploration and discovery is the fun part of birding by map.

Marshes, of course, are a wonderful place for birds, but are often very difficult to gain access to. On topographical maps, the symbol for marsh is a blue, white, or green background, overprinted with symbols looking like tufts of grass. When you find a marsh on a topo, look for clues for access. A road or path beside the marsh is an obvious one, but sometimes you can find a dike or abandoned railroad bed running across the marsh that can double as a trail. Two

years ago, when I started a new job, I immediately opened my topo map and found such a railroad bed through a marsh just yards from my office. In one short visit I found Virginia Rails, Soras, gnatcatchers, Yellow Warblers, yellowthroats, and innumerable Swamp Sparrows. The following fall, I discovered it was a wonderful evening blackbird roost, with hundreds of grackles, Red-winged and Rusty Blackbirds. I'm still waiting for my first bittern, but I remain optimistic.

Topos are not the only maps that can help find new birding locales. One of the best resources for birding by map can be as close as town hall. Many cities and towns have conservation departments, and often a map of the town outlining the conservation areas is available. Usually the charge for such a map is nominal, but I hold a special warm place in my heart for those towns that charge nothing. I recall a visit to the conservation office of a town near where I work. When I told the woman in charge I was interested in birding, she handed me map after map—beautiful, detailed little maps of each area, plus an overview map of the town showing me the location of each. All the while, she gave me a running commentary on the breeding birds at each location.

The advantages of town conservation areas are obvious: this is land set aside for pursuits like ours. In many cases, there aren't any signs indicating that they are public land, and you might otherwise pass by a fine birding area for fear of trespassing.

When I first started birding, I kept a stack of topo maps in my car, but recently I have been exploring topos on my computer. While several topographical map programs are available, the one I have includes a database that even lets you search for the nearest park, swamp, or cemetery. Unfortunately the database does not include sewage treatment plants.

Topographic maps are published by the USGS (U.S. Geological Survey) division of the Department of the Interior, and are available in outdoor stores such as REI (Recreation Equipment, Inc.) and EMS (Eastern Mountain Sports), or from map specialty stores such as the Map Shack in Winchester and the Globe Corner Bookstore in Harvard Square. Try your yellow pages under "Maps" for a place nearer you. For more information about topographic maps produced by the USGS call 1-800-USA-MAPS. For information on maps for a computer call Earthvisions at 1-800-627-7236.

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