



**Trail Names**

- Sacred Way Trail*
- Wolf Pine Trail*
- Owl Trail (as part of Wolf Pine Trail)*
- Service Road*

- (Approximate round trip trail mileages from parking lot)
- (1.2 mi.)
  - (1.5 mi.)
  - (1.7 mi.)
  - (1.5 mi.)

# CANOE MEADOWS WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

By René Laubach

## Introduction

This 262-acre Massachusetts Audubon Society sanctuary in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, is a rewarding place for wildlife observation in general and for birding in particular. Bordered by the Housatonic River, a regional migration corridor spawned at several sources north and west of the city, Canoe Meadows is considered by local birders to be one of the most productive birding sites in Berkshire County. The sanctuary, a mere mile from downtown Pittsfield, was established in 1975. Since then, 178 species, of which about 75 are regular nesters, have been recorded here.

Contained within roughly rectangular boundaries are human-built ponds dating from the early 1930s, beaver ponds (beavers recolonized the sanctuary in 1984 after an absence of fifty years), an oxbow pond, old fields, shrub meadows, mixed hardwood forest, and extensive hay fields. North America's largest rodent continues to have a major impact upon the sanctuary's environment, creating habitat for waterfowl and a bountiful variety of other aquatic life including wood turtles and river otters.

There is no office; Canoe Meadows is managed from Pleasant Valley Wildlife Sanctuary, four miles away in Lenox, as part of the Society's Berkshire Wildlife Sanctuaries.

## History

Many visitors are intrigued by the name Canoe Meadows. It hearkens back to a time long ago when indigenous peoples established summer hunting and fishing encampments in the wildlife-rich Housatonic Valley. For years the property was owned and managed by the Graves family. Much of Canoe Meadows was the private hunting and fishing preserve of Merle Graves, who supervised the construction of two ponds and a connecting waterway, placed a concrete dam across Sackett Brook, built a hunting lodge, and erected miles of chain link fencing topped by barbwire (which has since been removed). A daughter, Cooley Graves Crane, who passed away in 1998, contemplated residential development for the property in the early 1970s. Instead, to her lasting credit and the great benefit of the community (both human and non-human), she donated the land to Massachusetts Audubon in late 1975.

The Noble family, of abutting Tweenbrook Farm, has leased a portion of the sanctuary for crop production for many years. Hay and feed corn were grown on seventy acres until 1998; only hay production continues. Thankfully,

the ninety-acre farm's development rights were purchased by the Commonwealth in 1998, sparing it from development.

### **Access**

The sanctuary has a three-mile trail network. After leaving your locked vehicle in the small lot, examine the kiosk where a large trail map is posted. Nonmembers are asked to deposit a \$2 admission fee in the money pipe. The sanctuary is open daily, year-round, except Mondays and major holidays, from 7 a.m. to dusk. Staff and volunteers conduct two-hour-long bird walks on Friday mornings spring and fall. Mosquitoes are often troublesome during the summer months, so come suitably attired and armed with insect repellent. For a program schedule and bird checklist, contact Berkshire Sanctuaries at 472 W. Mountain Road, Lenox, MA 01240, by phone at (413) 637-0320, or by email at berkshires@massaudubon.org

### **Sanctuary Birdlife**

The best time of year to bird Canoe Meadows is arguably from late spring to early summer, when passage migrants and territorial breeders mingle to create a rich diversity. Given its riverside location and varied plant communities, however, the sanctuary is productive during any season. You can easily spend half a day here. In winter the variety of avian life here stands in stark contrast to the relatively lifeless uplands.

During breeding season, the songs and calls of familiar garden birds greet visitors as they step from their vehicles. Migrant White-crowned Sparrows are regular during the latter part of October. Carolina Wren is a sporadic resident in spring, summer, and fall, especially following mild winters. Red-winged Blackbirds and occasional Bobolinks sing on the wing in the hayfield bordering the service road. Scan the skies above the fields for resident Red-tailed Hawks, transient Sharp-shinned Hawks, and other diurnal raptors. An adult Golden Eagle was observed in passage high overhead one mid-November day.

### **Sacred Way Trail**

To bird this most productive portion of Canoe Meadows, which usually takes from one to two hours depending upon the level of bird activity, turn right fifty yards beyond the parking lot, and pass a cedar bench, a portable toilet, and a line of four nest boxes occupied during the breeding season by Tree Swallows and House Wrens. Northern Mockingbirds occasionally frequent the shrubbery from late October to late March. Continue past a windbreak of Depression-era red pines from which the songs of Tufted Titmice, nuthatches, and kinglets often originate, and pass through an open gate. Blue-winged Warblers sometimes visit this wet meadow during spring migration, while Eastern Kingbird stays to nest.

Gray dogwood shrubs bordering the pond outlet are often alive with White-throated Sparrows, Ruby-crowned Kinglets, and Yellow-rumped and Palm warblers in spring and fall. White-throateds breed on the nearby plateau. Scan West Pond for Mallard, American Black and Wood ducks, Belted Kingfisher, Great Blue Heron, Green Heron, and an occasional Osprey searching the pond's shallow waters for prey from mid-April to early May and in early fall. Be alert for transient Solitary Sandpipers during the first half of May, soon followed by Spotted Sandpipers. Postbreeding-dispersal Great Egrets sometimes work the pond shores from late August to early October, and Bald Eagle reports are increasing along the Housatonic; Berkshire County's first confirmed nesting in Sandisfield was cheered in 1999. Note that the trail's low-lying section is inundated regularly during spring and sometimes also during fall storms; if in doubt, call ahead for accessibility status.

The most significant ornithological excitement the sanctuary has generated during recent memory occurred from mid-April through August 1985, and again in 1986 and 1987, when at least three adult-plumaged Yellow-crowned Night-Herons drew birders from far and wide. The herons were seen consuming crayfish in West Pond, but alas, nesting was never confirmed.

Cross the concrete slab bridge, turn right, and follow the path through head-high reed-canary grass along a shrub-lined stream; listen for the sneezy refrains of Willow Flycatchers that nest in the willows and alders of the floodplain. Look-alike Alder Flycatcher breeds here, as well, but generally in the swamplands (listen for it on the other side of the loop). June singing male counts turn up an average of three Willows and one or two Alders. Virginia Rail and American Bittern have been found in spring. Scrutinize dead snags in the swamp to your left during late May for Olive-sided Flycatcher, an uncommon but regular migrant. During breeding season, Common Yellowthroats and Song Sparrows abound. After 150 yards there is a slight rise where the short Cutover Trail connects to the other side of Sacred Way Trail, but continue straight. The Housatonic flows by your right shoulder, while a field of meadowsweet, shrubby oak and white pine flourishes on the opposite side. Here hundreds of bejeweled spiderwebs decorate the shrubs on a dewy morning. The sweet melodies of Yellow Warbler, the most common nester on this section, fill the air from May to early July. June counts average fifteen singing males along this one-mile loop.

American Redstart, Chestnut-sided Warbler, and Black-and-white Warbler frequent the woodland edge. Tall black cherry trees offer food, nest sites, and song perches for Baltimore Oriole, Scarlet Tanager, Cedar Waxwing, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, and Red-eyed Vireo. Wood Thrush music adds to the atmosphere, but Veery is the sanctuary's most common spotted thrush. Be alert for Pileated Woodpecker bounding across the open spaces between stands of

timber, while the uncommon Brown Thrasher turns up most often in mid to late May.

The path passes another cedar bench and an enormous black maple, a rare species in these parts. Examine the oxbow pond for Wood Duck and other waterfowl, as well as muskrats and painted turtles. The trail continues through young gray birches and a few hemlocks, then winds to Sackett Brook at the loop's far end, where a formidable beaver dam backs up water near the border with Tweenbrook Farm. Eastern Towhees scratch the ground below trailside shrubs, and Great Crested Flycatchers utter their raucous calls from treetops. Early June may bring a Blue-gray Gnatcatcher. Locally uncommon species such as Red-bellied Woodpecker (increasing) and Fish Crow have been discovered on occasion, as well as the more unusual Yellow-breasted Chat in May and June and even Bohemian Waxwing in early March. Check the beaver ponds for ducks and geese, and listen for the burry refrains of nesting Warbling Vireos. Round the loop and follow it toward West Pond through birches, black cherry, and scattered white pines. Alder Flycatcher and Swamp Sparrow are easily heard breeders here.

At the intersection with the Crossover Trail, continue straight ahead, often on sections of boardwalk where dogwood, alder, willow, and cranberry viburnum shrubs teem with passerines from late spring to early fall. Watch for Ruby-crowned Kinglet from the end of April to early May and again in mid-October. Especially during flight years, winter finches feast upon the abundant mast crops available some years. Look for Pine Siskin during most any season except summer, while flocks of Common Redpolls eagerly glean seeds from gray birch catkins. Northern Shrike is found nearly every late autumn, and Pine Grosbeak has been recorded in winter. During migration a wide array of warblers passes through. Yellow-rumped Warblers are common from late April to mid-May and from late September through late October. They breed in the Berkshire highlands visible to the east. Less common transients include Wilson's, Northern Parula, and Tennessee warblers. Breeding Swamp Sparrows are sometimes present into December and may overwinter. As you near West Pond, stay alert for the vocalizations of Least Flycatcher and Warbling Vireo and search the pond and channel for Green Heron (early June to mid-October), a presumed nester.

To reach Wolf Pine Trail, return to the service road and turn right. The roadway leading to it is soon canopied by white pines and plantation red pines. Red-breasted Nuthatch, Brown Creeper, Downy and Hairy woodpeckers, and red squirrels are usually located without great effort year-round; look for Golden-crowned Kinglet from early October until the beginning of May. In spring listen for Pine Warbler's sweet trill. This uncommon nester predictably favors the tall pines along this straight stretch as far as the junction with Wolf Pine Trail.

## **Beaver Pond, Observation Building, Upper Hayfields**

At the terminus of the pines a path and boardwalk lead right to the Wildlife Observation Building, which overlooks a large pond. Shrubby growth adjacent to the boardwalk has hosted a fine variety of exciting species during migration, including an occasional Mourning Warbler (late May to mid-June). Listen for Purple Finch in June. From the blind, glass the pond for Green and Great Blue herons, Wood and American Black ducks, Green-winged Teal (sporadic in fall), Hooded Merganser in spring, Belted Kingfisher, muskrat, and river otter. One November 9 at dusk, an estimated 150 Wood Ducks were seen coming in to roost. Blue-winged Teal is unusual in spring and fall, but one summer record elicited speculation about possible breeding. Other migrant waterfowl are possible. Flocks of Rusty Blackbirds frequent these wetlands in early April and early to mid-October. American Robins are found most winters in the bottomlands where Eurasian buckthorn, wild grape, Asiatic bittersweet, and the fruits of other natives and exotics are available.

After returning to the service road, make another brief side trip by following a farm road, which begins opposite the path to the blind, two hundred yards between a white pine windbreak and hayfield to a small rise. From here you can scrutinize fields and treelines for open-country birds such as nesting Bobolink, American Kestrel (late March to late September), Field Sparrow, and Indigo Bunting. Retrace your steps to the service road, turn left, and walk by a former carriage barn to where the roadway straddles the swamp. The smaller wooded wetland on the left is a reliable nesting location for Northern Waterthrush. Continue through a moist and shady hemlock wood, a good spot for creepers, kinglets, and thrushes. Soon you will reach the Wolf Pine trailhead on the left. Straight ahead and to the right are hayfields along Sackett Brook, bordered by tall cottonwoods. Red-tailed Hawks frequent the tall trees, often harassed by a multitude of American Crows. You might also chance upon a flock of Wild Turkeys. You can walk as far as the fence and gate marking the boundary between the sanctuary and Tweenbrook Farm (do not enter farm property, though), crossing the brook in the process. Bluebirds have nested in the fenceline boxes, as have Tree Swallows.

### **Wolf Pine Trail**

At the signpost, turn down Wolf Pine Trail, and follow it through mixed hardwoods, white pine, and hemlock that harbor a significantly different bird fauna from that of the Sacred Way Trail. This is usually a fairly quick ramble and can often be birded in one-half to one hour. A rich mix of ferns and mosses add color to the forest floor. Ruffed Grouse, Wood Thrush, Veery, Blue-headed Vireo, Ovenbird, and Black-throated Green and Blackburnian warblers nest here. An active Cooper's Hawk nest was discovered one May, just in time for

the Massachusetts Audubon Society's Birdathon. A short side loop, Owl Trail, wends through pine woodland to the right. Both Great Horned and Barred owls are residents. Continue on Wolf Pine Trail under sizable conifers beneath which a thick layer of resilient needle duff has accumulated. Just before you reach the other Owl Trail intersection, a short detour leads to the massive looming hulk of the eleven-trunked trail namesake, the Wolf Pine. After admiring its evocative form, continue and turn left at the intersection to return to the junction with the service road; turn right back to the parking lot. In spring listen for Winter Wren singing from mossy logs in the boggy woodland.

The Canoe Meadows Community Gardens area off Williams Street also deserves mention. No trails lead to the site. To reach it, turn right onto Holmes Road when exiting the sanctuary, drive a third of a mile to the first intersection (Williams Street), turn right and follow Williams Street for another third of a mile to a driveway on the right (watch for a split-rail fence). It is open during daylight hours in gardening season (usually May 1 through October); at other times a cable bars entry. In late August and September members of the Hoffmann Bird Club conduct their annual Central Berkshire Nighthawk Watch here. During 1999, 2000 birds were tallied. Bobolinks are visible from here, as well. Abundant weed seeds make this an excellent place to find a fine variety of sparrows in September and October, including Savannah, Song, White-crowned, Lincoln's, and the occasional Vesper. To my great surprise and delight, a male Lark Sparrow was observed by many over a two-week period in May 1987.

### **Directions**

Take the Mass Pike (I-90) to exit 2 (Lee). Turn right onto Route 20 (later becomes 7/20) after leaving the toll booths. Travel north for eight miles to Holmes Road at a traffic light and Mobil station. Follow Holmes Road for 2.7 miles to the sanctuary entrance on the right.

Alternately, from Park Square in downtown Pittsfield, follow East Street for 0.3 miles to Elm Street at a traffic light. Turn right onto Elm Street, and follow it for 0.6 miles to Holmes Road on the right. Take Holmes Road across Williams Street at the traffic light (0.5 miles) and 0.35 miles beyond to the sanctuary entrance on the left.

### **Acknowledgments**

I am indebted to the many members of the Hoffmann Bird Club who have contributed sightings over the years, and especially to the late Bob Goodrich. Volunteers who generously lead Canoe Meadows birding walks for the sanctuary and provide regular avian updates include Priscilla Bailey, Sue Cook, and Norma Purdy. Thanks also to former and current Berkshire Sanctuaries staff for their help.

**René Laubach**, director since 1985 of Massachusetts Audubon Society's Berkshire Wildlife Sanctuaries, grew up in the Great Lakes region. René was previously engaged in museum work for fourteen years. Besides birds, he counts bats and butterflies among his favorite subjects for study. René compiles the Southern Berkshire CBC and NABA Butterfly Counts and leads birding tours for Massachusetts Audubon. He has authored or coauthored five books, including *A Guide to Natural Places in the Berkshire Hills*, and with his wife Christyna, *The Backyard Birdhouse Book, Building Nestboxes and Creating Natural Habitats*. His latest work is *The Audubon Society Guide to National Wildlife Refuges: New England*.

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