



# Birding Spots in Carlisle, Massachusetts: Great Brook Farm State Park and Cranberry Bog Conservation Lands

*J. Thomas and D'Ann W. Brownrigg*

Carlisle is a small (population 4700) town located about twenty-five miles northwest of Boston and about five miles north of Concord, Massachusetts. The habitat is diverse with extensive wetlands, some farms, and large conservation areas. We have been birding in Carlisle since 1985, and have kept detailed records of our sightings. The purpose of this article is to share our love of these special places with others. Although there are many places to bird in Carlisle, we have selected some of those places with the greatest species diversity.

The places described in this article are Great Brook Farm State Park and the Cranberry Bog, including the Chelmsford part. As of January 1, 2000, we have recorded 119 bird species at the State Park, 129 species at the Cranberry Bog (Carlisle and Chelmsford), and 147 species total for both locations. The excellent booklet *Trails in Carlisle*, available from the Town Clerk for \$5, has maps of the places mentioned here and many others. Great Brook Farm State Park has a free trail map, available at the Park Visitors Center on Lowell Street in Carlisle, or at the kiosk near the main farm.

For those who live in the Boston area, the easiest way to get to Carlisle center is to take Route 225 west from Route 128, through Bedford, making sure to stay on Route 225 (bear left) when it separates from Route 4 after Bedford Center. All of the directions below are given with respect to the rotary in Carlisle center.

## **I. Great Brook Farm State Park**

This park consists of 975 acres, and has been part of the Massachusetts Forest and Park Service since 1974. Mark and Tamma Duffy operate the dairy farm and the nearby cranberry bog. From spring through fall, a stand sells ice cream and some farm products including sweet corn in summer. In the winter, a cross-country ski concession operates from the Hart Barn located near Lowell Road. Winter visitors should be aware that many of the trails are groomed for skiing, and are closed to other uses if the snow depth is four inches or more. There is a \$5-9 fee for skiing and ski rentals are available. From spring through fall the State Park is a popular place with joggers, bicyclists, and horseback riders, so plan to arrive early on weekends. Fortunately, most of these people use the larger main trails, which are less interesting to birders.

To get to Great Brook Farm, take Route 225 to the rotary in Carlisle Center. As you approach the rotary from the east, take the first right turn off the rotary, which is Lowell Street. Daisy's Market (good food) will be immediately on the right. From the rotary, continue about 1.9 miles on Lowell Street to the intersection with North Road on the right (just before Curve Street goes left). Near the intersection with North Road

is a large sign for Great Brook Farm State Park; turn right onto North Road and drive about 0.3 mile, at which point you will see a large parking lot on the left. At the end of this parking lot are several green latrines. A kiosk with trail maps, the ice cream stand, and farm animals are located near this parking lot. Last year Yellow-throated Vireos nested in one of the large oaks near the Lowell Road sign.

There are three areas in the park where we tend to concentrate our attention. We will refer to these places as the *Log Cabin*, *Meadow Pond*, and the *Acorn Trail*. The first two are more easily accessed from a parking area about 0.5 mile east of the main parking lot on North Road. You will first see a small parking area on your right; this parking area is intended for use by people launching boats. Great Brook passes under North Road here, and Meadow Pond is visible from the road looking south. It is preferable not to park here, unless you plan to launch a boat. Continue a short distance east and park in another lot a few feet farther on the right.

### ***The Log Cabin***

The Log Cabin was a hunting lodge, and is located near the site of an old grist mill. An early colonial settlement called "The City" is located nearby, as is an ancient grinding stone used by Native Americans. This area, with nearby Meadow Pond, is one of the most scenic places in the park.

After parking, cross North Road and look for the trail entrance, which is near the brook and has a metal gate. This is called the Woodchuck Trail; most trails are marked with triangular plastic blue signs on trees. Follow this trail to the log cabin, which is about 1/8 mile (0.125) from the road. After the bridge, take a small path to the left (behind the cabin), and check the outlet dam for the pond. The rocky gorge is a good place to check in spring for Winter Wren, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Hermit Thrush, Pine Warbler, Black-and-White Warbler, Black-throated Green Warbler, and Louisiana Waterthrush. Last August an adult Winter Wren and three young wrens were seen in the rocky gorge near the outlet of the pond, as well as a Pine Warbler feeding a fledgling. Black-throated Green Warblers are present in summer and probably breed here. Return to the main trail, which soon comes to another wet area, which is popular with Wood Ducks.

Instead of continuing straight ahead, we usually double back a few feet and take a trail to the right. This trail parallels a small stream, and eventually crosses a bridge over this stream and passes through a stand of hemlock. Winter Wrens, nuthatches, warblers, and thrushes may be along the small stream. The trail continues through a stand of white pines and bears left downhill to a larger bridge over Great Brook. The area around the bridge is often good for warblers and flycatchers. The trail continues uphill and enters an agricultural field. *Note:* Visitors are requested not to walk on fields in agricultural use. The field is a good place to look for Indigo Buntings and sparrows. An occasional (transient) Field Sparrow has been seen here, and Great Crested Flycatchers have nested in the nearby forest. The brushy edges on the west side of the field often attract flocks of migrating warblers. There is an overgrown field on the left (east) side of the trail that should be checked. Blue-gray Gnatcatchers have sometimes been seen there. Scarlet Tanagers are often seen in the oak forest. The trail continues south and enters the woods, eventually intersecting North Road. The trail is

approximately one mile; allow about an hour to bird the locations described. After arriving at North Road, you can turn left and return to the parking area. The large pond on the right is called Meadow Pond, and is another place you will want to visit.

### ***Meadow Pond***

Meadow Pond should be checked carefully for ducks, geese, and herons. Wood Duck, Great Blue Heron, and Green Heron are often seen here. In the late summer this is a good place to look for migrating flycatchers. We have seen Spotted and Solitary sandpipers along the pond edges. One year we saw an Olive-sided Flycatcher perched in one of the tallest trees. Woodpeckers, including Red-bellied and Pileated, have been seen feeding in the dead trees bordering the pond. Here we once discovered the nest of a Brown Creeper, built under the peeling bark of a stump in the water. Veerys are sometimes heard in the wet woodlands that border the pond. Hermit Thrushes are fairly common in upland wooded areas and are probably breeding.

There are several ways to bird Meadow Pond. We usually start from the canoe launch and walk right (northwest) to a trail entering the woods on the north side of the pond. There are small trails bordering the pond. We use these smaller trails rather than the large, wide trails featured on the map because the likelihood of seeing birds and other wildlife is better near water.

Continue west through the woods near the pond. You will come to a small, wet meadow, which might be too muddy to walk through, but can be good for sparrows and warblers. There is a large stand of white pine bordering this meadow where we have seen Great Horned Owls. There is a small island in Meadow Pond, with many dead trees. These trees are a good place to look for woodpeckers and flycatchers. One summer a pair of Pileated

Woodpeckers flew overhead during our bird club trip! In spring Northern Rough-winged Swallows and Bank Swallows are seen in this area among the more numerous Tree and Barn swallows. A beaver lodge is located on this island, and you are likely to see chewed stumps and scent mounds. The alders bordering the pond attract warblers in the spring. This area looks like it should be good for rails, since there is a lot of cattail.

Continuing west, you will reach a grassy field called The Meadows. This area is kept mowed for the benefit of equestrians, although we usually don't see them in the early morning. This field is a very good place to see raptors, since it affords an excellent view of a wide expanse of sky. Broad-



*Pileated Woodpecker by D'Ann Brownrigg*

winged Hawks, American Kestrels, and Cooper's Hawks have been seen here. One summer the call of a Red-shouldered Hawk flushed a Northern Waterthrush in this area.

After birding The Meadows, you can return to the parking area or continue around Meadow Pond, either on the main trail (Pine Point Loop) or on smaller trails. We usually continue only a short distance farther west, where Great Brook passes under the Pine Point Loop trail, and then return to the parking area. Return can be either by the same route, or for variety, along a section of the Pine Point Loop passing through a large stand of white pines. You should allow about one-to-two hours to bird the areas on the north side of the pond, and three-to-four hours to cover the entire trail system around Meadow Pond

### ***The Acorn Trail***

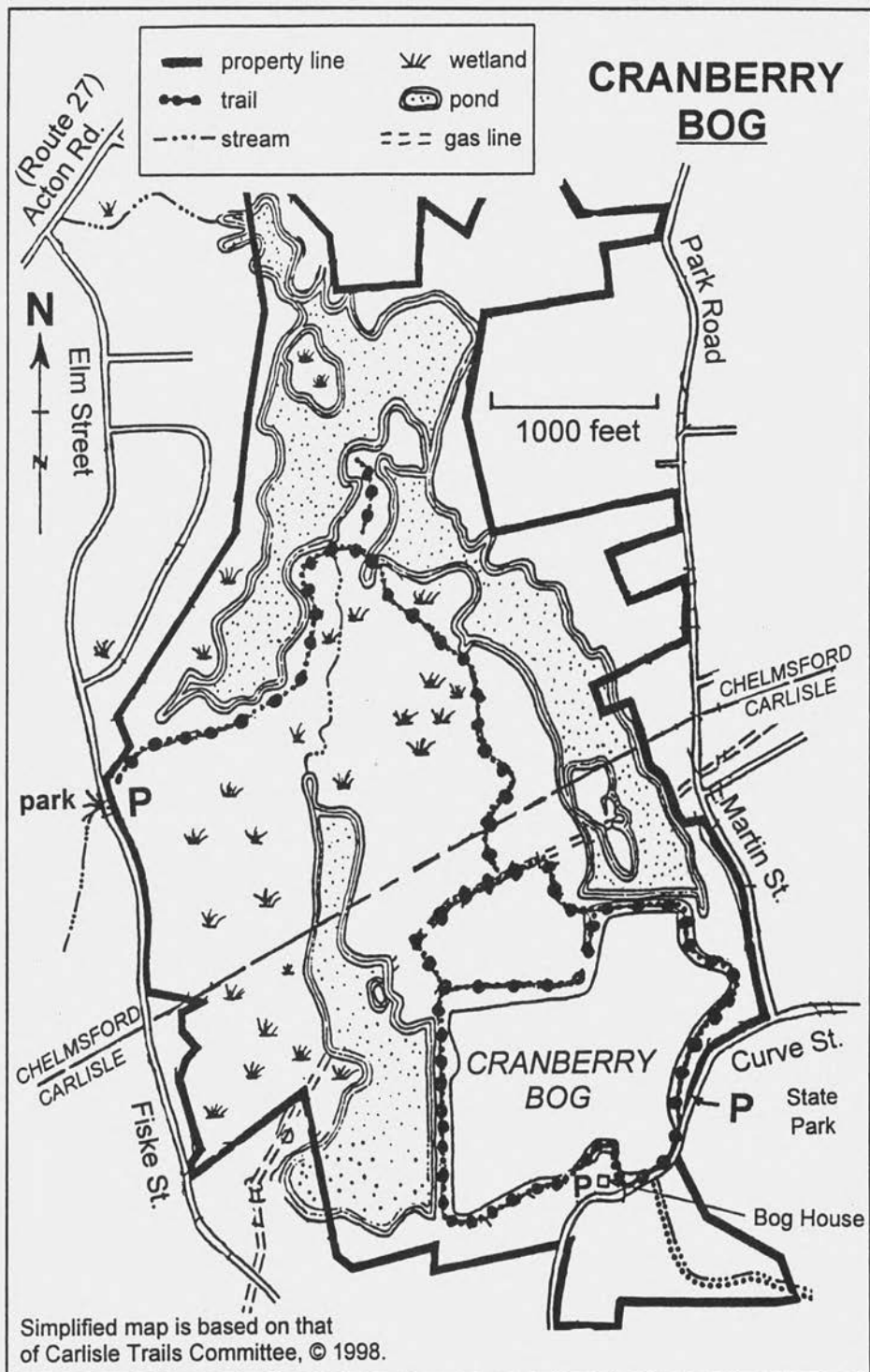
The Acorn Trail starts near the Hart Barn Ski Center, located a short distance from North Road on Lowell Street. Either drive back west to the main parking lot at the farm, or continue beyond it back to Lowell Street, and turn right (north). The Hart Barn is marked by a sign saying "Ski Touring Center" and is only 0.1 mile on the right. Do not park here if there is an equestrian event or if the ski center is open. A few nonskiing spaces are available in the main lot near the farm. Trails west of Lowell Street are open for hikers even when there is snow. The field edges between the Hart Barn and the farm are often good for Indigo Bunting (a probable breeding bird) in summer and sparrows in fall. During the spring and fall migrations, American Pipit, Horned Lark, and Common Snipe have been seen in the parking lot and cornfields.

The Acorn trail continues west across Lowell Street, where it leads through overgrown fields, woodlands, and eventually to large cornfields bordering Curve Street. After passing the cornfields, the trail continues uphill into a larger wooded section (Blueberry Hill) and then circles back. As you approach the cornfield, you will see a wetland to your right. This wetland and the bordering fields are good places to look for flycatchers, sparrows, Bobolinks, finches, and hawks. Lincoln's Sparrows and Northern Shrikes have been seen here occasionally in the fall. Eastern Bluebirds have nested in snags in the wetlands, and in nest boxes in the backyard of a house on Curve Street. Both Red-bellied and Pileated woodpeckers have been seen in this area. During migration, it is a good place to watch for hawks; Cooper's, Sharp-shinned, and Broad-winged hawks, and Osprey have been observed. Red-Tailed Hawks have nested in this area. Wild Turkeys (or more commonly their tracks) have been seen along the edges of the fields.

If you start from the main farm parking area, allow about two hours to bird the Acorn Trail as far as the cornfields and wetlands west of Lowell Street.

## **II. Carlisle Cranberry Bog**

The Cranberry Bog Conservation Lands are owned by the towns of Carlisle and Chelmsford. Carlisle owns 151 acres, of which 40 acres are leased to the cranberry grower. An additional 159 acres are owned by the town of Chelmsford. It is permissible for people and dogs to walk the various trails around the cranberry bog



including the dikes, but not on the bog itself. A spotting scope is useful for viewing the impoundments in both towns, especially during spring and fall migration.

The Carlisle section of the Cranberry Bog is located about 1.3 miles west of the Great Brook Farm barn on Curve Street. To reach the Cranberry Bog from Carlisle center, travel north on Lowell Street as if you were going to the State Park. In about two miles you will come to the intersection with North Road, and you will see the sign for Great Brook Farm on the right. However, instead of turning here, go a few feet farther north and turn left (west) on Curve Street. Continue about one mile down Curve Street until you see an open field (actually, bogs) on the right (north) side of the road. You can park off the right side of Curve Street, or continue farther until you see a three-story shingled frame building on the right. This is The Bog House and was built by the original owners of the Cranberry Bog for processing the berries and storing equipment. A small parking area is located on the far west side of the building.



*The Cranberry Bog (photograph by the authors)*

Walk around the circumference of the bog, and along two dikes of more recent construction. The bog is a good place to look for sparrows in fall, and swallows in spring and early summer. In late summer, if the water level is low in the impoundments, shorebirds may be present. Savannah Sparrows seem to be especially fond of the overgrown (and disappearing) bog fields. Bobolinks are often seen here in spring, and some may have actually bred in the past. Also in spring, many swallows can be seen flying over the water in the ponds west and north of the Bog House. We have seen Bank and Northern Rough-Winged swallows, in addition to the much more common Barn and Tree swallows. Spotted Sandpipers can often be seen in this area, especially if the water level in the ponds is low. One year we saw an adult and juvenile Spotted Sandpiper foraging together in the bog.

The impoundments should be checked carefully for herons, ducks, and shorebirds. We have seen Snowy and Great egret here once; Great Blue Herons and Green Herons

are common. A Greater White-fronted Goose was once seen sitting alone on a muddy island. In fall, check for ducks and shorebirds on mudflats (see Chelmsford below). The Carlisle Bog, with open vistas, is a good place to look for hawks during fall migration. Northern Harriers, Sharp-shinned Hawks, Cooper's Hawks, Northern Goshawks, and Broad-winged Hawks have been seen. Check the cattail marshes bordering the north impoundment. Virginia Rails and Marsh Wrens have been heard here. Last July, a possibly breeding male Canada Warbler was seen in the brushy area bordering the northern edge of the bog.

An area across Curve Street from the Bog House is used for storage of sand (and cow manure) and has a weedy border that can be attractive to sparrows and finches during fall migration. Indigo Buntings and Lincoln's, Savannah, White-crowned, White-throated, and Field sparrows have been seen in the weedy borders in the back of the sandpit. The trees bordering the bog have produced the occasional fall migrant Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. Migrating warblers and shorebirds have also been seen here feeding on insects. Veerys are sometimes heard in the wooded area across Curve Street from the Bog House and might breed here. Both Veery and Wood Thrush have also been heard in the wooded areas bordering the eastern section of the Carlisle Cranberry Bog.

### **III. Chelmsford Cranberry Bog Reservation**

The Chelmsford property has extensive wetlands and a large (unnamed) pond used for irrigation of the Carlisle cranberry bogs. These wetlands are often excellent places to look for ducks and shorebirds during the spring and fall migrations. The bordering wooded areas are often excellent for warblers and other spring/fall migrants.

To reach this area, continue driving past the Bog House on Curve Street until you reach the intersection with Fiske Street in about 0.5 mile, and then go right. You will pass by a large field, recently acquired by the Town of Carlisle as conservation land, on the right. In the fall, it is worth checking this field for geese; an occasional Snow Goose has been seen here among the numerous Canada Geese. The fields are also a good place to look for Northern Shrike in fall, and Eastern Bluebirds sometimes nest in the boxes near the road. Red-shouldered Hawks have been seen (but more commonly heard) in an area farther south and east of these fields where there are wooded wetlands. The trees along the road are worth checking for passerines.

The small parking area for the Cranberry Bog Reservation, marked with a sign, is located on Elm Street (the continuation in Chelmsford of Fiske Street) about 0.9 mile from the intersection in Carlisle of Fiske and Curve Streets. After parking here, take the trail leading through the woods. You will soon see wetlands on both sides of the trail. The wetlands to the left are closer, and may have water, depending on the time of year and the water usage by the cranberry grower. In spring and fall, these ponds attract shorebirds and ducks. The trail bears left and leads to a large expanse of deeper water, eventually ending at a small peninsula. This peninsula offers an excellent view of the pond and marshes to the east. Several years ago, a pair of Great Horned Owls nested in a large white pine to the east. This is an excellent place to look for ducks and



hawks, especially Osprey, during migration. You should allow about two hours to bird the trail from Elm Street to the large pond.

The impoundments in both Carlisle and Chelmsford are often very good for ducks in spring and fall. The Chelmsford pond has deeper water, and attracts diving ducks. Ring-necked Ducks, Common Goldeneye, Common Merganser, Greater Scaup, Bufflehead, and both teal have been seen. If the water level is low, check for shorebirds on the exposed mudflats. Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, and Solitary, Spotted, Pectoral, and Least sandpipers have been seen in late summer.

It is possible to park in either Carlisle or Chelmsford and walk the entire property. If you park in Carlisle and walk around the bog, there is a trail that enters the wooded north section of the property and leads to a path along a natural gas pipeline, marked by vertical white cylinders. The pipeline is often popular with Eastern Towhees. Another trail intersects this path and leads north, toward the large pond in Chelmsford mentioned above. This trail leads through the woods, and passes a large cattail marsh on the right (east). The vegetated borders of the marsh are often good for spring warblers, Virginia Rails, Rusty Blackbirds, and other migrants.

The distance from the Bog House to the peninsula in Chelmsford is about 3/4 mile, and the distance from the Elm Street parking lot to the peninsula is about 1/2 mile. Allow at least four hours for birding both the Carlisle and Chelmsford Cranberry Bog properties.

Besides birds, the Cranberry Bog supports a variety of other wildlife. We have seen painted, snapping, and musk turtles. Some mammals we have seen are deer, mink, ermine, river otter, and beaver.

#### IV. Other Places

There are many places to bird in Carlisle, and we hope to include more of these in a future article. Of particular interest are Towle Conservation Land, which has a breeding population of Bobolinks, and Foss Farm, which has breeding Woodcocks. Towle Conservation Land is located about 0.7 mile west of Carlisle center on Route 225 (Westford Street); park in the Westford Street lot and walk the large fields and wooded sections. Foss Farm is located off Route 225 about two miles east of Carlisle center, not far from the Concord River near Bedford. The parking area is about 0.3 miles from the Concord River on the north side of Route 225. Note: In the summer, Carlisle residents have gardens in a section of the property, and visitors are expected to not drive beyond the first parking area. For details of the trail systems, consult the booklet *Trails in Carlisle* mentioned previously.

We bird in Carlisle because of its variety of conservation lands with diverse habitats, located close to our home. During the migrations we spend less time near home and more time elsewhere, so there are likely more birds around than we have seen. It is worthwhile coming here for the sake of variety. Our time estimates are rough approximations and will vary depending on personal style and the number of birds in the area. ↗

## Acknowledgements

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**D'Ann Brownrigg** began birding in 1984 when she took the Massachusetts Audubon "Birding for Fun" course taught by fellow Carlisian Betty Valentine. She now teaches a section of that class and paints (primarily watercolors) seriously.

**Tom Brownrigg** is Senior Scientist at American Holographic in Fitchburg, Massachusetts. American Holographic manufactures holographic diffraction gratings and spectrometers used in analytical, clinical, and telecommunications instruments. He has been interested in all aspects of nature since his childhood in suburban Chicago, where he spent many hours exploring the local forest preserves. The Brownriggs have been birding together since 1985, and try to combine business trips with birding.

