



Dunback Meadow and Adjacent Areas, Lexington, MA

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In November 1977 birders from all over the state converged on Dunback Meadow in Lexington to see the first confirmed record of MacGillivray's Warbler in Massachusetts. Local birders, of course, had known about this year-round birding treasure for ages. It boasts a wide variety of habitats — woods, edge, meadow, marsh, and field — and if you add visits to a couple of other nearby locations, you can chalk up an impressive list of species.

Directions

Dunback is most easily approached from Route 2. Driving west on Route 2, take the Waltham Street exit, and turn right at the end of the exit ramp. Take your second right onto Allen Street, and turn right at the top of the short rise (this is a continuation of Allen Street). A very short distance after the turn, you will see the metal gate and sign indicating the entrance to Dunback Meadow. From Route 2 east, you exit at Spring Street, executing the 180° exit ramp, and turn right on Spring over the highway. Take your first right on Hayden Avenue, which parallels Route 2, and turn left at the end on Waltham Street. From there turn right on Allen Street as described above.

A Walking Tour

Take the **entrance path** beside the metal gate. On the right you will see a small cattail marsh (rapidly becoming overgrown with other vegetation); on the left, another marsh with bushes and pine trees beginning to take over. A short distance down the entrance path is a **community garden** on the right. Immediately after the garden, the path becomes shaded by conifers. Just as the path dips downhill, take the path on the left up a slight incline into a playing field, and walk right around the edge of the playing field until you see a three-foot-high post marking the entrance to a **red pine woods**.

The paths through the pine woods are not well marked, but there is little understory, so it is easy to meander down the hill until you reach a well-marked path at the bottom. Turn left, and follow the trail through a small stand of **white pine woods**, and then through an open area, ending up at the outdoor basketball court of the Clark Middle School. Work your way over the lawn toward the right, and go over the little stone bridge that crosses Clematis Brook, which runs throughout the entire area. Turn right, walk the edge of the playing field until it jogs left, and look for the path on your right.

This is the **main path** for Dunback Meadow, and leads you between the wet meadow on the left and an edge of birches, wild cherry, and bushes on the right. Continue along this path until you come to a **four-way intersection**, and turn left. This path simply leads you out into the meadow, and eventually runs parallel to Bacon Street. Toward the end of the path, you can cross Bacon Street to view the marsh

across the street, which is also part of Dunback. Once you reach the end, just double back the way you came. Back at the four-way intersection, turn left onto the **main path** again.

This path leads you through a gradually changing habitat, with meadow on the left and bushes and trees on the right, then bushes on the left (in winter you can see through to the meadow beyond), and woodland on the right. Eventually the path bears right over a bridge into a **deciduous woods**. If you follow it to the end, you go over another bridge, and eventually as the woods thin out you arrive at the playing field for the Bowen School. Return the same way you came, and then turn left at the four-way intersection back up the entrance path. A very short distance up, the path crosses the brook again, then returns to the entrance at Allen Street.

Autumn birding

Fall migration is probably the most exciting season at Dunback Meadow, from the first waterthrush at the end of July to the last Fox Sparrow that lingers into December. After checking the edges of the entrance path, be sure to stop at the community gardens. Like most gardens, its weeds and unharvested fruits and vegetables provide a bounty of food for migrating sparrows, and it also has a wonderful edge in back, well-lit in the morning light, for other songbirds. I can recall one morning watching a Yellow-bellied Flycatcher and a Philadelphia Vireo in a



Fox Sparrow. All photographs were taken at Dunback Meadows by the author.

single binocular field in this edge, with a Clay-colored Sparrow being discovered shortly thereafter.

As you continue your tour of Dunback, listen carefully for rustling leaves on the ground, and look for sparrows and thrushes. Fox Sparrows are a particular Dunback specialty, with ten or more possible at peak season. There are a number of cherry trees in the area, particularly near the four-way intersection, and these are also big draws for thrushes and Fox Sparrows.

Scan the many snags in the meadows for an Olive-sided Flycatcher. While they are not quite annual, I have found them on several occasions. *Empidonax* flycatchers also like the meadows. Other songbirds can be anywhere, but pay particular attention at the places where the path crosses the brook. These offer a break in the foliage so birds are easier to see, and the water provides a draw for birds.

Dunback is an excellent place to see hummingbirds in the fall, perhaps because of the ample jewelweed in the area. Another fall feature attraction is the appearance of accipiters zipping through. Whether there is some topographic reason for it, or just that there is plenty of sky to see them, it is a rare fall day when I do not see a handful

of Sharp-shinned or Cooper's hawks.

Winter birding

In December of 1980 a small roost of Long-eared Owls was discovered in the red pine woods at Dunback, and by January 10, 1981, it had built to a total of 22 birds. In recent years we have not been so lucky, but Dunback is still a fine place to find owls. Just wander through the pine woods looking for whitewash and pellets. Long-eared is almost



Great Horned Owl

annual in the red pine woods, and Northern Saw-Whet Owl has occurred a number of times in the white pines. I have had Barred Owls on several occasions in both pine woods, and Great Horned Owls in both the pine and deciduous woods. Eastern Screech-Owls are in both woods also, but more difficult to find, since they customarily roost in holes. While you are in the red pine woods, look and listen for Hairy Woodpeckers, Red-breasted Nuthatches, Golden-crowned Kinglets, and Brown Creepers.

Along the main path, search the numerous birches for redpolls or siskins. Although they are normally present only during invasion years, I have found them here when they have been scarce elsewhere. American Tree Sparrows are abundant in the fields. Also keep your eyes open for hawks. Red-tail is, of course, the default hawk here, and you can often see several in the air at once. In the winter of 2000 a Rough-legged Hawk spent the season here, and I have seen Northern Harriers on several occasions in winter, small accipiters often, and Northern Goshawks twice.

This is also a fine place to find Northern Shrikes, so be sure to search the tops of the trees in the meadow. In the winter of 2000 a shrike spent a long time here, and I had the thrill of watching a Blue Jay attempting to rob its cache, but it was quickly foiled by the vigilant shrike (see *Bird Observer* Volume 28, No. 2, page 100).

Be sure to take the walk through the deciduous woods to the second bridge. At this time of year large flocks of robins often congregate here, along with the occasional Hermit Thrush or Fox Sparrow, gorging on the fruit trees.

Spring birding

Spring birding at Dunback is not as exciting as in the fall, but still well worth a stop. Spring strategy is pretty much the same as fall, except that the community gardens are not as likely to be good. Early spring is a wonderful time, with the arrival of the first blackbirds, which can show up in impressive numbers.

One spring specialty is the dance of the American Woodcock, which can take place almost anywhere in the meadow, but a good place to start is the four-way intersection. Listen for the nasal *peent* of the calling male, and then follow the sound.

Their exhilarating sky dance can last for an hour at dawn or dusk, from March through May. I can recall one incredible April evening during a lunar eclipse when I watched a Saw-whet Owl waking up, while I could hear the twittering and peenting of the dancing woodcocks.

Summer birding

The breeding birds of Dunback Meadow are pretty much those you would expect in this type of habitat. Look for Willow Flycatchers, Warbling Vireos, Carolina and House wrens, Wood Thrushes (in the deciduous woods), Yellow Warblers, Common Yellowthroats, Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, Baltimore Orioles, and, of course, Red-winged Blackbirds. In 2000 a pair of Chestnut-sided Warblers was in evidence near the four-way intersection well into the breeding season. Ring-necked Pheasants are relatively common here, although more often heard than seen.

Waltham Street Farms (WSF) Conservation Lands

This chunk of Lexington conservation land is split into two sections, and leased to Lexington's Busa family for farming; for as long as I can remember, they have been planting corn here. The lease of conservation lands normally endows the lessee with rights to control access to the land, but the Busa family are exceptional in that they not only allow, but welcome birders on their lands. (Quick commercial plug: visit the Busa's farm stand on Lowell Street in Lexington beside Arlington Reservoir—their corn is terrific.) Fall is the time of year to visit these fields.



Cooper's Hawk

Directions: From Dunback Meadow, take Allen Street to Waltham Street, and turn left, pulling over to the right immediately beyond the building with the sign for White House Gardens. Look for the inconspicuous dirt road just beyond the building. Be sure not to block the road or use White House Gardens' parking area. To reach the other entrance to WSF from Dunback, turn right on Waltham Street (from Allen Street); the entrance is a dirt road immediately opposite Brookside

Avenue. You can park safely on Brookside and walk across the street. When walking through these fields, please be sure to stay to the edges of the fields unless it is clear that the corn has been completely harvested.

A few years ago I was birding in this area when I heard a Cooper's Hawk shrieking from the corn fields, then it stopped abruptly. Intrigued, I walked toward the sound, but could see no movement at all. I had given up looking, when it called again, apparently from the middle of the field. I walked gingerly up a row toward the sound, but still no movement. Suddenly I heard it again, immediately behind me. I whipped

around and saw the source. The Busas had erected a small speaker on a pole, and were using a recorded Cooper's Hawk call to try to drive off the blackbirds. Last year they had switched to distress calls of Ring-billed Gulls, so if you hear unexpected sounds, you may be hearing the latest line of defense against the birds.

Unfortunately for the Busas, these scare tactics only work in the immediate area of the distress calls, and these fields are spectacular for their blackbirds, including good flocks of Bobolinks and Rusty Blackbirds.

The edges of the fields provide superb fall birding. I have seen Orange-crowned Warblers there on several occasions, and in one year I had three different Dickcissels and a Lark Sparrow. White-crowned Sparrows are strangely only occasional visitors, but Lincoln's Sparrows are routine. Indigo Buntings love these fields, and it is not unusual to tally ten or more on a visit. The potential for any seed-loving bird is exceptional here.

Looking for rarities is always fun, but the most thrilling part of birding these fields is simply the sheer quantity of birds. Blackbirds swoosh out of the corn to perch on nearby trees and wires, only to dive back into the corn moments later. Savannah Sparrows are so plentiful that at nearly every step small flocks scatter in every direction. Palm and Yellow-rumped warblers forage in the corn, and the air is electric with their calls. Like Dunback, these fields are excellent for accipiter sightings.



Northern Saw-whet Owl

At the second entrance (opposite Brookfield), look for the tree-covered path to the right of the fields. This is part of the conservation area, going all the way through to Valleyfield Street, and provides a good view of the back side of the field edges. If there is any warbler activity in this edge, it is worth walking along the path to investigate further activity.

Hayden Woods

Hayden Woods comprises nearly 80 acres, with trails running through a maple swamp and old pastureland now overgrown in hardwood and pine new-growth forest.

Directions: There are a number of entrances, including from the end of Cutler Farm Road, and in back of the commercial buildings on Hayden Avenue, but I prefer to enter from the end of Valleyfield Street. From Allen Street, turn right on Waltham Street, drive past the traffic light at Brookside, and take your next left on Bridge Street. Take your first left on Valleyfield, and follow it to where it dead-ends at a playground. Walk through the playground, and enter the path that leads into the woods.

There is a maze of trails going through the area, and none of the maps I have located are 100% accurate; the accompanying map is a combination of public-domain maps and personal experience. My normal route goes past the red maple swamp, taking the first trail on the left for a loop through thin deciduous forest, and turning left when the loop returns to the main path. Eventually the main path bears right, and a boardwalk takes you over a wooded swamp and eventually brings you to a sign for Old Shade Street, a cart road laid out in 1660. Beyond this, there are trails leading off to the right that meander back to the Valleyfield path, but it is easy to get lost, and I generally go back the way I came.

This is a good place to find the first blackbirds of the year, and Rusty Blackbirds are quite reliable in both spring and fall. I have had fine luck with warblers in both spring and fall migration. It is a good place for Northern Waterthrush in particular. In many places (particularly where it is wettest) there is good visibility through the understory, making it wonderful for searching for elusive, low-foraging species such as *Oporornis* and Hooded warblers.

Breeding species are very much what one would expect in the woods: Great Crested Flycatcher, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Red-eyed Vireo, and Scarlet Tanager. One probable breeder is somewhat of a surprise: I have consistently heard a singing Winter Wren here during breeding season, certainly confirming a willing male if not a breeding pair.

Lexington has 1300 acres of conservation land, an impressive 12 percent of the entire town. The three areas described above comprise nearly 300 acres of protected space easily accessible to the public. Dunback Meadow itself came perilously close to being lost to development in 1965, but through the efforts of the Lexington Conservation Commission the town was able to purchase the property and preserve this site. You can purchase a guide to all Lexington conservation areas at town hall. ♣

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