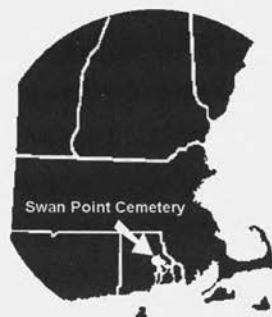


# Birding Swan Point Cemetary, Providence, Rhode Island

*Bob Bushnell*

Swan Point is a two-hundred-acre garden cemetery that was founded in 1847, and designed by Niles Bierragaard Schubarth. It is located in the northeast corner of Providence, Rhode Island. Swan Point is the final resting place of many of Rhode Island's prominent families of the past one hundred and fifty years. Among those buried there are Civil War General Ambrose Burnside and Elisha Hunt Rhodes, the Civil War soldier made famous by Ken Burns's use of his diary in Burns's "Civil War" series on PBS.



Swan Point can be reached from Boston or other northern locations by taking I-95 south to Pawtucket to Exit 27 (U.S. Route 1). At the end of the ramp turn left, go two blocks on Route 1 (Pawtucket Avenue) to a fork, bear left (south) on East Avenue, go 0.8 miles to Blackstone Boulevard, and turn left. Swan Point is the second left across the divided Boulevard.

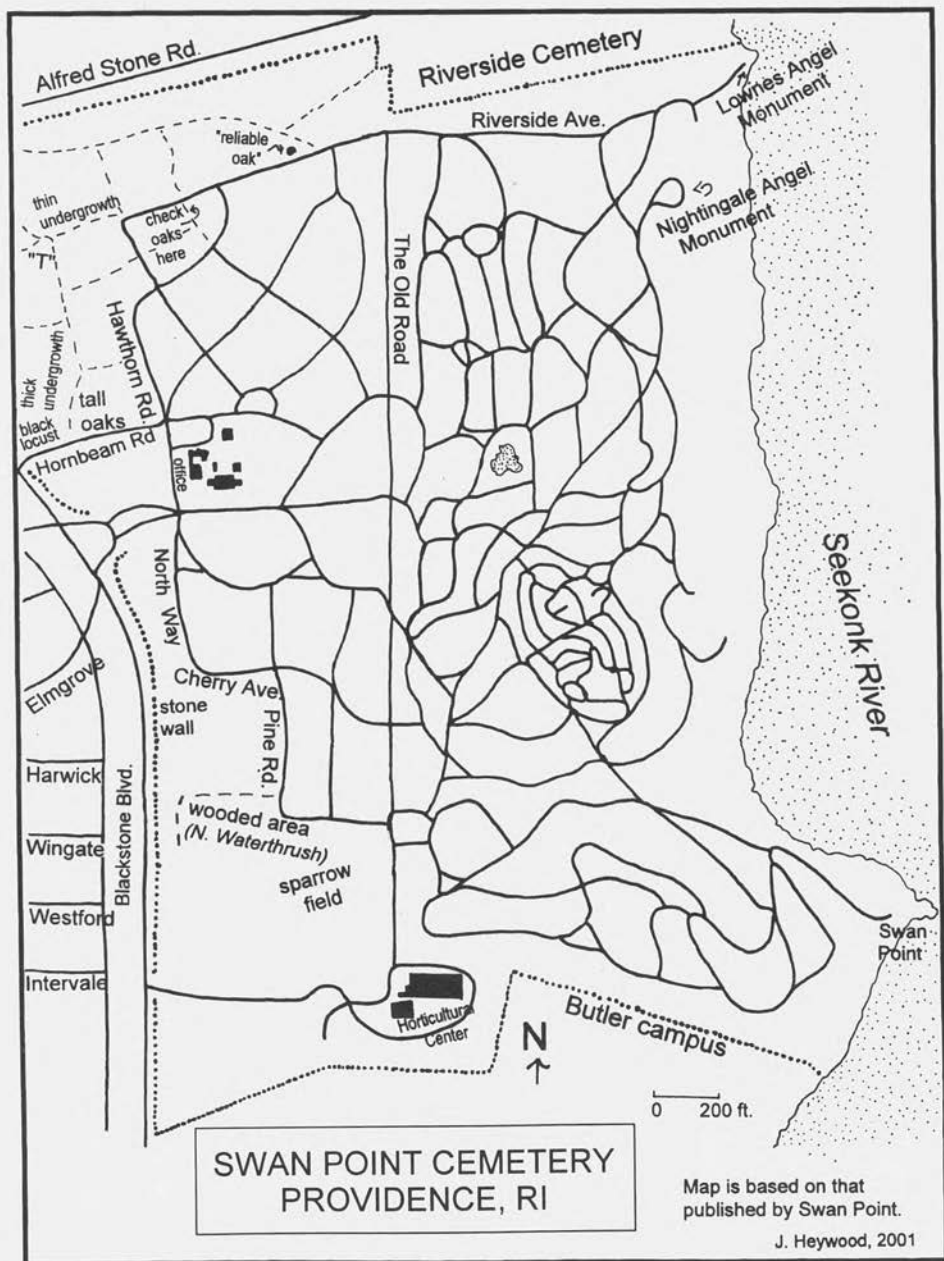
From the east take I-195 to Providence to Exit 3, for Gano Street. At the end of the ramp turn right on Gano Street. Go north to Waterman Street. Turn right. At the second light, turn left onto Butler Avenue. Butler Avenue turns into Blackstone Boulevard. Swan Point Cemetery is 1.7 miles on the right.

From the south or west take I-95 to I-195 East, and take Exit 3 (Gano Street). Follow the directions from the paragraph above.

Swan Point is open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. during the period of Standard Time, and from 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. during Daylight Saving. During spring migration the gates are usually opened for birders at 7 a.m., and in May 2000 the security guard opened the gates on most days at 6:30 a.m. If you arrive early, it is best to park your car along Blackstone Boulevard, and climb over the stone wall (an easy climb, but watch for poison ivy). To maintain our excellent relationship with the cemetery, please honor their request not to park in the driveway leading into the cemetery.

Birding at Swan Point can be interesting at almost any season, but for most people the main attraction is spring migration. Swan Point has long been known as a migrant stopover, and there are records that indicate that Swan Point was attracting bird fanciers to watch the spring migration at least as early as the 1930s (R. L. Ferren, pers. comm.).

The geography of Swan Point is probably the most important factor in its popularity with migrants. It is situated on the north side of Providence, and at the northern tip of Narragansett Bay. It is bounded on the east by the Seekonk River, which is a finger of Narragansett Bay. It is the only open wooded area situated



directly on the water from Warwick in the south to Pawtucket on the north. As nocturnal migrants fly up Narragansett Bay, Swan Point is the first significant patch of green available at first light.

As at so many other New England spring migrant traps, the wind conditions are a primary factor in the numbers of migrants one is likely to see. Southwest winds produce the best conditions, and fog may also produce significant fallout. Fog also tends to bring the birds that usually feed in the treetops down to eye level.

I usually pay my first spring visit to Swan Point in late March or early April. By that time the resident Black-capped Chickadees, White-breasted Nuthatches, and Tufted Titmice are singing, and migrants like Eastern Phoebe, Fox Sparrow, and Winter Wren may be found.

Although Swan Point is primarily wooded, the best place to look for migrants is the naturally wooded area in the north end of the cemetery. The landscaped area of the cemetery consists of mature trees and grass, while the woods have a mix of understory and undergrowth that is better habitat for foraging migrants. The area of woods lies to the north of Hawthorn Road (a cemetery road), and to the south of the city street Alfred Stone Road, which marks the boundary of the cemetery property. To find the woods, go through the main gate and take an immediate left on North Way (unmarked here). You will go past the cemetery office and Chapel (on the right). Then take the next left on Hornbeam Road. As you walk down Hornbeam, the woods will be on your right. In about 200 feet you will see a dirt road on the right. If you are visiting late in May, stop here before you turn right. To the left of the dirt road there are several tall black locust trees. If there is an Olive-sided Flycatcher in Rhode Island, it is likely to be seen on a snag on the tallest of the locusts.

Migrant songbirds can be found anywhere in the wooded area, or in the nearby formal cemetery grounds. Over the years I have noticed that treetop-feeding warblers in particular seem to prefer to feed in the largest of the oak trees. Before you enter the woods, check the large oaks on the right for migrants.

Now take that dirt road on the right, and as you enter the woods, you first pass through thick undergrowth. This area is likely to produce one or two Kentucky Warblers per year, and Mourning Warblers may occasionally be found here during the latter part of May and through the first week of June. You may be lucky enough to hear one of these two species, but getting a good look at either one of them may take some hard work, and it can be frustrating.

After walking approximately 400 feet east on the dirt road, you will come to a path on the left that is worth checking out. Go about one hundred feet to the north, and check the trees on either side of the path. On good days you should find migrant warblers and possibly vireos, thrushes, and other neotropical migrants. With a little luck you may see a Wood Duck fly in and land on an open branch. For the past several years a Red-bellied Woodpecker could be seen here on most mornings.

Return to the main trail, and continue toward the east. The path ends in a T; turn right here. As you pass through this area, watch for activity on the ground and up to



eye level in the thin understory. In late April this area is particularly good for Hermit Thrushes and Palm Warblers. In early May Yellow-rumped Warblers can be seen here in small flocks, which may contain other migrants. In the third week of May this can be the best area to look for Swainson's Thrushes.

As you continue, the path turns to paved road. This is Riverside Avenue, and the cemetery proper is on your right. The trees along the left can be very productive, and one tree in particular (about four hundred feet along the paved road) is always reliable. On April 30, 2000, I stood in the road and watched a stream of 106 Yellow-rumped Warblers cross from a tree on the south side into this old oak. Also, in this area, listen for Fish Crows.

Any of the other dirt paths that you have passed are worth checking for migrants, and listen as well in the nearby cemetery trees.

Regularly appearing migrants in Swan Point include Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Eastern Wood Pewee, Yellow-bellied and Least flycatchers, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Veery, Swainson's and Hermit thrushes, Red-eyed, Blue-headed, and Yellow-throated vireos, Blue-winged, Tennessee, Nashville, Northern Parula, Yellow, Chestnut-sided, Magnolia, Black-throated Blue, Yellow-rumped, Black-throated Green, Blackburnian, Pine, Palm, Bay-breasted, Blackpoll, and Black and White warblers, American Redstarts, Ovenbirds, Common Yellowthroats, and Wilson's and Canada warblers. Other neotropical migrants regularly seen include Scarlet Tanager, Indigo Bunting, and Baltimore Oriole. Of course, you cannot expect to see all of these migrants in one day. However, during the peak of the migration in mid-May, it is common to see from twelve to sixteen species of warblers in a walk lasting from one to two hours.

Unusual, but seen annually, are Bicknell's/Gray-cheeked thrushes and Cape May, Kentucky (not all years), and Mourning warblers. Typical southern species, which breed in Rhode Island but are rare in Swan Point, are species such as White-eyed Vireo and Worm-eating and Hooded warblers.

Over the years Swan Point has produced a number of rarities such as Cerulean, Prothonotary, and Yellow-throated warblers. In fact, thirty-seven of the thirty-eight accepted species of warblers seen in Rhode Island have occurred at Swan Point, including two records of Black-throated Gray Warbler (R. L. Ferren, pers. comm.).

Now continue toward the east on Riverside Road. Watch and listen for migrants as the road descends the hill. In about a quarter-mile you approach the Seekonk River.

The road ends at the river, and a small parking area is on the right. Listen on your right for the resident Eastern Phoebes. You may turn right and go south from here, following the dirt path along the edge of the water. If you have the time, this can be productive.

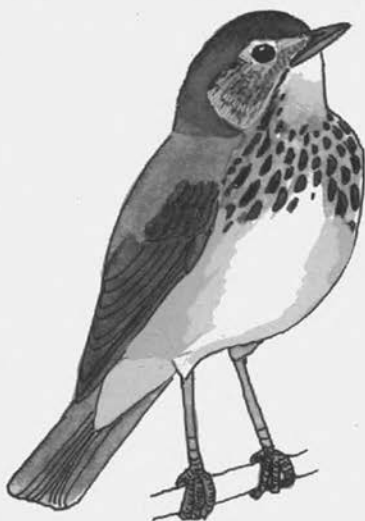
Now check the river. In spring you may still find a lingering duck or two. Black Ducks, Mallards, and possibly Buffleheads and mergansers can be found even in mid-May. Along the shore watch for Spotted Sandpipers and Greater Yellowlegs. Scope upriver to the left, and you should find Double-crested Cormorants, Great Blue Herons, possibly a Green Heron, and Great and Snowy egrets, as well as Common Terns and several species of gulls. Watch for a Belted Kingfisher on the opposite shore.

After birding along the river, make your way back to the main gate. You can return by reversing the route, or by going west on Riverside Avenue, then going left (south) on The Old Road, and right (west) on Holly Avenue. Or, since there are no restricted areas in the cemetery, you may follow any road back toward the main gate. A smaller wooded area may be reached by turning right when you enter the cemetery (unmarked North Way again). Go right when the road forks, and then make a ninety-degree turn to the left on Cherry Avenue. Go about two hundred feet, and take a right on Pine Road. Stop where Pine Road turns ninety degrees to the left. Walk down the dirt road on the right. In damp springs this is the most reliable place to find Northern Waterthrushes. The trees on either side of the path can be good for warblers and other migrants, and you should find American Goldfinches and Eastern Kingbirds here. Wilson's Warblers are found here more often than in the other wooded area.

Walk back out to the paved road. Turn right, and directly in front of you may be a weedy field. This can be a good place to look for sparrows, although that will depend on whether the cemetery staff has plowed, mowed, or in some other way disturbed the area.

Fall birding in Swan Point, although not as interesting as the spring, can also be productive. Try the same areas, and be sure to spend time along the river. In late September and October of some years, Forster's Terns can be found, along with the usual ducks, shorebirds, and waders.

In winter check the wooded areas for winter finches. Good places to watch for birds are in the formal cemetery grounds adjacent to the natural woods, where there are spruce or hemlock trees. In particular, check the trees at the corner of Hawthorn and Locust, and at the corner of Riverside Road and The Old Road. These can be good for Pine Siskins, occasionally redpolls, and rarely crossbills.



In the late winter of 2000, up to three Bald Eagles were seen along the Seekonk River either from Swan Point or from other vantage points.

If you are ready for a second breakfast when you leave Swan Point, there are a number of ethnic shops, restaurants, delis, and bakeries nearby. Turn right when you leave the cemetery onto Blackstone Boulevard. When you get to the end of the Boulevard, turn left onto Hope Street. You will see a number of establishments in the next mile. Enjoy your day. ↗

*Bob Bushnell has been a birder for thirty years, and has not missed many May mornings in Swan Point Cemetery since 1974. His primary birding-related interests are habitat conservation and environmental education to promote conservation. He has served the Rhode Island Audubon Society for twenty-five years as volunteer, board member, and president. After thirty years in business, Bob is now a first-year public school teacher. Finally, he would like to thank Dick Ferren for his comments about Swan Point, and in particular for providing him with historical records.*

### Wing Island Banding Station

The Wing Island Bird Banding Station in Brewster, MA, opened on September 30, 2000. The banding station is sponsored by the Cape Cod Museum of Natural History and is located in the small octagonal building behind the museum. Wing Island is a small island in Cape Cod Bay separated from the mainland by a tidal salt marsh.

There were 4 to 12 mist nets in operation for 13 days during the fall. The nets were opened from dawn to dusk, weather permitting. Most of the fall migrants had passed through before the station was opened, but we still netted 1514 birds, and 967 of those birds were banded. Some of the birds had to be released unbanded because of the government's lack of bands or the incredible numbers of birds netted on two of those days. There was a huge migration of myrtle warblers on October 5 and October 14, and 447 of those birds had to be released.

A total of 34 species of birds were banded, including a Philadelphia Vireo, 2 Blue-headed Vireos, 2 eastern White-crowned Sparrows, 1 Fox Sparrow, 2 Nashville Warblers, 1 Palm Warbler, 1 Orange-crowned Warbler, and 678 myrtle warblers!

Banding on Wing Island will begin again in early spring and continue through the fall. The public is welcome to stop by and observe while the birds are banded.

*Susan Finnegan*