



BIRDING IN THE BRIDGEWATER - LAKEVILLE AREA

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For those who feel that all the good birding is confined to coastal regions during mid-winter months, a trip through an interior, semi-rural area may seem like a waste of precious field hours. However, inland birding can be not only rewarding but also something of a learning experience. The rigors of winter impose a severe hardship on birds. Heavy snow covers weed seeds and stubble fields, each with their abundance of food for granivorous birds, while prolonged freezing temperatures lock up bodies of water and create extreme metabolic difficulties for those species hardy enough to attempt wintering. While these conditions can exist near the seashore, they are greatly magnified as one moves inland so that aggregate winter bird populations in the interior generally tend to be far below that of coastal areas. Nonetheless, interior winter birding is not without its compensations.

Raptors seem to be one group of birds arousing great appeal for many birders. Happily, raptors also are the very species which often typify the winter landscape. These large predators can generally eke out a living by preying upon field mice (*Microtus*), wood mice (*Peromyscus*) and on other birds and mammals of varying sizes. With the leaves off the trees and hunger at the doorstep of their daily lives, the raptors become more conspicuous than at any other time of year. A leisurely and vigilant tour through open farmland with adjacent woodlots and wooded swamps can often run up quite a tally of hawks in mid-winter. If special effort is made in the same areas, several species of owls are also possibilities.

In addition to raptors, winter waterfowl can provide quite a source of birding variety. If winter's grasp is not too severe, the larger ponds and reservoirs can often sustain a surprising array of duck species. As these areas freeze out, the waterfowl are forced either to salt water or to slightly more southerly areas. However, with the first thaws, leads in the ice are often found to contain the very species which only days or weeks before were frozen out. This kind of opportunistic habitat usage by waterfowl is another phenomenon best observed in an inland region.

If what has been said thus far tickles your birding fancy, then a winter trip to the Bridgewater - Lakeville area is recommended. The route which is described below has many variations. However, for the traveler coming south, it touches the high spots with a minimum of back-tracking. The area is easily done in half a day, but the birder must decide which end of the day will best provide the kind of birding he desires. For one wishing to maximize his appreciation of the area, U.S. Geological Survey topographical maps are available for the region. Appropriate quadrangles are the Bridgewater Quadrangle and the Assawampsett Pond Quadrangle. This fine map series is too often neglected by birders entering new territory for the first time.

The most direct approach is to come south on Route 18 until Bridgewater Center is reached. In the center of this little college town several roads come together. The birder should continue south on Route 18 and 28 for about 2.75 miles until a large sign on the left is seen which reads, "Massachusetts Correctional Institution." Turn left at this sign, where the road passes through a short stretch of low, moist woods before coming to an extensive area of open fields. On the right will be seen the dreary gray walls and facilities of the prison. (The state farm fields are not off limits to the discreet birder.) Continuing straight ahead, the road leads past a small piggery on the right, by the farm buildings. From the road, the birder should look closely at the gulls on the barn roofs or among the pigs. Experience has shown that an occasional Iceland Gull can drop in, seemingly out of context from the rocky shores of Essex County.

After turning around at the piggery, proceed several hundred feet to where the first of many dirt roads bisecting the fields begins. As one works slowly along this road, observe closely the hay and corn fields on both sides, as well as bordering trees and fences. It is here that Buteos, Kestrels and Marsh Hawks can often be present in startling numbers. Look for Rough-legged Hawks either soaring or hovering or else perched on small bushes as they survey the area for the abundant Meadow Voles. If one stays within the car, the hawks can occasionally be approached quite closely where they thus afford the serious student a fine opportunity to study their many and varied plumages. The Red-tailed Hawk and the Kestrel are most often seen perched in adjacent trees or on bordering phone wires. Marsh Hawks course the tall grass areas with regularity. Should the birder arrive in the morning, spectacular concentrations of Common Crows can be found in the corn fields. When present in flocks of 300-400 birds, these rowdy mobsters pose a picturesque facet to a wintery landscape.

The evening is the hour of the owl. If time permits, a twilight visit will usually be rewarded by the sight of one or more Short-eared Owls methodically searching in their erratic, bat-like feeding pattern, for mice. A loud squeaking on one's hand from the open window of a parked car can sometimes lure them quite close. The Bridgewater state farm is one of very few inland Massachusetts areas where this species can be found with regularity. After the sun has set, the hooting of the Great Horned Owl is a not infrequent sound from the adjacent pine woodlands.

Careful and extensive search of neighboring pine and spruce groves by day can sometimes turn up the communal winter roosts of the elusive Long-eared Owl. The gray, regurgitated pellets on the ground can often indicate preferred roost trees. But remember, too much harassment may mean abandonment of a roost!

Should there be open ground at the farm, flocks of Horned Larks and Water Pipits can be found at the proper seasons, while a variety of wintering sparrows and Meadowlarks frequent the moist ditches and tall grass areas. Regular visits to the state farm from late fall through early spring will well repay the careful observer since such fancies as Swainson's Hawk, Snowy Owl and Loggerhead Shrike have all been reported in recent years.

After thoroughly covering the fields and nearby paved roads, the visitor should return to the farm buildings and continue beyond them a short distance to Titicut Street, and follow it until River Street is reached on the left, just beyond the Taunton River crossing. Follow River Street about 2 miles to its end, where you will turn right on Thompson Street in Middleboro. The three-mile Thompson Street passes by several extensive dairy farms, each with attendant corn fields and cow pastures. These farms are often the winter forage areas for various hawk species. Most notable in this vicinity will be Red-tailed Hawks and Kestrels; however, Goshawks inconspicuously hunt grouse and rabbits in the adjacent swampy woodlots.

Upon reaching the end of Thompson Street, a right turn on Route 44 will bring one to the rotary where Routes 18 and 28, 44 and 25 come together. A Howard Johnson's here provides a pleasant break from winter cold. Before continuing south to Lakeville, a quick check of the Leona Farm, less than a mile north on Route 18 and 28, can be worthwhile. Not only is it another potential hawk area, but also a prime area in late fall for resting and feeding flocks of migrant Ring-billed Gulls crossing over southeastern Massachusetts.

From the rotary, continue south on Route 18, which eventually joins Route 105, to Lakeville. After a trip of approximately 4 miles, Assawampsett Pond will be seen on the left. On the way, however, several choice farm fields should be looked at for lingering Killdeers and Water Pipits, while Horned Larks can be expected. Once at Assawampsett Pond, park in the parking area across from the pumping station which is located on the stone dike on the left. If there is open water here, carefully scope for diving ducks and American Coots. Should this spot be frozen, continue driving along the shore of the pond until a running culvert under the road is reached. This is nearly always open and often contains Pied-billed Grebes, Canvasbacks, Ruddy Ducks and American Coots. Depending upon the amount of open water, Assawampsett Pond can be counted upon to yield impressive varieties of ducks, while during the height of the October-November migrations, over twenty species of waterfowl have been noted on a single trip.

Leaving Assawampsett, continue south about 2.5 miles to where the road passes a dividing dike between Great Quittacas Pond on the left and Little Quittacas Pond on the right. These ponds can be excellent from fall through mid-winter, providing ice does not close them completely. Even a thaw of several days in mid-winter can produce ducks, seemingly from nowhere. It was under just such conditions that the writer observed a drake Tufted Duck in January of 1975. Late fall, however, is most impressive, for it is then that large numbers of Ring-necked Ducks and other divers form dense rafts in the more sheltered coves, making the area a mecca for waterfowl watchers. The Quittacas Ponds, together with Assawampsett Pond, represent the best duck ponds to be found almost anywhere on the mainland of Massachusetts.

The coniferous woodlands around the Quittacas Ponds are off limits to birders. However, roadways are open and can provide good chances to see not only the waterfowl but also raptors frequenting the area. For several recent winters, one or more Bald Eagles have hunted ducks and coot on Great Quittacas Pond. The patient and vigilant birder who stations himself at a good vantage point can sometimes be rewarded by looks at both soaring and perched birds. Such vigils have also produced views of Buteos and Accipiters on clear, windy days. A particularly good observation point for hawks and eagles is reached by returning north from the Quittacas Ponds and turning right on Long Point Road, which runs along the north end of Great Quittacas and crosses a stone dike between Pocksha Pond

and Great Quittacas. Park by the reservoir gatehouse on the dike. Departure can be made by returning to Routes 18 and 105 and heading north.

While season and weather conditions can obviously affect a trip to the Bridgewater - Lakeville area, it is well worth the time spent any time from mid-October to mid-winter in search of the species described above. Why not try inland birding for a change?

Migratory Free-loaders

The following article is by Wayne Hanley in Nature's Ways, a publication of the Massachusetts Audubon Society.

Airline passengers are not the only ones traveling in luxury to Miami for the winter.

The hippoboscids are making the trip, too. Some hippoboscids (pronounced hip-po-BOS-sid) will make it all the way to southern Argentina to languish in the warmth of the southern hemisphere summer. But, what is more important, the whole hippoboscids bunch will make the trip without flapping a single wing. Good thing, too, because some hippoboscids have become such parasites on birds, or bats, that they no longer bother to grow things.

It may sound odd to call an insect which does not fly, a fly. Especially since its cousins among the flies are aerial artists. But hippoboscids are true flies, just as the house fly. They have found a better way of living.

Naturally, to spend the northern summer in Nova Scotia and the southern summer in Chile requires adjustments in a fly's life pattern. One minor adjustment consists of a body pattern that is so flat that the fly can lie closely to a bird's skin and not interfere with its streamlining. It also has adapted to a diet composed of nothing except its host's blood. So it has little to do except to ride around and sip an occasional meal.

The major adjustment the flies (there are several species) have made is in the reproductive process. It may be convenient for a house fly to flit around and lay her eggs on a piece of rotting meat. But this hardly would fit the gypsy life of hippoboscids. The young larvae might have little chance of finding an accommodating bird. So, the hippoboscids have evolved a reproductive pattern most unusual for an insect. In fact, the process is so unusual that the only other fly known to use the pattern is the tsetse fly of Africa.

Instead of laying its eggs upon an animal or plant host, as most insects do, the hippoboscids fly retains the eggs in her body. The eggs hatch within her, go through the larva stage inside the mother, change into cocoons within her, and then are laid, ready to emerge as adults. Although the mechanics vary greatly, the process involves features that would remind one of mammalian reproduction. The result is that young hippoboscids flies are right where they should be, snuggled in the feathers of a flying host.

One might wonder how hippoboscids flies get around to inhabiting the next generation of birds produced by its host. The transfer happens, of course, in the nest. When the bird they are riding dies, hippoboscids flies have a problem. Apparently they recognize it quickly since hippoboscids flies start crawling, or in a few cases flying, from the host as the body cools.

The flies' only stroke of luck occurs when the bird which was their host is eaten by another bird. Sometimes they crawl off the host onto a hawk. But usually things do not work out for them even under those circumstances. As with most parasites, they succeed well only on the species of bird that their parents inhabited.