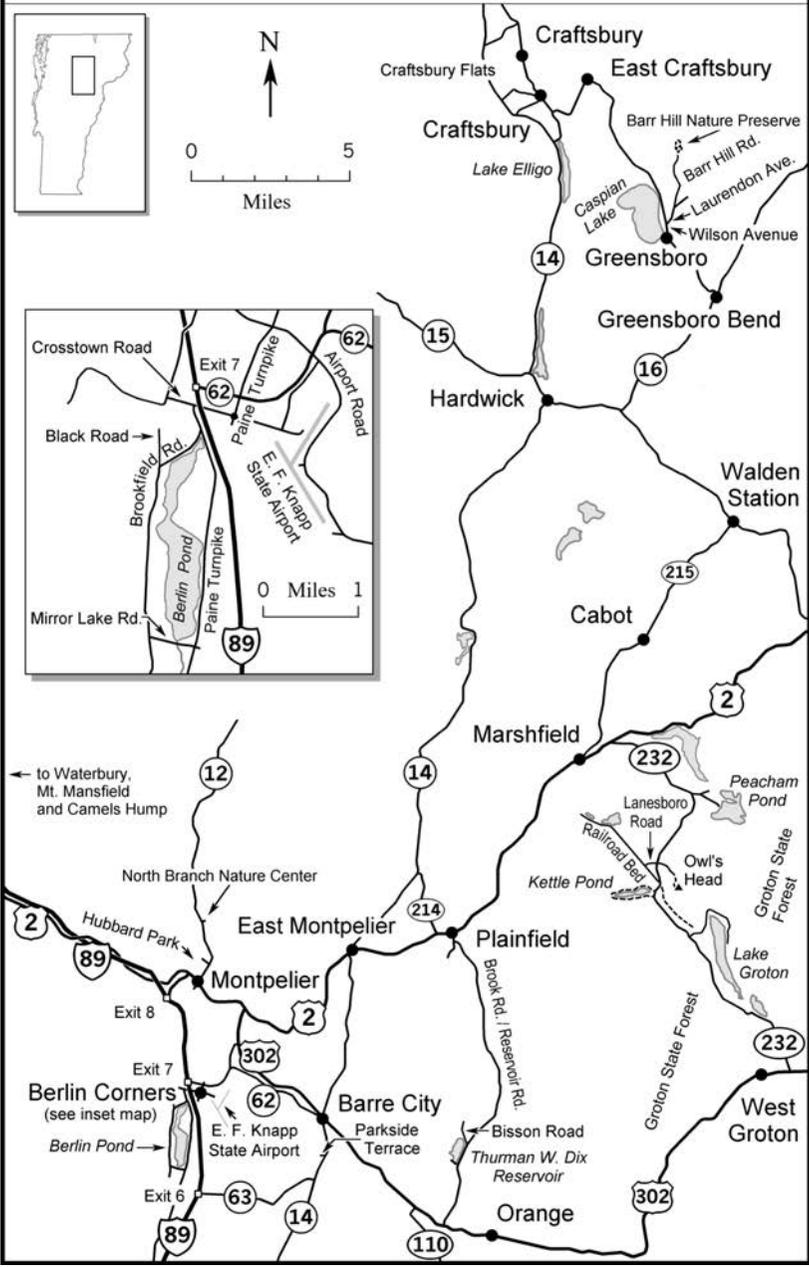


NORTH CENTRAL VERMONT



Birding North Central Vermont

Ted Murin and Bryan Pfeiffer

Editor's note: A birdwatcher in search of scenery, serenity, and the serenade of northern warblers and boreal birds need travel no farther than Vermont. Here's a new companion for the trip: Birdwatching in Vermont by Ted Murin and Bryan Pfeiffer, a complete guide to finding and enjoying birds across the Green Mountain State. It covers more than 120 birdwatching destinations and includes detailed accounts (with graphs) of 296 regularly occurring species. Atypical for a standard birdfinding guide are the book's chapters on the art of birdwatching (written mostly for beginners) and conservation. Adapted below for Bird Observer is the book's section on North Central Vermont. The region includes sites for Bicknell's Thrush. It is copyrighted and reprinted with the permission of the publisher, University Press of New England. Copies of the book can be ordered directly from the publisher by calling 1-800-421-1561. Birdwatching in Vermont by Ted Murin and Bryan Pfeiffer. University Press of New England. 208 pages, 297 graphs, 33 illustrations. ISBN: 1-58465-188-1

Forests, farmland, wetlands, lakes, rivers, and the state's highest peak offer the birdwatcher in this region a diverse encounter with Vermont. Deciduous and mixed woods dominate the eastern foothills here. But the Green Mountains, on the western edge of this area, offer trails to high-elevation spruce-fir forests and their own avian specialties. The mountains also influence the climate, which is colder and wetter than much of Vermont. The birdwatching hotspots are dispersed in this region. Migrant traps and flyways are a bit harder to find. But, like so much of Vermont, all of that forest, water, and varying elevation means birds can turn up virtually anywhere.

Mt. Mansfield and Camels Hump

Vermont's highest and most massive peak, Mt. Mansfield, with a long ridgeline and classic bald summit, hosts one of the state's largest nesting populations of Bicknell's Thrush. This tiny songbird that sings like a flute shares the mountain with a barrage of development – ski trails and lifts, radio towers, and even a visitor's center. The Stowe Mountain Resort's 4.5-mile toll road toward the top offers access to Bicknell's Thrush and other high-elevation songbirds. While Mt. Mansfield welcomes a diversity of birds during the warmer months, Bicknell's Thrush is most active and evident during the first two weeks of June.

From the village of Stowe, take Route 108 (Mountain Road) north for 5.8 miles to the toll road parking lot on the left (not shown on map). Watch carefully for the sign. Call the resort at (802)253-3000 to see if the toll road is free of snow and open for the season. The toll is \$14 per carload for up to six people. Hours for vehicles are from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. – convenient for a picnic but not ideal for finding birds. (Bicknell's Thrush will indeed sing from exposed perches after 9 a.m. in early June,

yet finding this elusive mountaineer is often tough, even at dawn.) Walking the steep road early and in the dark is a viable (but ambitious) option. Prepare for clouds, relentless wind, colder temperatures, and snow on top, even when it is warm and sunny below. Also be prepared for black flies, which are most tenacious on calm, humid days. Another approach is a strenuous hike to the summit along one of the mountain's numerous trails. The Long Trail south from Route 108 in Stowe or the Sunset Ridge Trail from Underhill State Park are among the best options. Contact the Green Mountain Club in Waterbury at (802) 244-7037 for maps and details.

The ascent of Mt. Mansfield passes through several life zones. The various habitats guarantee high bird diversity. During a single outing on this mountain, for example, it would be possible to locate every eastern North American thrush (except Gray-cheeked), from Eastern Bluebird and Veery below to Swainson's Thrush and Bicknell's Thrush on top. Forests of sugar maple, yellow birch, American beech, and other hardwood species dominate below. Songbirds here include Great Crested Flycatcher, Red-eyed Vireo, Black-throated Blue Warbler, Ovenbird, Scarlet Tanager, and Rose-breasted Grosbeak. Red spruce, paper birch, and mountain ash enter the picture somewhat higher, along with Red-breasted Nuthatch, Winter Wren, Swainson's Thrush, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Hermit Thrush, Magnolia Warbler, Black-throated Green Warbler, and Dark-eyed Junco. And finally, taking over near the summit are the stunted, contorted balsam fir and black spruce known as krummholz, the German word for crooked wood.



SWAINSON'S THRUSH BY GEORGE C. WEST

Good places to stop for Bicknell's Thrush include the parking area below the Octagon (3.9 miles from the toll gate) and the summit station at the end of the 4.5-mile road. On windy days investigate leeward areas of the mountain. On calm days the thrushes sometimes sing between dawn and dusk. But the ideal time is the crepuscular hours, even just before dark. Listen for the raspy and Veery-like *preer*. Also expect nesting Common Raven, Winter Wren, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Blackpoll Warbler, Purple Finch, and, depending on the fir cone crop, White-winged Crossbill and Pine Siskin.

No matter which birds show themselves, an ascent of Mt. Mansfield is one of the most rewarding encounters with Vermont and points beyond. Views from the top include Lake Champlain to the west, the northern Green Mountains (and Montreal on a clear day) to the north, the White Mountains (and Vermont's Worcester Range) to the east, and the southern Green Mountains to the south. From this high place in Vermont a visitor can sense the curvature of the Earth.

Note that the area near the top of the toll road is within a thrush research site.

While birding here, please stay on the road or marked trails. Near the summit of Mt. Mansfield, a 1.4-mile hike along the Long Trail from the upper parking area takes you through an alpine meadow, one of only three Vermont sites for this rare natural community. While these alpine plants, including Bigelow's sedge, alpine bilberry, and mountain sandwort, can tolerate the thin soils and harsh conditions here, they are vulnerable to human boots. Please step only on bare rocks in this zone.

Another classic Vermont summit, this one without the toll road and development, is Camels Hump (not shown on map). Bicknell's Thrush and the other Mansfield residents nest here as well. Choice trails up this peak, a prominent landmark in much of central Vermont, include the Monroe Trail from Duxbury and the Burrows Trail from Huntington Center. The same warnings about weather and alpine plants apply. To reach the Monroe Trail, take Exit 10 from Interstate 89 and go south on Route 100 for a few tenths of a mile, turn left on Route 2, and drive 0.2 mile to Winooski Street. Turn right on Winooski Street, cross over the Winooski River, turn right on River Road, and drive 3.9 miles to the Camels Hump Road on the left. The trailhead parking lot is 3.6 miles up this road at its end. It is a 3.4-mile hike to the summit. To reach the Burrows trailhead, take Camels Hump Road east from Huntington Center for 1.9 miles. Turn right across a bridge and continue 1.6 miles to the end of the road. The 2.4-mile hike to the summit begins at the back of the parking lot. Both hikes up the mountain are fairly strenuous.

Montpelier-Barre Area

Two miles north of downtown Montpelier, at a big slow bend in the North Branch of the Winooski River, is a small refuge with a big heart. The Vermont Institute of Natural Science's North Branch Nature Center is a reserve of grassland and floodplain forest. The best time to visit is spring through fall.

From State Street (Route 2) in Montpelier, drive north on Elm Street (Route 12) for 2 miles to the nature center, an old sheep farm, on the right. Stop in to visit the

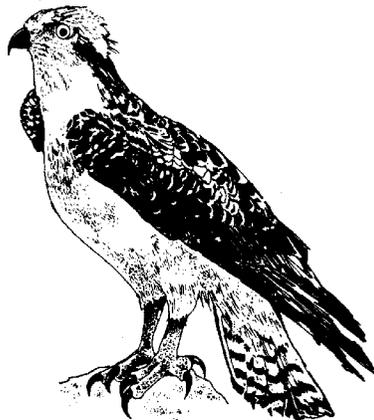
staff naturalists or the entertaining "Critter Room," or to pick up a field guide in the gift shop. A short nature trail passes through open habitat for American Kestrel, Common Snipe, Eastern Bluebird, Savannah Sparrow, and Bobolink. Closer to the river, watch for Spotted Sandpiper, Belted Kingfisher, Cedar Waxwing, Alder Flycatcher, Veery, Yellow Warbler, Chestnut-sided Warbler, and American Redstart. More unusual visitors have included Bald Eagle, Upland Sandpiper, and Carolina Wren. The butterfly garden is always worth a stop for Monarch, Great Spangled Fritillary, Red Admiral, and other delights with four wings. The reserve has a public restroom.

Elsewhere in Montpelier, Hubbard Park offers walking trails and decent birding within city limits. There is access to the park from the North Branch Nature Center, or from Route 2 go about 0.4 mile north on Elm Street, turn left on Winter Street, and go up the hill into the park. Hermit Thrush, Wood Thrush, a smattering of warblers, including Pine Warbler, and other songbirds are reliable in the city park during spring migration.

In Barre City, a recreation path above the Stevens Branch offers city songbirding. From Main Street in downtown Barre, at the small park with a statue and gazebo, drive south on South Main (Route 14) for 1.1 miles, turn right on Parkside Terrace, and continue ahead 0.2 mile (crossing the recreation path) to the parking lot for the Barre City Elementary and Middle School. Walk the path southbound for songbirds in May. Another short trail in the same direction, along the riverbank, leaves from the parking lot and picnic area just below the school (across from the tennis courts). Belted Kingfisher, Least Flycatcher, American Redstart, and Common Yellowthroat are among the riverside visitors.

Berlin Pond and E. F. Knapp State Airport

An Osprey smacks crystalline waters and emerges with a fish wiggling in its talons. Two Virginia Rails, staking out turf among a cattail marsh, grunt their comical *ki-ki-ki-ki-KEER!* A Common Loon investigates a nest site. And off in the woods, waves of warblers descend from the sky like manna from heaven.



OSPREY, ANON.

Another spring day dawns at Berlin Pond, a unique refuge only a few miles from two of Vermont's largest cities. Rare is an undeveloped pond in Vermont. This one has a list of more than 157 species. So what's a pond with an undeveloped shoreline doing a mere five miles from the Capitol dome and four miles from Barre's granite sheds? The pond is the city of Montpelier's drinking water supply. As a result it is off limits to fishing, boating, and swimming, making it a de facto refuge. The best times to visit are from mid-April through June and during the fall waterfowl migration in October and November. Most of the access to birding is from a rural residential road that circles the pond. Warning: The road is relatively quiet but not without the occasional speedster. Runners, families on bicycles, dogwalkers, and birders frequent the five-mile loop around the pond.

To reach the pond, take Exit 7 from Interstate 89. Turn right at the first stoplight onto Paine Turnpike. Drive 0.2 mile and turn right on Crosstown Road (near a flagpole and large boulder monument on the right). Immediately after passing under the interstate, turn left onto a dirt road and drive a few tenths of a mile to the pond. Investigate the pond in a 5.6-mile counterclockwise loop. Remember to watch for traffic, be aware that the shoreline is off limits, and please respect private property.

Starting at the pond's north end near Interstate 89, drive south on Brookfield Road (with the pond to the left) and park at a widening in the road only one-tenth of a mile ahead. From here walk a half-mile or so on the road along the shoreline. Scan the pond for Common Loon, Pied-billed Grebe, Wood Duck, Ring-necked Duck, and Hooded Merganser. Practice identifying all five eastern swallow species on the wing. Osprey or Bald Eagle (uncommon) perch on shoreline trees across the pond.

Linger at the cattail marsh up ahead. Virginia Rail, Yellow Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, and Swamp Sparrow nest here. American Bittern is usually around in early May. In the willow-alder stand across the road, with a backdrop of tall conifers, Ruby-crowned Kinglets flash their crowns in late April; later in May this is a reliable spot for Alder Flycatcher. In the conifers, look for Olive-sided Flycatcher (surprisingly reliable), Cape May Warbler (rare), and other warbler species.

Continue driving south 0.6 mile and turn right onto the narrow, dead-end Black Road. Drive ahead another 0.4 mile past Black Cemetery to a tiny parking spot on the right. The road and cemetery area attract passerines. Winter Wren, Veery, Hermit Thrush, and Wood Thrush are reliable, as are warblers including Chestnut-sided, Yellow-rumped, Black-throated Green, Blackburnian, and Canada. Turn around and return to the pond loop road. Continue south 0.2 mile to another wide spot with a pull-off on the right. Listen for both kinglet species, Northern Parula, Black-throated Blue Warbler, and other songbirds. Broad-winged Hawks sometimes nest near here.

Continue south another 1.3 miles past a number of homes with limited birding opportunities (watch for Eastern Bluebirds on fence posts, though). Turn left on Mirror Lake Road and proceed 0.3 mile to the most magical spot on the pond, an open wetland with views of the pond's southern end. Park at a widening in the road. Scope the lake for Common Loon, waterfowl, and swallows, then walk Mirror Lake Road through a wetland of alder, willow, and black ash. Highlights here include

nesting Yellow Warblers and Baltimore Orioles. Flocks of Rusty Blackbirds maraud through the ash from late April to early May. Northern Waterthrush, which nests here, perches in the open and belts out its song. The poplar and willow stands at the end of Mirror Lake Road attract Least Flycatcher, Warbling Vireo, Veery, American Redstart, and Baltimore Oriole. Meanwhile, Common Snipe display high above while an Osprey circles the pond. Rarer visitors over the years have included Wilson's Warbler and Yellow-throated Vireo.

Continue (east now) along Mirror Lake Road another 0.2 mile to the four corners. Either turn right and explore roadside woods and wetlands for several miles or turn left (north) on Paine Turnpike and proceed close to the shoreline. Pull aside with caution in another 0.2 mile and check for Common Loon or waterfowl. Red-necked Grebes occasionally stop here during migration. From here the birding thins out. Continue circling the pond to the starting spot.

Not far from the pond, the E. F. Knapp State Airport in Berlin has hosted nesting Upland Sandpipers and other grassland species. From Exit 7 on Interstate 89, continue 1.2 miles on the exit road (Route 62), turn right on Airport Road, and drive 1.2 miles to the airport parking lot on the right. Scan the openings for the sandpipers (sometimes even walking runway edges), Northern Harrier, American Kestrel, Savannah Sparrow (on the chainlink fencing), Bobolink, and Eastern Meadowlark. The airport has a restaurant and public restrooms.

Thurman W. Dix Reservoir

The source of Barre City's drinking water is another de facto refuge off limits to swimming, boating, and fishing. And belying its location in Orange County, the reservoir's border of mature conifers and wetlands makes the place seem farther north by nature. The best time to visit is spring through fall.

To reach the reservoir from Plainfield Village, turn south off U.S. Route 2 at the blinking yellow light onto School Street, take an immediate right on Mill Street, and drive past the church 0.2 mile to Brook Road on the left. (Note that the road sign to the right says Barre Hill Road.) Turn left on Brook Road and drive 7 miles to the north end of the reservoir. (Brook Road changes its name to Reservoir Road along the way.) Alternatively, reach the reservoir from U.S. Route 302 in Orange. Pick up Reservoir Road 1.1 miles east of Route 302's intersection with Route 110 and proceed north for 1.9 miles to the reservoir's southern end.

Common Loons usually nest at Dix Reservoir. Osprey stop for visits. Expect the unusual: a Red-throated Loon, rarely seen in Vermont away from Lake Champlain, once stopped on the reservoir. The best land birding is at the northern end. From Reservoir Road (at the northern end of the reservoir), turn west onto Bisson Road and pull off at a widening 0.2 mile ahead on the right. Scope the open water for waterfowl, including Wood Duck, Green-winged Teal, Ring-necked Duck, Common Merganser, and Hooded Merganser. Both kinglet species and Yellow-rumped Warblers are common in the coniferous woods. Cape May Warbler is relatively reliable from mid- to late May. Watch for river otters munching fish out in the reservoir. In fall, the

reservoir attracts waterfowl and, during periods of low water, an occasional shorebird on the exposed mud flats.

Groton State Forest

Vermont's second largest tract of public land, Groton State Forest is 26,000 acres of woods, bogs, ponds, and developed state parks. Beneath it all is granite – the Groton area's shared bedrock with the White Mountains to the east. Black bear, moose, white-tailed deer, mink, beaver, otter, fisher, and bobcat wander this state forest. Birds, by the way, are abundant.

Groton State Forest is hardly pristine, however. Intensive logging here began in 1873 and continues to a lesser extent today. And with no fewer than seven parks within its boundaries (Big Deer State Park, Boulder Beach State Park, Kettle Pond Group Camping Area, New Discovery State Park, Ricker State Park, Seyon Ranch State Park, and Stillwater State Park), campsites and trails abound. Groton is arguably the closest wild retreat from the cities of Barre, Montpelier, and St. Johnsbury. Spring migration in May is the best time to visit, when it is possible to encounter seventeen or more warbler species in a single morning. The woods here are varied. Deciduous woods offer their own specialties, including Red-eyed Vireo, Black-throated Blue Warbler, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, and Scarlet Tanager. Stands of conifers offer theirs, including Red-breasted Nuthatch, Golden-crowned Kinglet, and Hermit Thrush. Lakes and wetlands offer herons, waterfowl (not very common in this region), and specialists such as Lincoln's Sparrow (uncommon) or Rusty Blackbird.

The easiest ways to find birds in Groton State Forest are to stop the car anywhere along the many unpaved roads, to hike the numerous trails, or even to explore by mountain bike, with birdsong signaling each stop. Route 232, which bisects the forest, is the perfect entryway. From Marshfield Village drive east on Route 2 for 1.1 miles to Route 232. Proceed south 3.1 miles and turn left on the Peacham Pond Road. Drive 0.2 mile, bear right at the fork, and continue 0.8 mile to a boat launch at Peacham Pond. Common Loons nest here, and the forest edges along the pond can be speckled with warblers in spring. Return to Route 232 and continue south 2.5 miles to an access road on the left for Owl's Head, a granite pluton affording striking views of the region. From spring through fall (it's closed in winter), drive the road 0.8 mile to a parking area, from which there is a short, steep hike to the top. Better yet, hike the entire access road and trail to look and listen for songbirds. In fall Owl's Head is great for viewing foliage and an occasional migrating hawk.

Directly across Route 232 from the Owl's Head access road is Lanesboro Road. Walk or drive it 0.5 mile to the old Montpelier to Wells River Railroad Bed, the best birding in Groton State Forest. Walk, bike, or drive the rail bed to the right (northwest) and watch for Olive-sided Flycatcher, Blue-headed Vireo, northern nesting warblers, and perhaps a Peregrine Falcon, which nests on Marshfield Cliffs towering to the northeast. Marshfield Pond, a beautiful spot with occasional waterfowl, is 1.9 miles ahead, and Bailey Pond, sometimes good for moose, is farther ahead another 0.4 mile. Retrace your path to Route 232.

One mile south of the Owl's Head access road is the parking lot (on the right) for Kettle Pond, a kettle hole (formed by a big chunk of leftover glacial ice) where Common Loons often nest. The open birch-maple deciduous woods near the parking lot can attract warblers during spring and fall migrations. Walk the 2.7-mile loop around the pond, emerging at the group camping area from which it is a short walk north on Route 232 back to the parking lot.

Barr Hill Nature Preserve and Craftsbury Flats

At the foothills to the Northeast Kingdom, The Nature Conservancy's Barr Hill Nature Preserve is an island of boreal habitat. The panoramic views alone from this high 256-acre reserve are worth the visit.

Leave the village of Greensboro northbound on Wilson Avenue and bear right at the Town Hall on Laundon Avenue. Travel 0.6 mile (passing the Greensboro Elementary School on the left) to bear left at a fork onto Barr Hill Road (muddy in spring). Proceed another 1.2 miles past a farm to a sign at the reserve's entrance. Drive a bumpy road to the parking lot about a half-mile uphill.

In spring, pick up a trail guide at the trailhead and walk the loop trail 0.8 mile through woods dominated mostly by red spruce, white spruce, and balsam fir. Listen for Cape May Warbler at the edge of the open area near the start of the trail. Magnolia Warbler, Nashville Warbler, Blackburnian Warbler, Yellow-rumped Warbler, and Chipping Sparrow are among the common species here. Boreal Chickadee is uncommon along the trail.

To the northwest, not far from Barr Hill and Greensboro, is Craftsbury Flats, a floodplain of the Black River along Route 14 beginning just north of the north end of Lake Eligo. From Hardwick, drive west on Route 15 for 1.2 miles, turn right (north) on Route 14, and drive 7.5 miles just past the north end of Lake Eligo. Explore the area using the roads that cross the flats to the east from Route 14 north of the lake. Waterfowl and occasional shorebirds visit the flooded fields in spring. The flats can also host Rough-legged Hawk, Northern Shrike, and Horned Lark in winter, and American Pipit in migration. 

*Ted Murin has spent years investigating and documenting the distribution and seasonal status of birds in Vermont. Whether paddling rivers or withstanding a gale on the shores of Lake Champlain, he is most content in pursuit of a greater understanding and appreciation of nature. A systems analyst and software developer, Ted lives in South Burlington, Vermont. **Bryan Pfeiffer** is a writer and founder of a nature touring company, Vermont Bird Tours. His essays have appeared in the New York Times, Northern Woodlands, Vermont Life, and other publications. Bryan hosts an award-winning radio show on birds and is the on-camera naturalist for weekly nature features on a Vermont television station. Bryan lives in an old farmhouse near Bartlett Hill in Plainfield, Vermont.*

FINDING BICKNELL'S THRUSHES

The Bicknell's Thrush breeding ground is sort of like an avian brothel – males and females mate with multiple partners. And with males flying back and forth across the mountain, singing and copulating with multiple females, it would seem this species would be relatively easy to locate. Not so.

The best time to find Bicknell's Thrush in Vermont is around dawn during the first two weeks of June. Males take exposed perches and sing near territorial females. But this is a cryptic bird. And one of the best tools for getting a decent look is a spotting scope.

When you hear a male sing, scrutinize the tips of spruce and fir – as many as you can find. Males will also sing from exposed snags or horizontal branches of paper birch. Quite often on Mt. Mansfield or Camels Hump you can position yourself to look down toward an expanse of stunted spruce and fir. The more turf you can scan, the better.

Males also sing at dusk, but not until 8 p.m. or so, leaving precious little time to view a bird before sunset. One problem in Vermont is that the toll road up Mt. Mansfield is open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., hardly prime time for this species (although it can indeed be located after 9 a.m.). A few organized trips (Vermont Bird Tours and the Vermont Institute of Natural Science) take birders up the mountain before dawn.

In any event, a pre-dawn hike up the toll road, while physically demanding, especially if you're carrying a scope, will often produce not only Bicknell's Thrush, but Veery, Swainson's Thrush, Hermit Thrush, and Wood Thrush as well – not to mention other breeders of northern hardwood and coniferous forests.

This is by no means a casual trip. Expect black flies, high wind, cold temperatures, snow, and no facilities as you approach the summit. A good outpost on Mt. Mansfield is the upper parking lot for the toll road. Thrushes can be seen from the lot or from the gravel road winding around the summit area. Even if you don't find Bicknell's Thrush, the views alone are worth the trip. 



RED-BREADED NUTHATCH BY GEORGE C. WEST