

Birding the Erwin S. Wilder Wildlife Management Area, Taunton

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The Erwin S. Wilder Wildlife Management Area is a 465-acre tract of land with a variety of interesting habitats. Oak, maple, and white pine trees are common in the upland areas. There is also a red maple swamp, surrounded by many fields, situated at the edge of an outwash plain. The area is located primarily in the northern section of the city of Taunton, but is also partly in the town of Norton. The Wilder WMA abuts the much larger Hockomock WMA to the east, is bounded by the Snake River to the south, and lies only a short distance from Winnecunnet Pond (in Norton) to the west.

The best time of year to bird Wilder is spring and early summer, though birding at any time of the year can be productive. The mosquitoes can be an issue in summer, so a generous application of insect repellent is strongly advised. Birding between mid-October and late December is not recommended since the hunting pressure in this area can be extreme. Be advised that the Wilder WMA is open to hunting year-round (depending on what is in season) with the exception of Sundays.

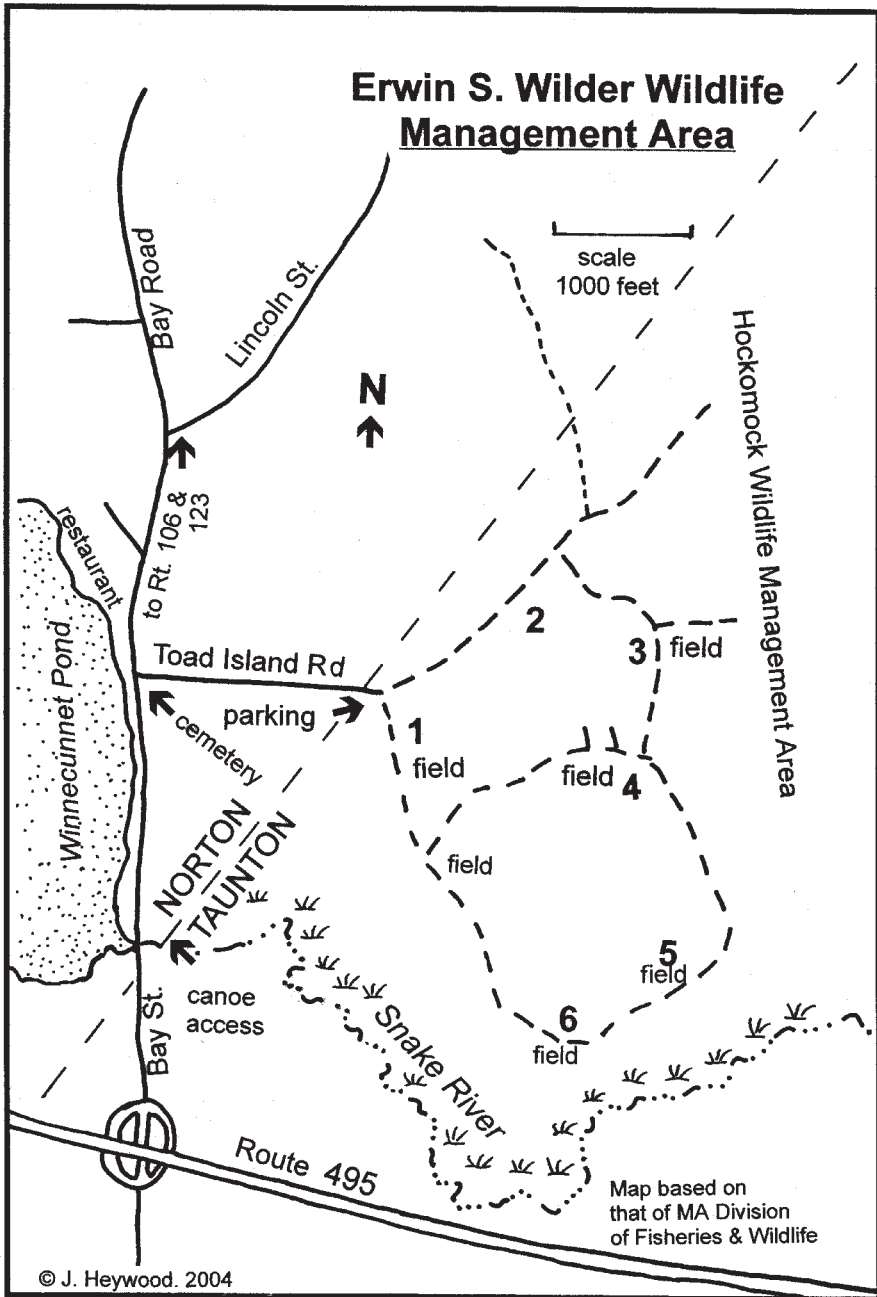
Birders should plan to spend at least several hours at this location. A casual stroll along the main trail can yield many sightings and could easily occupy half a day of birding. In addition to birds, the site has produced an impressive list of odonate sightings, and in mid-summer it is not unusual to record over fifteen species of butterflies. Snapping turtles and black racers are frequently sighted in late spring, and deer and coyotes are occasionally observed.

Directions

From Route I-495 in Taunton, take Exit 9 (Bay Street/Taunton). Travel north on Bay Street to the Taunton/Norton border. Bay Street becomes Bay Road in Norton. Continue about 0.75 of a mile up Bay Road, and look for Toad Island Road on the right. There is a small cemetery just before Toad Island Road. Winnecunnet Pond is on the left. Follow Toad Island Road to the end, and look for the gate and signage for Erwin S. Wilder WMA. If the gate is open, continue on the dirt road a short distance to the main parking lot. The parking area falls just outside the Norton town boundary and is located in Taunton. If the gate is closed, park on the right side of the road, and walk in. Be sure to leave enough room for the gate to be opened and closed.

A Loop Route on the Trails

The best place to start birding is from the parking area. About ninety acres of open fields are under cooperative agreement with a local farmer who grows corn and hay. In years when corn is planted in the field opposite the parking area, there can be large concentrations of Red-winged Blackbirds and, occasionally, Rusty Blackbirds. In January 2002, 167 Rusty Blackbirds were observed in the vicinity of the parking lot. This is also a great place to see the courtship displays of American Woodcock in



mid-March. Woodcock can be found in all the fields throughout the area, but it is not unusual to hear, and sometimes see, up to six birds in this main field (#1 on map).

From the parking lot, walk the left-hand trail that runs northeast. The wooded margin to the left of the trail is a good place to find Indigo Buntings, Carolina Wrens, and Eastern Towhees in summer, and Dark-eyed Juncos, White-throated Sparrows, and Golden-crowned Kinglets in winter. Looking south from the trail, there is a good chance of observing a Northern Harrier (fall) or a Red-shouldered Hawk. American Kestrels are frequently observed in early spring. Moreover, Sharp-shinned and Cooper's hawks can be seen around this field during migration.

At the northeast corner of the main field, the trail enters a red maple swamp. The trail's edge is thick with sweet pepperbush and several species of ferns. Follow the trail to the next field (#2), and listen for Scarlet Tanager, Wood Thrush, Baltimore Oriole, and Yellow-billed Cuckoo. In addition, House Wrens, Red-eyed Vireos, and Yellow Warblers are reliable at this location. In the fall the fields in the immediate area are a good place to look for Palm Warbler, Swamp Sparrow, Field Sparrow, and Purple Finch. In spring a variety of warblers can be found in the black locust trees nearby. In June 1998 a singing Cerulean Warbler was observed in the area during a South Shore Bird Club breeding-bird survey.

Following the next trail to the right (southeast) will lead to another field (#3). Indigo Buntings, Red-bellied Woodpeckers, Great Crested Flycatchers, Ruby-throated Hummingbirds, Blue-winged Warblers, and Chipping Sparrows are regular here. Moreover, the edges of this field are a good place to search for migrant sparrows. In winter check the thickets for Winter Wrens. Brown Creepers can be found in the wooded edges as well. A short distance south of the field, the trail enters pine-oak forest. Pine Warblers, Ovenbirds, and Veeries can be heard, and usually seen, on the hottest days of summer. To the right of the trail are many tangles that may produce a variety of warblers, thrushes, and vireos during the spring and fall migrations. Check the leaf litter in this area for scraping towhees. A closer look in early spring might yield a Fox Sparrow.

Follow the trail a short distance to yet another field (#4). Taking a right at this location will lead west to another part of the red maple swamp, and also offers a shorter loop back to the entrance if your time is short. Red-shouldered Hawks probably breed in the immediate area. Joe-pye weed and jewelweed mark the entrance to the cool and shady swamp. Stop here to look for Blue-gray Gnatcatchers. By bearing left and continuing south, you will see the habitat change to pine-oak woodland again. However, it is not long before the trail enters another series of fields (#5). These fields are particularly good for observing butterflies and odonates. By carefully birding the edges, you have a good chance of seeing Red-eyed Vireos, Scarlet Tanagers, American Redstarts, Wood Thrushes, and Eastern Phoebe. American Redstarts are most likely breeding at this location, as are many of the species mentioned in this article. Also in this area are several smaller hunting trails that lead to a cattail marsh near the Snake River. The trails are rather primitive, but a walk to the cattails may produce a sighting of a rail, a Marsh Wren, or a Great Blue Heron.

If you follow the main trail to the southwest, the habitat changes quickly from pine-oak woods back to a much smaller field (#6). Stop here and listen for Eastern Wood-Pewee. Patient searching may be rewarded with a view of this diminutive flycatcher. Yellow-throated Vireos have been observed in this area and at the edges of the south end of the main field (#1, which you will soon reach). According to Veit and Petersen (1993), the Yellow-throated Vireo is local in its distribution, being most numerous in the Connecticut River Valley and western Berkshire County. However, there are scattered pairs breeding in eastern Massachusetts. The Yellow-throated Vireo was formerly a common summer resident at lower altitudes south to the edge of the coastal plain at Taunton and Rehoboth. After 1910, this species decreased rapidly eastward, becoming rare and local (Griscom and Snyder 1955). The presence of two Yellow-throated Vireos in June 2003 suggests possible breeding at Wilder WMA.

At the western edge of this small field, look for Cedar Waxwings, Hairy Woodpeckers, Gray Catbirds, and Common Yellowthroats. The southern end of the red maple swamp abuts the western edge of this field. Listen for the “spray bottle” call of the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher at the entrance to the swamp. It is likely that Blue-gray Gnatcatchers have been breeding in this area for the past few years. Often, in early spring and after heavy rains, the trail in this area is flooded. Waterproof boots are highly recommended when birding at this time of year.

On the other side of the swamp, the trail enters the south end of the main field (#1). In the fall the edges of the field produce many Savannah and Song sparrows. Large numbers of Tree Swallows congregate here in late summer. Be sure to check this area for Killdeer in early spring. It is not uncommon to observe several birds flying around the south end of the field in April. In fall and winter it is best to bird the edge of the field closest to the Snake River. Slowly bird the edge as you continue north. Look for American Tree (winter), Savannah, White-throated, Field, and Lincoln’s sparrows in the weedy patches at the edge of the field. Swamp Sparrows are particularly numerous in the lower part of the main field closest to the Snake River. In addition, migrant warblers are frequently encountered in this area. Blackpoll, Black-throated Blue, Palm, and Yellow-rumped warblers can be observed here on a crisp October morning following the passage of a cold front.


Following the field edge north, look for a cluster of trees on a gentle rise. This location often yields Eastern Bluebirds in winter. Frequently, up to fifteen birds can be observed perched in these isolated trees. Other birds to expect here include Northern Flicker, Warbling Vireo, Swamp Sparrow (fall), and Eastern Kingbird. From the top of the rise, the parking lot is visible. Whether you walk the trail or the field’s edges, the trip back to the lot is likely to produce sightings of Barn Swallows, Chimney Swifts, Red-tailed Hawks, and Northern Mockingbirds. Savannah Sparrows can be easily flushed by walking through the field. An Eastern Screech-Owl can sometimes be heard calling after dark from the vicinity of the swamp just before the entrance to Wilder WMA. Listen for it from the parking lot.

The main trail around Erwin S. Wilder WMA is a leisurely walk through fields, swamp, and pine-oak habitats. However, it should be noted that the entire area is

replete with subsidiary hunting trails. Many of these trails are not well maintained, but provide access to the vast Hockomock WMA. Hockomock contains numerous fragmented parcels and covers 4389 acres. The wetland vegetation is extremely variable, with marsh grasses and cattails dominating some areas. In other areas are red maple, Atlantic white cedar, and shrub-swamp habitats. Most of the acreage in Hockomock is vegetated wetland, but there are some areas of dry ground throughout the site. There are several locations that provide easy access to the Hockomock WMA. These areas will be the subject of a future where-to-go article in *Bird Observer*.

The Snake River

A canoe trip along the Snake River in fall can be a very productive birding experience. The foliage at this time of year can be spectacular. There is one caveat, however. The first mile of the Snake River is, at times, seemingly impenetrable. The river is very narrow and shallow in some areas, but is surrounded by extensive marshland. Furthermore, the edges of the river are crowded with dense tangles and growth. This can make for a rather strenuous canoe trip. However, the birding can be very rewarding. Presumably, the trip would be easier in spring when the water level is higher and singing birds are conspicuous. However, the author's canoeing experience on the Snake River is limited to the fall season, so an account of the birds found at other times of the year will require further investigation. There is little question that riparian species like Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, Eastern Kingbirds, and Baltimore Orioles would be found along this corridor in the spring.

There is canoe access on Bay Road just over the Taunton/Norton border. Look for a small lot on the right side of the road just past the bridge. There are several places to take the canoe out of the water in the first two miles. The Snake River eventually flows into Lake Sabbatia in Taunton. Lake Sabbatia can be productive for migrant waterfowl in fall. Look for Ring-necked Ducks, Greater Scaup, Hooded Mergansers, and Common Mergansers. Birds to expect on the Snake River in October include Great Blue Heron, Belted Kingfisher, Wood Duck, Swamp Sparrow, and Yellow-rumped Warbler. At several locations, there are usually some mud flats containing shorebirds. Look for Greater Yellowlegs, and Pectoral and Solitary sandpipers in these areas. 

References

- Veit, R.R. and W.R. Petersen. 1993. *Birds of Massachusetts*. Lincoln, Massachusetts: Massachusetts Audubon Society.
- Griscom, L. and D. Snyder. 1955. *The Birds of Massachusetts. An Annotated and Revised Check List*. Salem, Massachusetts: Peabody Museum.

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