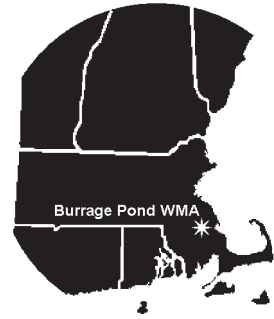


Burrage Pond Wildlife Management Area, Hanson/Halifax

Kathleen S. Anderson and Wayne R. Petersen

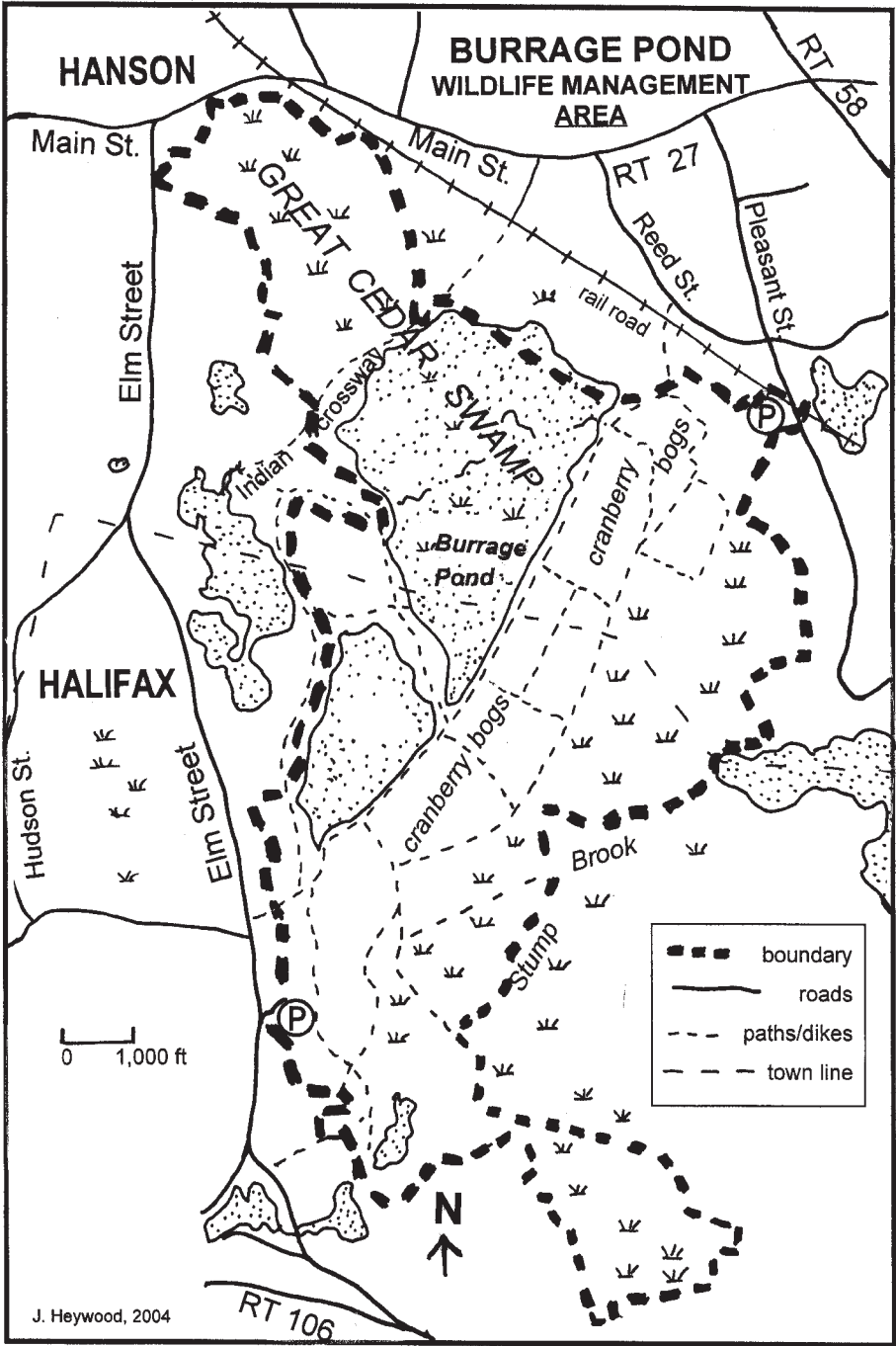


Background and History:

South Hanson Swamp. The name probably means little to most Massachusetts birders in these early years of the twenty-first century, but, for a fortunate few, it brings back vivid memories of thirty or forty years ago when birders eagerly headed for the mix of bog reservoirs, wet woodlands, cattail marshes, and cranberry bogs that at the time was locally called the South Hanson Swamp. Waterfowl in early spring and again in fall, an active night-heron colony and breeding rails in summer, land birds of great variety from spring through fall, and raptors any time. South Hanson Swamp was one of the best inland birding spots on the South Shore. Although birders shared the area with fishermen, hunters, and occasional walkers, there always seemed to be room for all.

Increasingly gated and off-limits to trespassers beginning about 1990, the area was all but forgotten by most birders except an intrepid few who surreptitiously walked in at times when cranberry-growing activities were unlikely. Fortunately, in 2002 the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, with the enthusiastic support of local conservationists and sportsmen, purchased approximately 1700 acres of the swamp from the Northland Cranberry Company and renamed it the Burrage Pond Wildlife Management Area (WMA). Today, birders once again have access to this splendid area, and the time has come to put it back on the list of worthy birding destinations for a new generation of birders.

To set the scene, a bit of history is in order. There seems to be no description of what the first Europeans found in the region; however, remaining woodland remnants suggest that for eons it was probably an Atlantic white cedar swamp, intermixed with red maple in some areas, with pines and oaks on the uplands. In other words, it most likely resembled other similar habitats elsewhere in southeastern Massachusetts, such as the Hockomock Swamp in Raynham and West Bridgewater, the Acushnet Cedar Swamp in New Bedford, and the Little Cedar Swamp in Middleborough. It was simply another of many such wooded swamps scattered across the flat and soggy terrain which comprised southeastern Massachusetts 12,000 years ago in the aftermath of the last Pleistocene glacial period. Stump Brook, the only natural outlet of nearby Monponsett Pond, flows southwest through the southern portion of the South Hanson Swamp to Robbins Pond in Halifax, which is the source of the Satucket River — a significant headwater tributary of the Taunton River. A well-traveled Indian crossway, still visible and locally called “The Tunk” (Tunk being the Wampanoag word for crossway or crossing), traversed the northern part of the swamp, connecting the villages of Mattakesett (around the ponds in adjacent Pembroke) with the Titicut region of Bridgewater. The Stump Brook and Snake River floodplain was also part of



the important Wampanoag canoe passage leading from Massachusetts Bay to Narragansett Bay.

Historically known as the Great Cedar Swamp (sharing that name with many similar swamps in southeastern Massachusetts), the region was logged for its valuable cedars in the 1700s and 1800s, then apparently ignored until industrialist Albert C. Burrage chose South Hanson as a site for several small industries. In fact, in 1905 Burrage was known to have dug out peat from Stump Pond to generate steam power for his enterprises. In 1931 the United Cape Cod Cranberry Company bought land from the Hanson Cedar Company (presumably the South Hanson Swamp) and began creating cranberry bogs in the area. These bogs were eventually sold to Cumberland Farms, which owned them from 1977 to 1990. Under Cumberland Farms ownership, more swampland was cleared for the creation of additional cranberry bogs, thus destroying much of the fine cattail marsh that some of us fondly recall. Ultimately the draining and clearing activities of portions of the South Hanson Swamp resulted in an enforcement action by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency that culminated in Cumberland Farms “gifting” 250 acres of high-quality wetland to the Massachusetts Audubon Society in 1996, a parcel now called Stump Brook Wildlife Sanctuary. While birders never felt totally welcome under Cumberland Farms’ ownership, once Northland Cranberry Company bought the bogs in the early 1990s, the entrance roads were totally gated, and there was no longer any legitimate access.

According to longtime birder Joseph F. Kenneally Jr., the birding history of the South Hanson Swamp began in the 1940s when Raymond J. Seamans, a local naturalist, woodsman, and most excellent birder from nearby Halifax, began exploring the swamp and finding interesting birds. In the December 1942 issue of the *Bulletin of the Massachusetts Audubon Society*, Seamans wrote an article called “Birds of Late Summer,” which soon led to exploratory visits by South Shore birders Adrian Whiting, John Foster, and others. (Editor’s note: The article is reprinted in toto at the end of this piece.)

In 1948 a teenaged Joe Kenneally, a young man with a rapidly growing interest in birds, learned from a school chum named Elton Seamans that his uncle knew of a place with lots of birds. Soon the boys were accompanying Raymond Seamans on field trips into the swamp. Joe vividly recalls seeing small flocks of Little Blue Herons and thirty or more Great Egrets on some of those early visits in the late 1940s and recollects hearing the continual calling of Pied-billed Grebes and Soras. For a boy who thought these wonderful birds could only be found in the Deep South, these memories remain fresh. Joe also remembers that it was Ray Seamans who first notified Ruth Emery (Massachusetts Audubon’s seminal Voice of Audubon) of a local place with many birds and great birding. Eventually, his accounts and those of other South Shore birders led to visits by the late Ludlow Griscom, Ruth Emery, Arthur and Margaret Argue, and other similarly distinguished field ornithologists of the day.

The South Shore Bird Club, established in 1946 by Don West and a coterie of area young people (many of them veterans recently returned from World War II), learned of the swamp and began making occasional field trips to the area.

Specifically, it was the report of 380 roosting Wood Ducks on September 24, 1950, by South Shore Bird Club recorder, Sibley Higginbotham, which first brought Ludlow Griscom to South Hanson Swamp. On June 30 the following year, Ruth Emery, Griscom, and others found a Glossy Ibis in the swamp, which at that time was a great rarity in Massachusetts. The discovery of nesting Great Egrets in the Black-crowned Night-Heron colony at South Hanson Swamp in 1954 established the first breeding record of this species for the state. This event put the South Hanson Swamp squarely on the map for a growing number of birders, and the rest was history...until, that is, the gates were locked in the 1990s.

The most recent chapter in the South Hanson Swamp's history opened in 2002, when the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife purchased 1738 acres from the Northland Cranberry Company and officially named it the Burrage Pond Wildlife Management Area. Henceforth this important new property will be managed exclusively for fisheries and wildlife habitat. A management plan to protect, enhance, and restore the varied natural habitats is currently in the development phase. A major focus of the management plan will be to ensure the safety of the 64 flumes (i.e., manmade water-control structures used for raising, lowering, and diverting water) associated with the existing 272 acres of cranberry bogs and dikes that comprise a portion of the area. Current access to this marvelous expanse of bogs, ponds, marshes, red maple and white cedar swamps, and mixed upland pine-oak forest is limited to foot traffic. Including Massachusetts Audubon's 250-acre Stump Brook Wildlife Sanctuary, the area now comprises a total of nearly 2000 acres of protected open space. An added bonus of this open space acquisition is that it provides a link previously lacking in the Bay Circuit Alliance's greenbelt of open space stretching from Kingston to the North Shore.



Commissioner David Peters and EOEA Secretary Bob Durand at the dedication of the Burrage Pond WMA on August 24, 2002. Photograph by Kathleen S. Anderson.

In somewhat of a celebratory effort, on June 15, 2003, the South Shore Bird Club returned to this historic favorite field-trip destination for the first time in many years in order to conduct a breeding-bird census of the area. This effort resulted in a tally of 81 species, 17 of which were confirmed as breeding (including a pair of Ospreys and a pair of American Kestrels), along with cumulative totals of 28 Eastern Kingbirds, 24 Warbling Vireos, 63 Gray Catbirds, 40 Yellow Warblers, 34 Baltimore Orioles, and 8 Orchard Orioles. The authors' records, along with those of Robert P. Fox, Joseph F. Kenneally Jr., and others, total 206 species actually observed on the property since regular visits to the area began in the mid-1940s, a figure representing a major percentage of inland species known to regularly occur in Massachusetts.

A Selected and Annotated List of Birds of the Burrage Pond WMA:

Needless to say, the status of certain species has changed through the years, both as a function of changing habitat conditions and as a result of changes in overall regional avian abundance. In an effort to offer readers a sense of the current and historical diversity of bird life at Burrage Pond WMA, an abbreviated description follows for some of the more notable bird species or groups that regularly utilize the area.

Waterfowl – Both historically and currently, migrant waterfowl represent one of the foremost features of the wetland portions of Burrage Pond WMA. An extensive area of dead, but standing, Atlantic white cedar (*Chamaecyparis thyoides*) and dense islands of water willow (*Decodon verticillatus*) in Burrage Pond provide shelter for modest numbers of Wood Ducks, American Black Ducks, Mallards, Blue-winged Teal, Northern Pintails, Green-winged Teal, Hooded Mergansers, and Common Mergansers in spring. Immediately following ice-out, the area is one of the best localities in southeastern Massachusetts to observe Ring-necked Ducks, sometimes in the hundreds, offering ample opportunity to observe courtship activity. Lesser numbers of Buffleheads and Common Goldeneyes typically join these diving ducks. In late summer and early fall Burrage Pond is a notable roosting area for Wood Ducks that come into the swamp from far and wide, with evening counts occasionally reaching the low hundreds. Burrage Pond also hosts a robust breeding population of Wood Ducks, in addition to a few secretive pairs of Hooded Mergansers.

Pied-billed Grebe – A regular spring migrant, formerly more common and possibly nesting; habitat change, largely as a result of wetland succession and conversion of some of the wetlands to cranberry bogs, is at least among the causes for recent scarcity.

Long-legged Waders – Herons, egrets, and ibises have long enjoyed an interesting history at this locality. As previously noted, the first breeding Great Egrets in Massachusetts occurred at Burrage Pond in 1954 and 1955. In addition, counts of 68 Great Egrets tallied at Burrage Pond during the great southern heron flight of 1948 (Cottrell 1949), and 72 in 1950 (Bailey 1955), were quite remarkable for that period. Similarly, as early as 1949 Glossy Ibises began to appear at Burrage Pond (Bailey 1955), a trend that continues to this day when water levels are appropriate, and a Tricolored Heron was recorded here in 1954 (Bailey 1955). Particularly noteworthy today is the fact that in the 1950s, Black-crowned Night-Herons were nesting inland at Burrage Pond, a situation currently unknown for this now declining and exclusively coastal nester. Finally, both bitterns have a history of regular occurrence in the cattail areas of the region. Members of the South Shore Bird Club historically recorded “pumping” American Bitterns in the swamp in May, but today this species has all but disappeared, although Least Bitterns were recorded in May several times in the 1990s.

Raptors – Despite the lack of any significant elevation, the openness of much of the Burrage Pond WMA can sometimes make hawk-watching productive, especially in spring. At this season small numbers of Northern Harriers, Sharp-shinned Hawks, American Kestrels, and Merlins regularly pass northeastward toward the coast, while

a pair or two of Red-shouldered Hawks continue to maintain a long and virtually unbroken tradition of nesting in the area. Recently, Ospreys have nested, a reflection of this species' gradual expansion in Massachusetts into inland nesting situations. Owls in the area, while never obvious, regularly include Great Horned Owls, and Northern Saw-whet Owls are almost certainly annual visitors, if not nesters.

Rails – Although portions of former cattail areas have ecologically changed or been converted to cranberry growing, Virginia Rails continue to maintain a robust population, as evidenced by a tally of eleven birds recorded on a breeding-bird survey in 2003. While King Rails and Soras are no longer regularly found these days, both species have been well documented in the past. Most notably absent today is the Common Moorhen, a species regularly reported at Burrage Pond at least into the early 1960s.

Passerines – A great many passerine species either breed or occur as migrants in the Burrage Pond area. Although the list is long, only a few deserve specific mention. Foremost of this group are the swallows, since all of the swallow species nesting in Massachusetts occur practically annually, and the otherwise uncommon Purple Martin is regular, due to several nearby breeding colonies. Burrage Pond is possibly one of the best locations in Massachusetts to find early migrant Tree Swallows, and there is a healthy population of breeding birds in the many dead trees and snags surrounding Burrage Pond. Besides the plethora of nesting Yellow Warblers, Ovenbirds, and Common Yellowthroats, the more extensive areas of Atlantic white cedar (particularly the Stump Brook section) routinely support a few pairs of Northern Waterthrushes, along with an occasional pair of Canada Warblers. During spring and fall migration the area's wet, swampy woods host small numbers of Rusty Blackbirds, and an unexpected surprise during a 2003 breeding-bird survey was the discovery of eight Orchard Orioles.

Unusual Species – Besides the birds already described, the authors would be remiss not to mention at least a few of the more unusual birds that have been recorded one or more times at the Burrage Pond WMA through the years. The list includes Great Cormorant, Eurasian Wigeon, Northern Shoveler, "Eurasian" Green-winged Teal, Bald Eagle, Caspian Tern, Black Tern, Long-eared Owl, Say's Phoebe, Western Kingbird, Loggerhead Shrike, Sedge Wren, Dickcissel, White-winged Crossbill, and, on March 26, 2004, two Sandhill Cranes flying over the swamp.

Flora and other Fauna:

In addition to the rich diversity of bird species, another 30 species of fish, amphibians, reptiles, and mammals, along with a plethora of invertebrates, have been recorded in the area. Always popular fishing spots, Upper and Lower Burrage Ponds offer excellent warm-water shoreline fishing along the main dike. Fish populations that were found in the ponds during a 2003 sample included golden shiner, brown bullhead, chain pickerel, white perch, pumpkinseed, bluegill, largemouth bass, black crappie, and yellow perch. Although the ponds are very fertile, shallow (average depth three to four feet), weedy, and difficult for human fishing, they are perfect for herons and egrets. Among the more noteworthy butterflies that have been documented on the



South Hanson Swamp Bog Reservoir. Photograph by Kathleen S. Anderson.

property are Hessel's hairstreak (*Callophrys hesseli*) and variegated fritillary (*Euptoieta claudia*).

A proper and thorough botanical survey of the property has never been completed; however, Raymond Seamans and the authors have personally recorded such locally unusual plant species as large whorled pogonia (*Isotria verticillata*), calapogon (*Calapogon tuberosus*), painted trillium (*Trillium undulatum*), white-fringed orchis (*Platanthera blephariglottis*), mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*), bunchberry (*Cornus canadensis*), and pink azalea (*Rhododendron nudiflorum*), among a diversity of other lovely species, during their visits through the years. Files at Massachusetts Audubon include a long list of interesting plants from Stump Brook Wildlife Sanctuary, many of which are almost certainly also found at adjoining Burrage Pond.

Burrage Pond WMA is accessible via Hawks Avenue in Hanson or from Elm Street in Halifax. To reach the Hanson entrance, proceed north (although it appears to be west) on Route 27, 0.3 mile from the intersection of Route 58 in Hanson, to Pleasant Street on the left. Take Pleasant Street for 0.7 mile to a railroad crossing. Immediately after crossing the railroad tracks turn right onto Hawks Avenue (sign on phone pole), and travel several hundred feet to a chain link fence on the left. A left turn here onto a dirt road leads to the WMA parking area. To access the Elm Street entrance in Halifax, continue north on Route 27 1.8 miles from the Route 58 intersection, to Elm Street on the left. Turn left on Elm Street, and proceed 2.4 miles to a dirt road on the left that leads to the WMA parking area. The regional headquarters for the Massachusetts Environmental Police is also located on the Burrage Pond WMA property.

Exploration of the Burrage Pond WMA is most easily undertaken on foot, particularly since the area is generally off limits to vehicular traffic. The easiest access to the area is via the main dikes leading from both the Elm Street and Hawks Avenue entrances. From these main dikes there is a network of connecting cross dikes that makes it possible for birders to gain access to practically all portions of the property. Although some of the smaller cross dikes are somewhat overgrown, the intrepid birder can nonetheless readily traverse them. For viewing waterfowl in Burrage Pond, the Hanson entrance often affords the best observation. Two cautionary notes for visitors are not to walk on the cranberry bog areas and to be watchful for poison sumac (*Rhus vernix*) along some of the more overgrown cross dikes. 🐦

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Kathleen (Betty) S. Anderson's interest in birds and conservation has led to a life-long active involvement in these areas. Her many achievements include her fifteen years as the Founding Director of the Manomet Bird Observatory and her current service as the chair of the Massachusetts Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Advisory Committee. **Wayne R. Petersen** is a Community Leader for the Swarovski Birding Community in North America, prior to which he served as Field Ornithologist for the Massachusetts Audubon Society for fifteen years. He is past Vice President of the American Birding Association, and he has made numerous contributions to birding literature as both author and editor.

Betty and Wayne each live within ten miles of the Burrage Pond WMA, and they have birded there together for over thirty years. They are grateful to the many people who contributed information for this article, but would particularly like to thank Philip Clemons (local history), Robert P. Fox (South Shore Bird Club records), and Joseph F. Kenneally, Jr. (early birding history), whose collective knowledge and memories added greatly to their own impressions and records.

Birds of Late Summer

Raymond J. Seamans

Do you know that super-birding-spot of southeastern Massachusetts, the Great Cedar Swamp? Roughly two square miles in extent, it was, prior to the recent development of several large cranberry bogs, very wild and inaccessible country. A network of good sandy roads has now been built up, and from one or another of these the eye may explore almost any part of the area. Besides the reclaimed land, there are a fine hemlock grove, a few knolls covered with pine and beech, a field of two or three acres, a number of small stumpy ponds, considerable meadow region, sand banks galore, and acre upon acre of the swamp proper—a hideous morass of unknown depths presided over by the spectral remains of drowned cedars. This is the place