

Gleanings from the Journal of William Brewster: Journey to Lake Umbagog

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Ornithologists were first introduced to the Umbagog region by Edward Samuels, who mentioned the area in his *Birds of New England*. This volume included casual observations made while Samuels was trout fishing there. In 1870, Henry Bailey and Ruthven Deane, two young bird collectors, were intrigued by the possibilities of the birds that had been described by Samuels, and they traveled to the region. Returning to Cambridge, Massachusetts — then the center of ornithological zeal and activity — the pair brought specimens of birds that were represented in very few private collections. This put the area on the map for future explorations. William Brewster began to visit the region in May, 1871, and continued to do so for a period of thirty-eight years. In the earlier days it took considerable trouble to get there, and careful planning and arrangements had to be made well in advance. Brewster never visited in April or early May. The forests were, according to Brewster, “infested by myriads of mosquitoes, midges, and black flies, even the briefest camping trips were seldom undertaken except in late summer or early autumn, when these grievous pests were no longer to be feared.”

“William Brewster loved Lake Umbagog intensely,” wrote Ludlow Griscom in 1938, when he completed the unpublished manuscript left when Brewster died in 1919. Brewster’s “Lake Umbagog region of Maine” is, in fact, more than half actually in the state of New Hampshire. Brewster was not interested in what records were from Maine or New Hampshire and did not explain locations with the same concentrated attention he did for Massachusetts. In the introduction to *Birds of the Lake Umbagog Region of Maine* (published by the Museum of Comparative Zoology in four parts from 1924 to 1938), Brewster writes, “many passages relating to it [visits to the lake] occur in my journal; as some of these will perhaps give a better understanding of it, I shall venture to draw from them rather freely as follows.” These are excerpted below. Enjoy.

June 13, 1879: Upton, Oxford County Maine

Cambridge River and shores of the lake near the Lake House

A clear and rather warm day with a very high west wind. Taking Oscar [his dog], I started off at about 8AM. We went first up the Cambridge River as far as the old pine stand where I left a nest (*D. maculosa*) (Magnolia Warbler) on the 11th. On the way up I saw several *Buteo pennsylvanicus* (Broad-winged Hawk) and shot a fine male from the top of a tall fir. Then after hunting some time for a nest of *E. flaviventris* (Yellow-bellied Flycatcher), the mosquitoes finally proved too much for us and we returned to the Lake House [an inn in Upton, Maine at the southeast corner of Lake Umbagog, just north of the outlet of the Cambridge River] at about 10AM.

Starting off again we paddled out to B. point [about a mile north of Lakeside, NH] where we ate our lunch. After spending about an hour at the point we sailed across to Brown's clearing on the south shore and worked slowly along from there towards the Lake House, landing at frequent intervals. The lake was exceedingly rough and we nearly swamped my little boat in crossing from B. point to the south shore. The woods were carpeted in places with beautiful wild flowers. There are apparently two species of "lady's slippers", one of a faint purple color, the other pure white.

Observations:

Icterus Baltimore (Baltimore Oriole): I have at length found this species here. This morning while standing upon the piazza I heard his loud familiar notes in the elm in front of my window. Altho' he sang six or eight times I did not succeed in getting a sight at him.

Vireo philadelphicus (Philadelphia Vireo): I both heard and saw the male above the mill this morning. I also listened to one that was singing on B. point and finally shot at and wounded him but could not find him. I can now instantly distinguish their song from that of the Red eye. It is feebler, higher and does not flow so smoothly. They sing much in the tops of the highest trees. The one on B. point was in the crest of a mighty yellow birch, at least a hundred feet above the ground, and the branch was lashed wildly about by the rushing wind that floated the leaves and swung the whole tree top thro' many feet of air, yet he hardly paused in his strain even when the fiercest gusts swept by.

Picoides arcticus (Arctic Three-toed Woodpecker): I visited the nest on the Cambridge River this morning. The parents were making frequent trips with food and the young came to the mouth of the hole to receive it keeping up an incessant chattering that could be heard 100 yards away. In no instance did either parent enter the hole but they simply hung beneath it and placed the food in the eager hungry mouths that lined the opening.

Dendroica maculosa (Magnolia Warbler): Nest with 4 young at least a week old and one egg with a dead embryo.

Otus wilsonianus (Long-eared Owl): Saw one in the woods near Brown's clearing. He was pursued by a mob of enraged, noisy crows and was forced constantly to take wing.

Junco hyemalis (Slate-colored Junco): A nest in earth bank of fallen tree, beautifully concealed by a hanging curtain of earthy roots. Contents five young about a week old.

June 16, 1879

Upton, Oxford County, Maine

Cambridge River

A continuation of yesterday's storm: wind east with steady rain all day.

Thro' the forenoon I remained in the house but after dinner I donned my rubber coat and boots and started for the woods, or rather for the Cambridge River. I paddled up only a short distance above the rapids and landing, spent most of the P.M. in searching for a nest of *Emp. flaviventris* (Yellow-bellied Flycatcher) but without success. I did however find two vireo nests high up in birch trees, which may prove to be those of *V. philadelphicus*. The mosquitoes singularly enough, hardly molested me at all today.

Observations:

Nyctala acadica (Northern Saw-whet Owl) While forcing my way thro' a dense cedar swamp this afternoon a beautiful little adult of this species flew from a branch about 3 feet above my head and alighted again some ten paces off. I tried to creep up near enough to knock him down with a pole (I had left my gun at home on account of the rain) but he was much too shy to allow me to get within reach, and taking another short flight he settled on a higher branch. Before I could get beneath him it startled off and disappeared. He seemed very animated in all his motions and undoubtedly saw quite as well in the gloom of this stormy afternoon as he would have done at night. His flight was noiseless and essentially Owl like and I noticed that he alighted in their peculiar way. There were a number of small birds within a few yards of him but they made no unusual fuss and indeed did not seem to notice him at all.

Carpodacus purpureus (Purple Finch) This bird like the Robin occurs miles away from the clearings in the very heart of the forest. The song of all the males differs markedly from that of Mass(achusetts) birds, in being rather shorter and with a wild ringing tone that makes it on the whole more beautiful if not so finished.

Turdus migratorius (American Robin) Breeds miles away from the clearings. Song does not appreciably differ from that of Mass[achusetts] birds


Seiurus noveboracensis (Northern Waterthrush) I rarely hear them now except in early morning.

June 24, 1879

Upton, Oxford County, Maine to Boston, Mass.

A clear perfect June Day. Rising at 4AM we had an early breakfast and with Mr. Ryerson to drive started on my return home. As we left the lake at about 5AM, a heavy fog cloud enveloped everything chilling us to the very marrow, and casting a gloom over the early morning that only a few of the more daring songsters seemed able to defy. I heard from the gloomy evergreen forest the songs of a few *Turdus swainsoni* and the clear ringing notes of the White-throated Sparrow came at intervals

from the roadside thickets as we were ascending the hill. But as we reached its summit we found ourselves emerging from the obscurity as we gradually climbed up above the sea of fog that shrouded the lower lake valley. When we finally reached the hilltop the sun was shining brightly and the sky perfectly clear. Looking back over the lake the eye rested upon one vast expanse of billowing fog that concealed from view everything beneath and beyond. Its upper surface was finely tinted by the sun's rays which however absolutely failed to penetrate the dense masses below.

The drive to Bethel was one of great enjoyment. The grand mountain scenery thro' the notch was seen under exceptionally favorable conditions. In places where the mountain summits still through their protecting shadow over some little stretch of meadow the grass was fairly frosted with bead-like dew drops, and the leaves in the forest were fresh and wet with moisture. A species of low shrub like maple that grew in great profusion by the roadside was covered with clusters of pendant-like blossoms. I noticed that its stem was blotched with grayish, but the leaves were very much like those of the rock-maple. Mr. Ryerson called it bush maple. We reached Bethel at 9AM and taking the 9:45 train I arrived in Boston at 5:30PM. As the cars swept thro' Massachusetts I noticed the farmers at work in the hay fields and many of them had already been mown- a striking contrast with the condition of the season at the lake where haying never begins before July. 

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NORTHERN SAW-WHET OWL BY GEORGE C. WEST