

Nagog Pond: Inland Gull and Waterfowl Haven

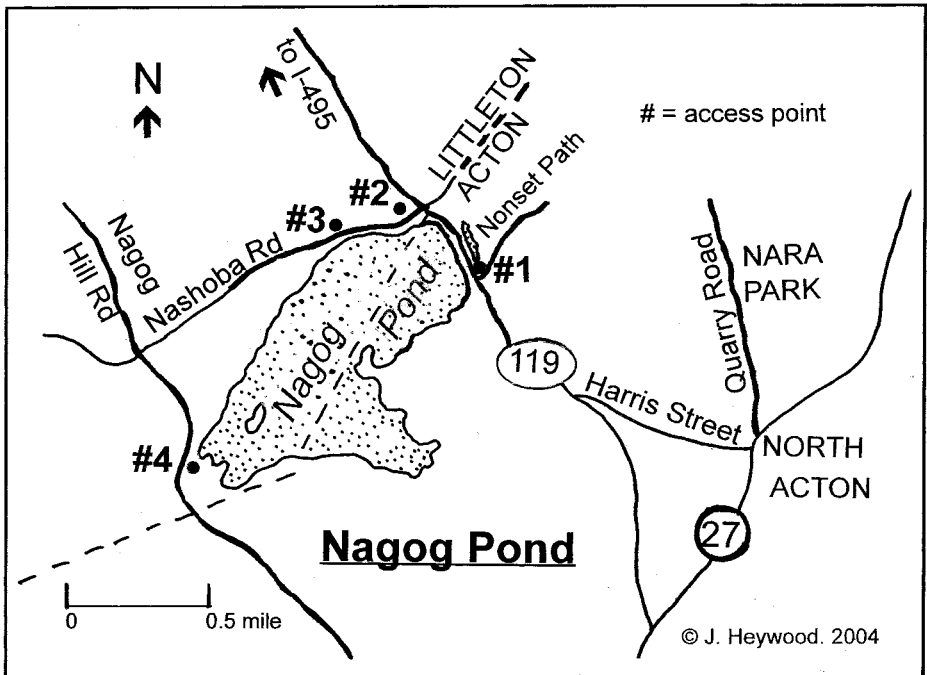
Mike Resch

Nagog Pond, actually a good-sized lake, is an excellent inland location for gulls and waterfowl during migration. Over the last ten years I have seen seven gull species and twenty-five species of waterfowl and related birds there, including several rarities. Fall gull numbers well into the thousands are possible at Nagog Pond — one day I conservatively estimated over 5000 gulls on the water! (I've heard “Nagog” pronounced with both a long and a short “a” and cannot attest to an “authentic” pronunciation.)

Located on the Littleton/Acton line along Route 119 in western Middlesex County, Massachusetts, this 284-acre lake is a water-supply reservoir for the Town of Concord. As such, boating and fishing are not allowed. This lack of human activity is undoubtedly a big reason why Nagog Pond is so attractive to migrant waterfowl, which indeed can be quite tame. Gulls are present on the lake for bathing, drinking, and roosting, following foraging at a nearby feedlot located on private land a short distance to the northeast.

Gull Species and Frequencies

Migrant gulls begin to arrive in small numbers in September and peak later in the fall, generally in November. Daily counts during that season are 1000 or more in most years. Totals then tend to drop, but increase again when the lake is partially iced over,



which typically occurs in early to mid-December. As with many other aquatic locations that attract large numbers of gulls, these birds seem to favor conditions where they can bathe and drink but still have an opportunity to roost on the ice. The numbers drop dramatically when the lake freezes solid, which typically occurs late in December or sometimes in January. A small flock of 100 to 200 birds will generally last throughout the winter until the lake melts in the spring. Gull numbers increase only slightly in spring, with totals never coming close to those seen in the fall.

Many fall days will feature six species of gulls, with Iceland, Lesser Black-backed, and Glaucous gulls being of prime interest. Herring Gulls of all ages are by far the most common. Great Black-backed Gulls are very numerous, typically representing up to twenty to thirty percent of the flock, with all plumages present. Surprisingly, Ring-billed Gulls are quite rare, many times being outnumbered by the actual rarities. These are detailed below.

Iceland Gull (*Larus glaucooides*). These are the most common of the three target gulls, with as many as five birds seen on one day, though seeing one on any given day is not guaranteed. Most Icelanders are first-winter birds, with occasional second-year birds mixed in. One adult was seen one winter.

Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus*). “Lessers” are seen on most, but not all, days when significant gull numbers are present. My highest total in a day is three birds, although one per day is typical. Most birds are adults or subadults, with an occasional first-year bird seen. One very dark-backed bird seen numerous times one fall was possibly of the *intermedius* race.

Glaucous Gull (*Larus hyperboreus*). The frequency of Glaucous Gulls is about the same as for Lesser Black-backs. One or two are seen most days, with two as my single-day maximum. All birds have been in first-winter plumage.

As for extreme rarities, two sightings are notable. On December 2, 1994, I found an adult gull that may have been a California Gull swimming among Herrings and a few Ring-bills (details were submitted to the Massachusetts Avian Records Committee but the sighting was not accepted). Then, a week later, I saw a probable first-winter Thayer’s Gull. Unfortunately, the bird was not sufficiently cooperative to allow me to confirm the sighting. Whenever the gull flock numbers in the thousands, almost anything is possible, though identification of the rarer Larids can be a very difficult process.

Gull-Viewing Strategies

Gull-watching can be a frustrating part of our birding activities. Not only can identification be problematic, but many times the birds are distant and/or partially hidden in a flock. Here are some tips to try to increase your chances of finding the rarer gulls at Nagog Pond.

Only a portion of Nagog Pond is visible from, and close to, any of the viewing locations described below (and a portion of the southeast part of the lake is not visible

from any accessible spot). So it is important to look from most, if not all, of the viewing locations, and of course bring a scope.

There is an almost constant movement of the gulls between Nagog Pond and their feeding location to the northeast, so there is a good chance that your targets may not be resting on the lake at any given time. If you don't see them at first, just give it some time, and maybe they'll arrive. You might also try nearby Nara Park in Acton where a portion of the same gull flock will also roost (see below for details).

A good way of seeing the gulls up close is to come when the lake is partially iced-over (usually in December). The last open water is generally toward the northern part of the lake. As a result, the gulls tend to bathe and roost closer to most of the access spots during that time.

Waterfowl and Related Species

A typical fall day at Nagog Pond will feature quite a high diversity of waterfowl, with twelve to fifteen species to be expected. The vast majority of the waterfowl seen are Canada Geese and the more common inland migrant dabblers and divers. But what gives birding Nagog Pond a special edge is the rather high frequency of waterfowl more typical of coastal locations. I normally spend more time on the gulls at Nagog Pond than on the waterfowl. Undoubtedly, more time spent with the waterfowl could result in an even greater list of species.

As mentioned above, I've found that many of the waterfowl are rather tame and quite approachable. A slow and quiet approach to the water's edge at most of the access points will often result in great close-up views of a nice flock of ducks. Brief summaries of each group of waterfowl are provided below.

Loons. Commons are regular migrants in small numbers, once as many as five. Red-throateds have been seen.

Grebes. Horneds are uncommon; Pied-billeds are occasional. A Red-necked was seen once.

Cormorants. Double-cresteds are rare at Nagog. A Great was present once.

Geese. Canadas are abundant. An immature White-fronted was seen several times one year.

Dabbling Ducks. Mallards are very common. Black Ducks, American Wigeon, and Green-winged Teal are uncommon but expected on most trips, with as many as twenty-five of each species sometimes found. Pintails and Gadwalls are occasional, with numbers never exceeding a pair for either species. A Eurasian Wigeon made an appearance one year.

Aythya Ducks. Ring-neckeds are rather common, numbering in excess of 200 on peak days. Both Greater and Lesser scaups are occasional, typically in very small numbers.

Scoters. I've seen a White-winged on two occasions; once four birds were present.

Goldeneyes and Buffleheads. Common Goldeneyes are found in small numbers (sometimes up to ten birds) on almost every trip later in the fall. Buffleheads are rather common, frequently with one or more flocks of twenty to thirty birds.

Mergansers. Hoodeds and Commons are rather common and are seen almost every trip. Loose flocks totaling up to twenty are typical. I've seen Red-breasteds a couple of times.

Ruddy Ducks. Small flocks are seen most years, typically staying on Nagog Pond for a week or two at a time. One year a flock of nearly 100 birds was present.

American Coots (admittedly not a waterfowl species). Small flocks are seen most years, though sometimes numbering close to 100.

Access Points

Access to view Nagog Pond is rather limited. As shown on the accompanying map, four locations are listed, but only #4 on Nagog Hill Road affords good parking opportunities. At all other locations, birders are urged to use caution to ensure they have parked completely off the road.

#1 – Route 119. Park on the very wide shoulder on the northeast side of Route 119 just northwest of a road called Nonset Path. Traffic is heavy and fast on Route 119, so I suggest setting your scope up even with or behind your car. This location is the closest for viewing the northeast part of the lake and can be good during partial and complete freeze-ups, since the gulls frequently are closest to the north end of the lake during these times.

#2 – Nashoba Road. There is a very small brushy shoulder on the northwest side of the road just after turning southwest off Route 119. This spot can be very muddy in wet conditions. As with #1, this is a good location during partial freeze-up.

#3 – Nashoba Road. Two very small shoulders are present on the northwest side of the road before the mailbox for house number 27. Alternatively, you can walk from location #2. Unfortunately, the brush between Nashoba Road and the lake is thick in most places, so you need to find a location along the road where a path may be evident to take you to the water's edge. This is the best viewing location to see the largest part of the northern end of Nagog Pond. Waterfowl can be at your feet here. Directly southeast across the lake from this location is the most likely spot for gulls to swim before the ice forms. Also, on the southeast edge of the lake opposite this location are a number of rocks that are favorite perches for the gulls. Although quite far away, this is a good location to check for rarities. One Christmas count an immature Bald Eagle was perched on these rocks. Because you are looking to the southeast from #3, early morning viewing can be difficult on a sunny day. As a side note, the hillside on the northwest side of the road here has a lot of bushes and shrubs with berries that are attractive to waxwings, mockingbirds, and robins in fall and winter.

#4 – Nagog Hill Road. Parking is on the east side of the road at a small path to the southern edge of the lake, which you can take to the water's edge. Wide dirt shoulders on both sides of the road mark this parking spot where Nagog Hill Road is closest to the water. This location gives you close views of the southern end of the lake and the south side of a small island, with a number of rocky perches in the area. This is a favorite spot for many of the waterfowl species, and gulls enjoy using the rocks as perches (one year a Lesser Black-back used one rock as favorite perch for several weeks). Canada Geese enjoy grazing in the adjacent fields. I've seen Red-bellied Woodpeckers here on many trips and once found a flock of Wild Turkeys in one field.

One additional nearby spot to check for gulls is Nara Park. To reach this location, turn right off Nashoba Road onto Route 119, and continue southeast on 119 for about 0.8 mile to Harris Street. Turn left on Harris, go to the end of this road (0.6 mile), then left again on Route 27. Then take an immediate left onto Quarry Road. Nara Park is about 0.3 mile ahead on the right. This community park includes a small pond that in some years is also favored by the gulls for roosting and bathing. The same gulls seen at Nagog Pond rest here as well, but viewing can be closer here, and there is considerable movement of the birds between Nara Park and Nagog Pond. However, in some years park management makes efforts to prevent gulls from roosting on the pond and adjacent beach. Depending on the success of these efforts, gulls may or may not be present at this location in any appreciable numbers. Other birds to look for at this site include Horned Larks, sometimes present at the sandy beach, and the occasional Northern Shrike or flock of Eastern Bluebirds in the ornamental trees planted at the park. 📍

Mike Resch has been an avid birder all his life, previously living in Maryland, Florida, and Pennsylvania. He moved to Massachusetts in 1993 to take a job in an office building at Nagog Park in Acton. Little did he know that this was directly along the route that thousands of gulls use to travel between Nagog Pond and their favorite feeding location. Nice to have Iceland and Glaucous gulls fly by your office window! The biggest part of Mike's birding focus is state listing. His Total Ticks (sum of all state lists) just exceeded the 10,000 milestone.



ICELAND GULLS BY DAVID LARSON

MASSWILDLIFE NEWS

MAN PLEADS GUILTY IN BALD EAGLE SHOOTING

A Pittsfield man was convicted November 4 in federal court of killing a bald eagle last October in Cheshire. Joseph Donahue, of Pittsfield, Massachusetts, pleaded guilty to violating the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act and the Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

In October of 2003, a pheasant hunter came across the carcass of an immature bald eagle and reported it to MassWildlife Western District Manager, Tom Keefe, who picked up the bird. The carcass was x-rayed by local veterinarian, Dr. Keith Beebe of Waconah Mobile Veterinary Services. Numerous metal fragments were found that were later verified as shot from a shotgun. The Massachusetts Environmental Police and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service were notified and began an investigation. "The sportsman who found the bird deserves a lot of credit for reporting his finding," said Special Agent Tom Ricardi Jr., of the United States Fish & Wildlife Service. "Tom Keefe's action in obtaining x-rays was also very helpful as it allowed us to take immediate action with the investigation. We appreciate Dr. Beebe's assistance."

Several newspaper stories ran in the Pittsfield area after the bird was discovered, and several sportsmen who had been hunting in the area prior to the discovery of the bird came forward to assist local and federal law enforcement during the investigation. These witnesses stated that a large bird was seen in the air above a field in which several parties were hunting. The witnesses identified Donahue as the shooter saying they saw him raise his gun and shoot, and then saw the bird fall. The sportsmen said that, although they were uncertain about the exact species of the bird, due to its large size and wing span, they knew it was a raptor and therefore could not legally be hunted. "I can't stress how much easier our job became, once we heard from witnesses," said Ricardi. "Their action in coming forward demonstrates how sportsmen will not tolerate illegal and unethical behavior from others."

Sentencing has been scheduled for January. A violation of the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act is a federal misdemeanor with a maximum term of imprisonment of one year and a fine of up to \$100,000. The Migratory Bird Treaty Act carries a maximum term of imprisonment of up to six months and a fine of up to \$15,000. The case was investigated by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Office of Law Enforcement and the Massachusetts Environmental Police. For more information, contact: Samantha Martin, United States Attorney's Office at 617-748-3139.

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