

# Birding the Brattleboro Retreat Meadows

*Hector Galbraith and Whitney Nichols*



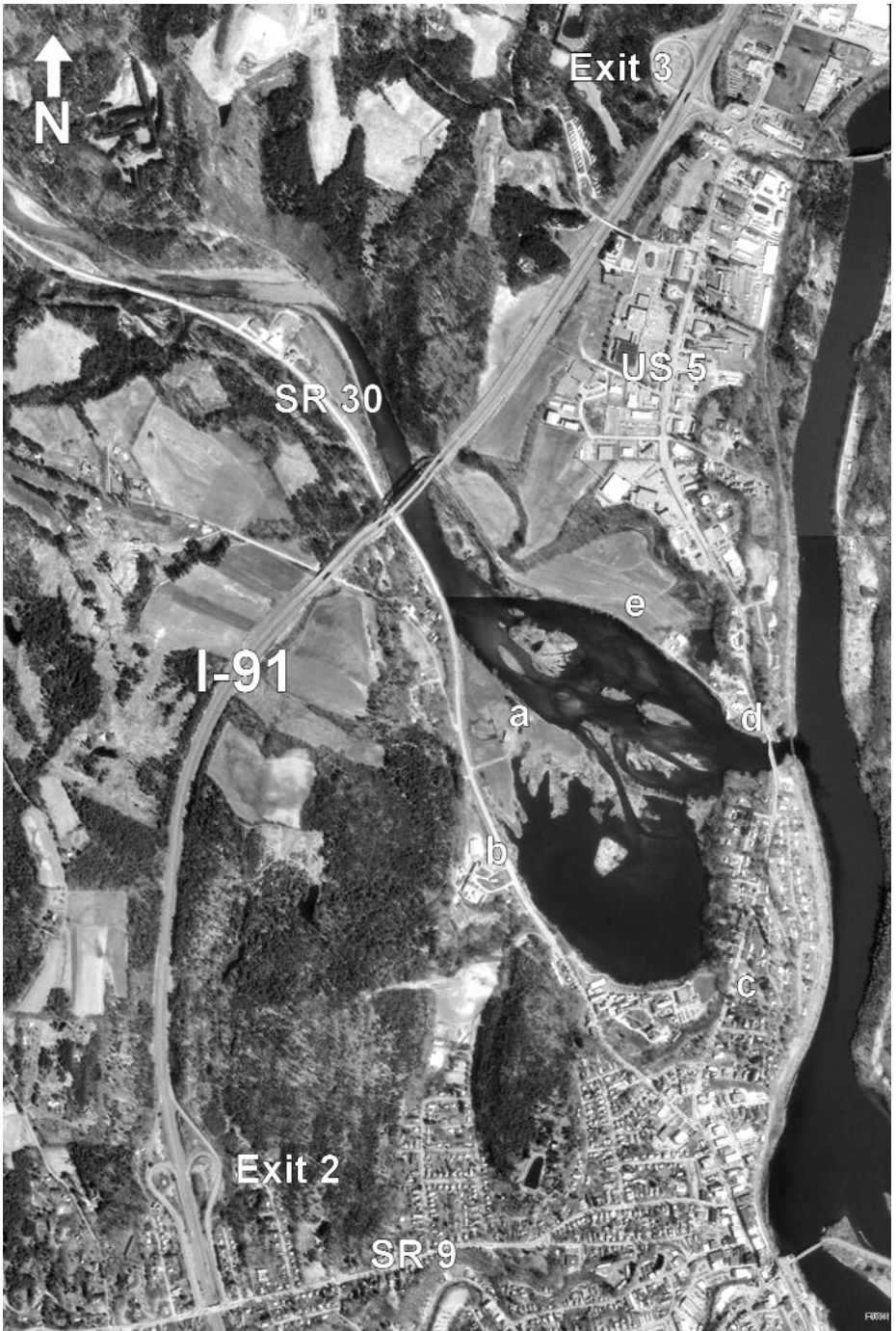
## Introduction

Birders from Massachusetts and other southern New England states who are driving north through southern Vermont on Interstate 91 pass close to one of the most consistently productive lowland birding sites in the state. If you glance to your right as you drive over the tall bridge just beyond Exit 2 and before Exit 3, you will see below you an extensive wetland area at the confluence of the West and Connecticut rivers. This is the Brattleboro Retreat Meadows, which, over the years, has consistently produced as many unusual and interesting birds as anywhere else in southern Vermont or western Massachusetts. To take a few examples: there was the Green-tailed Towhee that wintered in 1989-90, the Pacific Loon in 1993, the Tundra Swans in 2003 and 2004, and the Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow and Cackling Goose in 2004.

The Meadows are named for the Brattleboro Retreat, a private psychiatric facility that has been in operation since 1832. Before about 1909 the Retreat Meadows were just that — fields where hay was grown and cattle were grazed. They must have been largely dry at that time because local fairs and other events were regularly held there. In the early days of aviation the Meadows were used as a temporary airfield. During an air show in August 1922, a crash occurred, and three passengers were killed. With the construction of the dam on the Connecticut River at Vernon to generate electricity for local industry, however, the water levels in the West and Connecticut rivers were raised high enough at Brattleboro to inundate the lower-lying pastures. For a time, the local townspeople and farmers fought against the rising water and attempted to reclaim the flooded land, but they soon gave up and let nature take its course. Vestiges of concrete retaining walls that were built to unsuccessfully keep the river out can still be seen. The flooding has resulted in an ecologically rich area of shrub, cattail, and sedge wetlands, riparian woodland, and open shallow water.

## Access

To reach the Retreat Meadows from Interstate 91, take Exit 2, and drive east on Route 9 until you intersect Route 5 in downtown Brattleboro (0.9 mile). Turn left on Route 5, and in 0.2 mile you will reach the intersection where Route 30 branches left from Route 5. Continue straight on Route 5 to reach the Marina (d), or follow Route 30 to the left to reach areas (b) (boat ramp) and (a) (Water Filtration Plant). These are the three main access points to the Retreat Meadows (see map on page 82). To scan the most productive areas of open water, marsh fringe, and mudflats (exposed in the fall and at other times of low water and during drawdowns), the access points at the boat launch area on Route 30 (b on map) and the Marina (d) are best. To gain access



to the shrub and sedge meadows, a surfaced single-lane road, becoming a trail, leads along the southern perimeter of the Water Filtration Plant, or WFP (a). If you plan to walk this trail, you better have good waterproof footwear, since the first few yards of it often flood after rains, and it is otherwise usually very muddy. If you chose to park at the Marina side, you can drive down the lane that runs north from the Marina and park at the gravel parking area 100 yards farther (e). This allows you to walk along the continuation of the lane scanning the fields to your right (often good for sparrows, shorebirds, and geese) and the open water, marsh, and mudflats to your left.

### **Birding in the migration seasons**

For us, the wonderful thing about birding on the Retreat Meadows is the sense of uncertainty. Stepping out of your car during the migration seasons, you can never be sure just what you are about to see; if the birding history of the area over the last few decades teaches us anything, it is that the wetlands of the Meadows are often a migrant hot spot. Of course, you can go there on any one day and see little, but those days are more than made up for when something exciting and unexpected pops up.

Fall is often the better of the two migration seasons, especially during inclement weather when it is foggy, or when rain-bearing fronts are moving through. At such times the diversity of species is much higher than in more settled or clearer conditions when the birds fly right over on their ways north or south.

During the migration seasons it is best to scan the open water for waterfowl and shorebirds from the Route 30 (b) or the Marina (d) access points. These areas are where Tundra Swans, Pacific Loons, Cackling Geese, Mute Swans (a rarity in southern Vermont, believe it or not), and Lesser Black-backed Gulls have been seen. During both migration seasons many waterfowl species use the Meadows. In the spring these are mainly dabbling ducks such as Blue-winged and Green-winged teal. In the fall diving ducks such as Common Goldeneye and Bufflehead occur, together with Brant and (occasionally) Black Scoter and Long-tailed Duck. Also in fall, up to fifty or more Hooded Mergansers have been recorded. Red-necked, Pied-billed, and Horned grebes and Common Loons have also been seen during migration, as have Glaucous, Iceland, and Bonaparte's gulls. If the water level is low enough to expose mudflats, Wilson's Snipe, Least Sandpipers, and Greater and Lesser yellowlegs may occur in numbers, together with the occasional Pectoral Sandpiper. One tip worth bearing in mind is that combining kayaking with birding can be very productive and may allow a close approach to many of these species.

Don't neglect the area that you can access via the WFP (a): you might get only your lower half soaked in the long wet vegetation. On the other hand, if you get lucky and are patient and observant enough, you might hit the jackpot. This, after all, is where the Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow turned up in October 2004. Also during passage seasons, Peregrine Falcon, Merlin, and Northern Harrier occur in the WFP area.

If you like being confused by little brown jobs, the sedge and scrub area beyond the WFP is the place! During fall it is possible to see up to nine or ten sparrow species

over a day or two (more, if you sneakily include the House Sparrow). Lincoln's Sparrows are fairly common in the fall, and two or three individuals in a day are not unusual. Field and Savannah sparrows are pretty common, with Vesper an occasional visitor. Later in the fall the area is inundated with White-throated and White-crowned sparrows. Swamp and Song sparrows are abundant throughout the migration and breeding seasons.

During migration, the scrub and sedge areas beyond the WFP can also be good for warblers: Wilson's and Palm warblers are regular in small numbers, and all the other common warblers occur, as does Blue-gray Gnatcatcher. Yellow-throated Vireo is occasional on migration. It is also worth checking out some of the damp muddy pools in the grass meadows at the WFP, since up to six Solitary Sandpipers have been seen in a single day in the fall.

### **Summer and Winter**

Given the available habitats, you might expect the Retreat Meadows to support a richer breeding bird community than they actually do. Unfortunately, however, levels of human disturbance are high during the summer months. Numbers of fishermen, canoeists, and kayakers are usually present from dawn till dusk. This may be the reason that typical reed-bed breeders like bitterns and rails are not usually present, although Marsh Wrens, Swamp Sparrows, and Wood Ducks do breed, and Great Egrets occur in late summer.

The scrub and sedge areas are, however, good during the breeding season for some species that are not too common in Vermont. Carolina Wrens, Red-bellied Woodpeckers, and Northern Mockingbirds (attracted by lush multiflora roses), all southern species, are as abundant here as anywhere in Vermont. Other breeders and summer visitors include Great Blue Herons, Canada Geese, hordes of Red-winged Blackbirds, Willow Flycatchers, Warbling Vireos, and Belted Kingfishers.


Most winters, the open water and wetlands freeze over from about late December until March. Then they are frequented only by Ring-billed or Great Black-backed gulls (scavenging from the ice fishermen) and a few lingering Song and Swamp sparrows, Northern Cardinals, and Northern Mockingbirds. At this season, you might want to watch out for Horned Larks, Snow Buntings, and American Pipits in the open fields close to the marina.

### **Nearby areas**

If you have time left over after your trip to the Retreat Meadows and are not fully satiated, it may be worth visiting the nearby Hinsdale Setbacks. This is an area of riparian woodland, cattail marsh, and wetlands on the New Hampshire side of the Connecticut River — actually a recess from the river, joined to it on the north by a channel and separated from it to the south by a mud bar overgrown with alders and willows. To get there from Retreat Meadows, return to Brattleboro center, cross the river, and proceed south on Route 119. After about five miles you will come to a place where the old road forks off to the right. Take this, and park at the boat launch area

fifty yards down. From there, you can explore the woodland and marshes by following the old railroad bed.

The Hinsdale Setbacks are at their best during the migration seasons when they provide habitat for warblers, vireos, orioles, tanagers, and other songbirds. Osprey are also regular at this time. The Setbacks can also be worth checking during the winter: if there is any open water on the river, waterfowl may be numerous. Tundra Swans, numbers of Snow Geese, Long-tailed Ducks, Barrow's Goldeneyes, and Iceland and Glaucous gulls have all been recorded. You might also be lucky enough to see the Bald Eagles that nest a mile or so downriver and regularly harry the waterfowl at Hinsdale.

So, when in southeastern Vermont, consider a visit to the Retreat Meadows and environs. Be sure to record your sightings and send them to the Vermont Institute of Natural Science (VINS) in Woodstock. Help to formulate and gain a clearer understanding of the nature and occurrence of species and numbers of birds in an often undercovered, but potentially productive part of the state. And, you never know, you might be lucky! 

***Hector Galbraith** moved to the Brattleboro area of Vermont a couple of years ago, after spending twelve years in Boulder, Colorado. Professionally, he is an avian ecologist and ecotoxicologist, doing research into the ecological impacts of climate change and contaminants. He is currently serving as a County Coordinator for the Vermont Breeding Bird Atlas. What spare time he has is spent birding in Vermont or farther afield. **Whitney Nichols**, an experienced and active Vermont birder, has records of his observations at the Retreat Meadows from 1966. He has led trips both locally and abroad, to destinations including the Pribilofs, Sri Lanka, the Amazon, Bhutan, and Tanzania, and has served as well as a member of the Vermont Bird Records Committee. He has been heavily involved in each of the Vermont Breeding Bird Atlas projects — for the first as both a Regional Coordinator and a Species Account Author. Whitney works as an educational consultant/diagnostician.*



SWAMP SPARROW BY DAVID LARSON