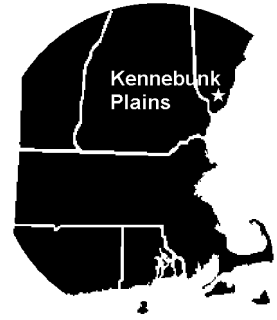


Birding the Kennebunk Plains Wildlife Management Area

Scott Cronenweth

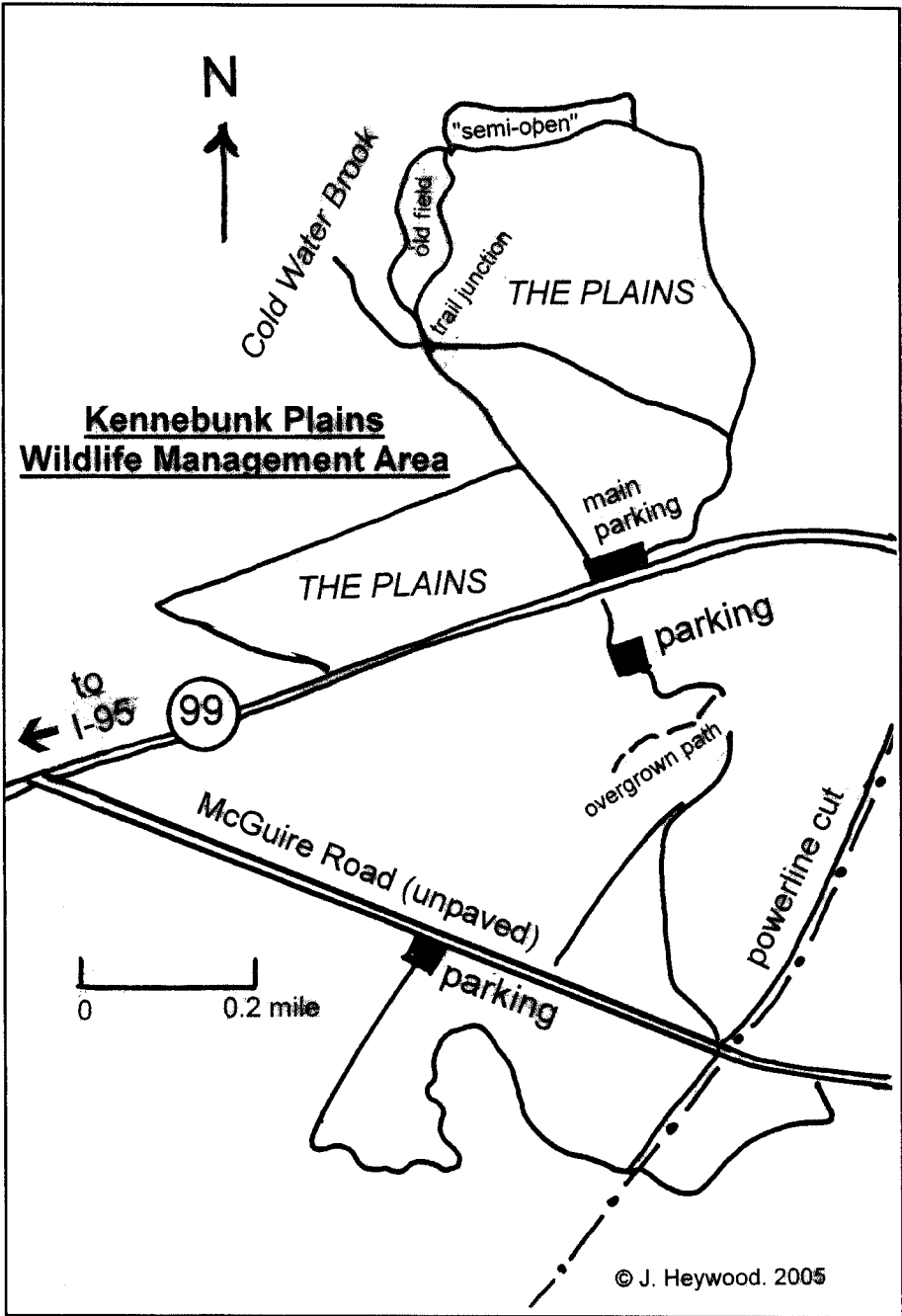


One late spring morning, on the still and silent edge of sunrise, you find yourself in a landscape apart from time. An island of grass, flat and nearly treeless, it floats like a sole survivor in a sea of houses, roads, and woodlots. This place does not rush out to greet you with extravagant vistas or interpretive signage. It holds back, hunkers down. Cloaked in hushed purples and browns, the terrain itself seems to drift like mist in the soft dawn light. You feel conspicuous, like you ought to crouch. You begin walking; expectant, attuned to subtleties. Insects buzz faintly. Distant crows *caw*. Was that a chip note? Is that a bird or a milkweed pod? Why is everything around here so...low-profile? Then all at once the calls of Upland Sandpipers roll out over the land, mournful yet exultant — *wii-ee-LEE-ooooo*! Some ancient magic has been worked, and the scene is transformed. Now song, color, and movement well up all around you. Sparrows perch on every snag. Bobolinks babble overhead. Meadowlarks chortle almost at your feet. Suddenly you can't decide where to look next. Welcome to the Kennebunk Plains.

There is literally no place left like the Kennebunk Plains. With the retreat of the most recent glacial ice some 12-14,000 years ago, meltwater streams formed an outwash plain here, depositing the sand and gravel that give the area its distinctive "barrens" character. The soil holds water poorly, creating a landscape adapted to recurrent fire and resistant to drought. The 600+ acres of sand plain grassland at this 1200-acre site represent the largest remaining fragment of this exceedingly rare and threatened habitat in all of New England. Many of the species found here have their backs against the wall, making the Kennebunk Plains ecosystem one of Maine's top conservation priorities.

The management focus of the area is to sustain maximum habitat for three state-endangered species: the Grasshopper Sparrow, the northern black racer, and the northern blazing-star. Many other rare species, like the Upland Sandpiper and the diminutive upright bindweed, also benefit. Along with the adjacent Wells Barrens, the Kennebunk Plains complex supports populations of fourteen rare animals and plants. Mammals found here include fisher, mink, snowshoe hare, New England cottontail, coyote, red fox, raccoon, and wandering moose and black bear. Notable flowering plants include blue boadflax, flowering dogbane, frostweed, and wood lily. Among the principal grasses are little bluestem, poverty grass, and woodland sedge.

Adjoining the open grassland that forms the core of the Kennebunk Plains are a variety of other natural communities including heath barrens; pitch pine/scrub oak woodlands around the margin of the grassland; and outwash seepage hardwood forest with red maple, poplar, gray birch, white birch, and white oak on the steep, sandy slopes of the alluvial swamp where groundwater lies close to the surface. The area



also includes the drainage of Cold Water Brook, a tributary of the Mousam River that still harbors native brook trout. The terrain here is flat to very gently rolling, except where moving water has carved deeply into the soft substrate.

The Plains are not exactly pristine but have been kept at an early successional stage due to natural wildfires and later logging, blueberry farming (lowbush blueberries are still abundant here), and other forms of agriculture. More recently, The Nature Conservancy has maintained the Plains by controlled burns and mowing efforts, without which the area would eventually succeed to pitch pine and early successional hardwoods.

Driving Directions

From the south or north, take Interstate 95 to Maine Exit 25 (formerly Exit 3), for Kennebunk and Kennebunkport. At the end of your exit ramp, follow the signs for Route 99 West and Sanford. You'll find yourself on Alfred Road. Continue to follow the signs for Route 99. You'll turn left at the first stop sign onto Mill Street. After 0.6 mile, turn right onto Route 99, also called Webber Hill Road, heading toward Sanford. Stay on Route 99 for approximately 1.8 miles, at which point the terrain opens up and you'll see grassland on both sides of the road. The parking area on Route 99 is easy to spot on your right.

To explore the southern part of the area, continue on Route 99 for about 0.9 mile, and turn sharply left onto McGuire Road, which is mostly unpaved but well-maintained. Look for a small dirt pull-off about 0.5 mile down the road on your right. From there it's about 0.5 mile to the power line cut that delimits the eastern side of the grassland.

When and How to Bird Here

The Kennebunk Plains is one of the premier birding spots in Maine during the nesting season (late May to mid-July). Grasshopper Sparrow, Vesper Sparrow, Savannah Sparrow, and Upland Sandpiper are the reliable specialties most of us seek. But the Plains can be an interesting and worthwhile destination in any season. In late August and early September the aptly named and globally endangered northern blazing-star is in bloom, blanketing much of the area in a haze of fiery magenta. Even if birds are few, you never know what you'll find here, especially if you're prepared to walk a bit. This write-up presents bird-finding tips for all seasons, with an emphasis on the breeding birds. General information about nonavian species, conservation initiatives, access restrictions, and so forth follows at the end.

The most productive way to bird the area — and the only way during the breeding season, when vehicles are entirely prohibited — is to walk the dirt roads. A tangle of roads and footpaths crisscross the Plains; the accompanying map shows the key ones for birders. You can stroll these trails at will with little fear of getting lost. I'll suggest a couple of favored routes. Bushwhacking, needless to say, is out of the question in a habitat that shelters so many endangered plants and ground-nesting birds.

A gentle reminder: The Kennebunk Plains is a large, exposed area that offers no shelter from sun, wind, and precipitation. Mosquitoes, black flies, and ticks, including those that carry Lyme disease, abound here during the warmer months. Dress and plan accordingly as regards to precautions like water and sunscreen, and wear footgear that is conducive to walking over mud, grit, and rocks.

Getting Oriented

Route 99 bisects the Kennebunk Plains. There are two primary parking areas: a sizable square of dirt/mud bounded by a wooden fence on the north side of Route 99, and a smaller dirt pullout on the south side of McGuire Road. There are lots of spots where you can safely pull off along McGuire Road, but don't even contemplate it on Route 99.

One walking route that I often take on spring and summer visits starts at the parking area on Route 99. On the dirt road on the left (west) side of the parking area, walk north to the corner of the pine/oak woodland. From here you can follow a side trail down to Cold Water Brook, and then head east and back to the parking area with varying degrees of directness. This is the "North Loop" described below. Or you can go north and then straight west through the grassland and return to the parking area via Route 99.

An alternative is to park at the McGuire Road turnoff and walk a loop trail on the south side of the road. You can retrace your steps or go straight back to the parking area along the road itself, scanning both sides. This is pure Grasshopper Sparrow habitat all the way.

Another popular walk for birders includes the trail through the scrub under the power lines that run north-south across McGuire Road about half a mile east of the parking area. This area, particularly the path that swings east from the power line cut just south of McGuire Road, is a "traditional" spot for breeding Blue-Winged Warbler, an uncommon nester nearing the northern limit of its range here.

Between Route 99 and McGuire Road there is a large swath of grassland bisected by a brook drainage with its attendant red maples and pitch pines. South of the drainage there are a couple of trails worth wandering, especially during the breeding season or if you wish to bird along the brook itself. North of the drainage and south of Route 99, trails are very few and increasingly overgrown.

Finding Grasshopper Sparrows

Many birders come to Kennebunk Plains in search of Grasshopper Sparrows. The Grasshopper Sparrow is a state-endangered species in Maine, where it is at the northeastern edge of its range. It has nested in only four locations in the state over the past twenty years, none farther north than Brunswick. Kennebunk Plains annually supports about half the statewide breeding population. The birds generally arrive and begin vocalizing around the third week in May and continue singing through mid-July. A few pairs may attempt a second nesting, in which case singers might be heard into August.

I have been privileged to survey breeding populations of Grasshopper Sparrows here on a number of occasions with both the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. We've done both point counts and walking transects, listening for singing males. Based on survey results, anecdotal information, and personal correspondence, it seems reasonable to conclude that the number of breeding pairs is generally between twenty and forty area-wide, in any given recent year. For example, the 2003 census conducted by The Nature Conservancy found thirty-nine singing males, while the 2004 census located twenty-nine.

So the birds are spread out pretty thinly, but there are a fair number around. It is far easier to find them if you can learn — and hear — their buzzy, often faint, songs. However, many people cannot perceive the high-pitched *zeeeeee* component of the song, especially if the bird is facing away from the listener, or if there is any appreciable wind. In this case more persistence may be required. Scan first and foremost the low grassy stems and sticks favored as singing perches. Grasshopper Sparrows don't generally sing incessantly, but they may perch up for brief periods even when quiet.

Due to the need to burn its various management units in rotation, different areas of the Plains are at different successional stages at a given time, and therefore may host more or fewer sparrows year by year. Dry grassy areas interspersed with a few weeds for perches are ostensibly favored. However, the site fidelity of this species seems to be extraordinarily fine-tuned, so perhaps pairs retain suboptimal territories on that basis. Singing males probably stay in or very close to their territories. But the need to bring food to nestlings no doubt causes individual birds to move around. My point, as you've no doubt gathered, is that "the birds are where you find them." There are no sure-fire spots. Be resolute and watchful, and you should find a teed-up singing male or an individual carrying food somewhere in the grassland habitat. Some local birders have a bias toward the McGuire Road side of the area, but in my experience it's a toss-up. Go with your instincts, and don't give up too easily.

One Birding Option: The North Loop

One tramp of moderate length (roughly 2.5 miles) that I often take at the Kennebunk Plains starts and ends at the parking area on Route 99. The bulk of the route moves through or along the edge of a large swath of grassland. In between it takes in the Cold Water Brook drainage with its associated red maple swamp, a bit of old field with birches and sumac, and a fair bit of pitch pine/scrub oak woodland. Walking this route is an excellent way to enjoy a good cross section of birds in whatever season you find yourself here.

Begin by scanning from the parking area itself. Early on a June morning you can frequently find Vesper Sparrow, Savannah Sparrow, Eastern Meadowlark, Bobolink, Upland Sandpiper, and sometimes Grasshopper Sparrow before you even start walking. Uppies, in particular, seem to favor this general area, and often circle overhead while vocalizing. They fly around a lot, so look above and well ahead of you once in awhile. Keep in mind that they can appear a bit like American Kestrels

from a distance. Recent census data suggest an average of around eight to twelve singing Upland Sandpipers in a given year.

Once you've scanned your starting point, begin walking along the dirt road that proceeds north from the west/left corner of the parking area. Savannah, Song, and Vesper sparrows are usually abundant here in season. Vagrants like Lark Sparrow and Clay-colored Sparrow are not out of the question, especially in fall. The first nesting record for Clay-colored Sparrow in Maine was recently documented in nearby Arundel, and birds have been recorded in summer at the Kennebunk Plains (Brinker and Vickery 1997), so who knows when they might be shown to nest here?

In late fall and winter, keep a wide eye out for flocks of Snow Buntings interspersed with Horned Larks and the occasional Lapland Longspur. American Pipits also turn up here in spring and fall. Along the lines of "can you top this?" on October 27, 2000, Lysle Brinker had point-blank looks at a Northern Fulmar in this vicinity. There was storm activity well offshore at the time, but local conditions were clear and calm.

There are often a few Grasshopper Sparrow territories in these environs also. Scan the low snags on both sides of the road, and be alert for that thin *chup-chup-ZEEeeeeee!* song. If you haven't spent much time in New England grasslands, it can be maddening to separate one song from another — so many of them have common elements, like a buzz or a burble. Keep walking and listening, and the cacophony may begin to sort itself out. Another impetus to keep walking will be the swirling mayhem of Bobolinks, meadowlarks, and sparrows. Bank, Tree, and Barn swallows are also quite likely. If nearby areas have been recently burned, stay tuned also for the tinkling flight song and hover-flight of Horned Larks. A few (two to four) pairs are presumed to breed annually in the Kennebunk Plains, and burned-over spots are the best areas to find them. Nesting Horned Larks usually return in mid-April.

To walk the loop described here, follow the road back (north) 0.4 mile to the scrubby edge of the tree line. If you prefer, you can veer off to the left about halfway to the tree line and head straight west along that road for about 0.8 mile. Eventually you'll come to another road heading south, back to Route 99. If you're really flogging the Grasshopper Sparrow habitat, this option may appeal.

But for those who are sticking with me, let's continue north. At the end of the road is an eroded track heading steeply downhill through brush and red maples. This leads to Cold Water Brook and a sizable pool above a breached earthen dam. This general vicinity is great for birds like Rufous-sided Towhee, Eastern Bluebird, Eastern Kingbird, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Scarlet Tanager, Baltimore Oriole, Brown Thrasher, Least and Great Crested flycatchers, and possibly Willow or even Alder flycatcher as well. Eastern Phoebe is likely, as are American Goldfinch, Song and Chipping sparrows, American Robin, Gray Catbird, and Common Yellowthroat. You can also luck into Yellow- and/or Black-billed cuckoos here. While far from a sure thing, cuckoos, especially Yellow-billed, seem to pop up fairly often at the Kennebunk Plains.

When you've finished birding the trail junction, take the track down the hill to the pool. This is a fine place for Belted Kingfisher, Great Blue Heron, and perhaps Green Heron in spring, summer, and fall. Canada Goose and puddle ducks other than Mallard are possible. Don't forget to check for beaver, muskrat, and the tracks of raccoon, fisher, mink, and even moose. Linda Cook found skeletal moose remains near here on a recent visit.

After enjoying the Cold Water Brook drainage, retrace your steps back up the hill and buttonhook left (east) at the top of the rise into some "old field" habitat bracketed by pitch pines to the north. This stretch of trail is a gem for breeding Field Sparrow, a tough bird to find in Maine. Other likely breeders hereabouts include Prairie Warbler, Yellow Warbler, American Redstart, and Nashville Warbler. Cedar Waxwings are often present.

Very shortly you'll notice a narrow trail heading northeast through the pitch pines. I heartily recommend this little detour, which leads through a semi-open area punctuated by gray birches. It's among my favorites for warblers and assorted passerines in both spring and fall. Palm, Bay-breasted, Blackpoll, Blackburnian, Wilson's, Magnolia, and Yellow-rumped warblers, Ovenbird, and Northern Waterthrush, both kinglets, and Blue-headed, Warbling, Philadelphia, and Red-eyed vireos are among the migrants I've enjoyed along here. Yellow-throated Vireo has also been spotted in this locale. Common Redpolls, being lovers of birch catkins, might show up in winter.

Continue moving east along this trail, and soon it curves to the south, back into the open and toward our starting point. To your right is grassland, to your left pine/oak woodland. This grassy zone may hold a few Grasshopper Sparrows and possibly a Field Sparrow or two. Wild Turkeys seem to like this area. Once or twice in recent years a Sandhill Crane has been seen here. Along the woody edge you might find Black-and-White Warbler or Black-throated Green Warbler. Listen for Wood Thrush and Hermit Thrush. Looking south across Route 99 you may see a Common Raven in flight, as I have on several occasions.

Keep going on the dirt road as it winds south, and eventually you'll see a road intersecting from your right. Now you're at a choice point. If you turn right (northwest) here, you'll cruise through more Grasshopper Sparrow habitat and end up back at the north end of the trail you first walked in on. Or continue straight south, and shortly you'll hit a trail that parallels Route 99; turn right (west) to return to the parking area. If dusk is falling as you return to your vehicle, you may wish to stick around and listen for Whip-poor-wills from late May through July.

If you've missed Grasshopper Sparrow so far, you might do well to get back in your car and head west on Route 99 for about 0.9 mile, and then turn sharply left on McGuire Road. After half a mile, park in the first dirt pull-off you come to. The trail that runs south and east from the pullout can be productive for Grasshopper Sparrows. Or, as previously suggested, you can try simply birding the road. There is appropriate habitat on both sides as far as the power line.

Raptors at Kennebunk Plains

Kennebunk Plains can be a fine place to encounter raptors. In the breeding season watch for Red-tailed Hawk, American Kestrel, and possibly Cooper's Hawk. Red-tails and their nocturnal counterparts, Great Horned Owls, use this territory year-round. During spring and fall migration just about anything might show up here, from Sharp-Shinned Hawks along the piney edges to American Kestrels perch-hunting on the power lines to Merlins and Northern Harriers hunting the open country. Spotting ten or more raptors of several species on an October afternoon would not be exceptional. Bald Eagles and even Ospreys are seen occasionally, mostly in fall. Turkey Vultures are commonly sighted in season. A Short-eared Owl shows up from time to time. Stands of small pines that look promising for Northern Saw-whet Owl occur in several places, though I personally have never seen or heard the species here.

More Rare Plants and Animals

The Kennebunk Plains supports one of the highest concentrations of rare species in Maine. I've already mentioned three state-endangered species found here: the Grasshopper Sparrow, the black racer, and the northern blazing-star. A fourth is the toothed white-topped aster, for which the Plains is the only known location in the state.

The northern blazing-star is endangered not just in Maine but throughout its limited range. There are only four places on earth where more than 1000 stems of this lovely New England endemic are known to exist. Kennebunk Plains supports the largest single population by far. The more than one million stems found here represent perhaps 90 percent of the northern blazing-star's total population.

State-threatened species found at Kennebunk Plains include Upland Sandpiper and upright bindweed. State species of special concern observed here include the Vesper Sparrow, Eastern Meadowlark, Bobolink, ribbon snake, and wood turtle, as well as two moth species, the broad sallow and trembling sallow. No doubt other rare insects occur here, but sampling has been extremely limited. Plants with state special-concern status include small reed-grass, Wiegand's sedge, and pale green orchis.

In addition to rare plants and animals, the Kennebunk Plains also has archaeological significance. A preliminary survey made in 1990 by the Maine Historic Preservation Commission found a Native American campsite some 10,000 years old. Known as the Hedden Site, it has been partially excavated and is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Conservation Initiatives

If not for a temporary drop in the housing market, the Kennebunk Plains would likely have been lost to development pressure in the 1980s. The Nature Conservancy (TNC) first proposed acquisition of the site to the Land for Maine's Future program in 1988. The land was acquired in 1990 as part of a joint initiative between TNC, the Land for Maine's Future Fund, the Maine Division of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife (MDIFW), the Kennebunk, Kennebunkport, Wells Water District, the Kennebunk

Conservation Commission, and local land trusts. Kennebunk Plains is now a Wildlife Management Area, jointly owned and managed by TNC and MDIFW.

Considerable land under private, nonconservation ownership remains in the Kennebunk Plains/Wells Barrens area, particularly to the southwest of the existing Wildlife Management Area. In 2001, a grant from the Land for Maine's Future program enabled a broad-based partnership to permanently protect an additional 673 acres, including nearly four miles of Mousam River shoreline, abutting conservation land near and in the Kennebunk Plains. This ecologically significant acreage is now owned by MDIFW and managed by TNC. Acquisition of this parcel expands the contiguous area under conservation to approximately 2600 acres.

But threats to the viability of this critically important ecosystem remain. For example, a likely site for a proposed gambling casino in Maine was within a stone's throw of the Kennebunk Plains. Escalating development pressure in the form of more roads and buildings would be just the tip of the conservation problem if a casino were to be built. While Maine voters overwhelmingly rejected casino gambling in a public referendum in 2003, its proponents are not expected to give up that easily. Even without a casino, rampant growth and sprawl in the area present significant threats, among them increased high-impact use of the Kennebunk Plains. Illegal ATV operation and trash dumping are particular and intractable concerns.


Access and Activities

The Kennebunk Plains WMA is open year-round, free of charge, from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. There are no facilities. Vehicle access is restricted as posted. Logs block many roads year-round. There is *no vehicle access* during the nesting season, currently May 1 to September 30. All vehicles, including ATVs and snowmobiles, must remain on roads at all times whatever the season. The scars left by violators are everywhere in evidence.

Low-impact recreational activities are permitted, including fishing, hunting, trapping, hiking, and cross-country skiing. Dogs must be leashed and kept on roads during the nesting season (May 1 – September 30). Blueberry picking is restricted as posted; harvesting for personal consumption begins on August 1 to reduce disturbance to nesting birds. Various special rules may apply during the nesting season; in particular, birders and other walkers must stay on trails.

For more information, please contact:

Maine Department of Inland Fisheries & Wildlife: 207-287-8000

The Nature Conservancy, Maine Chapter: 207-646-1788 

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UPLAND SANDPIPER BY DAVID LARSON