

BIRDING FROM A TRAIN SEAT

by Jim Berry, Ipswich

Over the past three and one half years since moving to Massachusetts, I have been a daily commuter on the Boston and Main railroad from Ipswich to Boston. The tracks pass in several places through fine habitat, particularly good for waterbirds.

Appleton Farm in Ipswich/Hamilton is dependable for Cattle Egrets in summer and Red-tailed Hawks year-round. The marsh in Wenham next to the golf course probably has breeding ducks (Black Ducks and Mallards) and once in a while yields an American Bittern. Beverly harbor is good for cormorants (including Great), and the adjacent North River in Salem is the winter home of several hundred Black Ducks and several dozen Buffleheads. At low tide (in season) it is an excellent tidal flat for shorebirds, and it was in this heavily populated area one morning that Stan Baker saw a Great Horned Owl sitting on a telephone pole!

The next spot, and one of the best, is the marsh beside the Salem Municipal Golf Course. Herons, American Coots, Wood Ducks, American Bitterns, and Common Gallinules are common here, and the latter three probably breed. It was here that I saw a bird that I may never again see from a moving train, a Least Bittern, which obligingly flew up from near the tracks and showed me its striking back and wing pattern on a lucky summer morning.

Far and away the best location on the trip is the salt marsh in Saugus and Revere, despite the presence of an enormous (and obviously leaching) dump. In this marsh I have seen six species of herons, a Glossy Ibis or two, Double-crested Cormorants, scaup, Red-breasted Mergansers, at least eight species of shorebirds, Bonaparte's Gulls, Common Terns, Belted Kingfishers, and in January 1975 a Snowy Owl close enough for easy identification. The dump itself provides food not only for thousands of gulls, but also for pheasants and American Kestrels (year-round) and for occasional Red-tailed and Rough-legged Hawks in winter. On 29 April 1975 I was lucky enough to see a Short-eared Owl fly off the garbage and follow the train right beside my window before veering off to the inner wilds of the Saugus Dump. (Mine was one of the few clean windows; there are obstacles to be overcome in trying to watch birds from the Boston and Maine.)

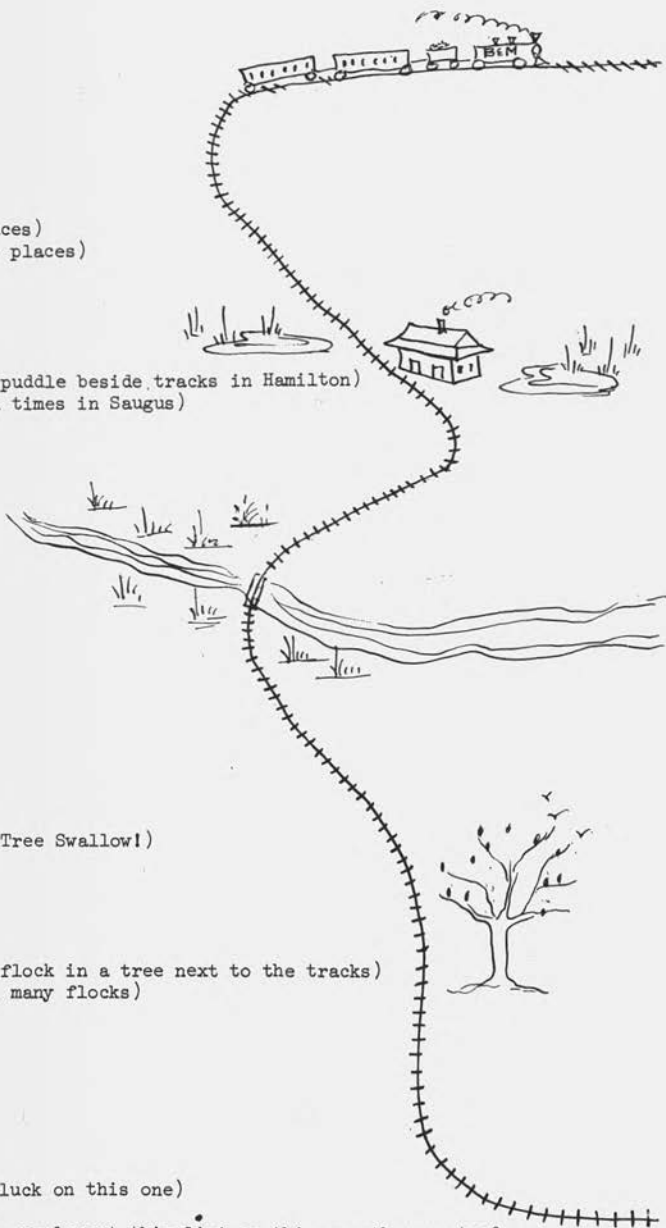
From Revere the tracks turn southwest down the west side of the Chelsea River--another good shorebird spot at low tide--then swing west through Chelsea and Everett, before turning back to the south to cross the Mystic River at the Monsanto Chemical plant. For several years (at least) Herring Gulls have bred here, with some chicks hatching and growing up within two feet of the tracks. There is a half-sunken barge/crane combination that gives the place a rather surrealistic appearance. A few of the Herring Gulls nest right on the barge, which is piled with dirt with weeds growing out of it. If Great Black-backed Gulls haven't yet bred in this area, it is probably only a matter of time. In other seasons I have seen Ring-billed, Bonaparte's and even Laughing Gulls here (these last, two or three times last fall, in flight and easily recognizable). Other species found in this area include Pied-billed Grebes, Ring-necked Pheasants (no kidding), kingfishers, dowitchers, Ruddy Turnstones, several other shorebirds, and a Common Goldeneye.

The rest of the trip into North Station is uneventful, with little to be seen on the Charles River except the ubiquitous Herring Gulls and a few oil-eating Mallards.

So there it is: one of the more mundane birdwatching experiences of our time, but every once in a while good for a surprise or two. As of now my species total since July 1972 is 69, plus a few probables. Here are the species, annotated where appropriate to mollify the skeptical:

Pied-billed Grebe
Great Cormorant (1 im. flew over train in Beverly Harbor, October 1975)
Double-crested Cormorant
Great Blue Heron (sometimes in mid-winter in Saugus)
Green Heron
Cattle Egret
Great Egret (several times in Saugus, Salem)
Snowy Egret
Black-crowned Night Heron (common in Saugus)
Least Bittern (see text)
American Bittern
Glossy Ibis
Canada Goose

Mallard
 Black Duck
 Pintail
 Blue-winged Teal
 Wood Duck
 Scaup (sp.)
 Common Goldeneye
 Bufflehead
 Red-breasted Merganser
 Red-tailed Hawk
 Rough-legged Hawk
 American Kestrel (many places)
 Ring-necked Pheasant (many places)
 Common Gallinule
 Semipalmated Plover
 Killdeer
 Black-bellied Plover
 Ruddy Turnstone
 Common Snipe (1 flew from puddle beside tracks in Hamilton)
 Spotted Sandpiper (several times in Saugus)
 Yellowlegs (sp.)
 Dunlin
 Dowitcher (sp.)
 Semipalmated Sandpiper
 Great Black-backed Gull
 Herring Gull
 Ring-billed Gull
 Laughing Gull
 Bonaparte's Gull
 Common Tern
 Rock Dove
 Mourning Dove
 Snowy Owl
 Short-eared Owl
 Chimney Swift
 Belted Kingfisher
 Common Flicker
 Eastern Kingbird
 Eastern Phoebe
 Barn Swallow (but never a Tree Swallow!)
 Blue Jay
 Common Crow
 Mockingbird
 Brown Thrasher
 American Robin
 Cedar Waxwing (happily, a flock in a tree next to the tracks)
 Starling (unhappily, many, many flocks)
 House Sparrow
 Bobolink (Appleton Farm)
 Eastern Meadowlark
 Redwinged Blackbird
 Northern Oriole
 Common Grackle
 Brown-headed Cowbird
 American Goldfinch
 Rufous-sided Towhee (pure luck on this one)



Can any other train commuters supplement this list on this or other routes?

On Saturday, the 21st of February, a Peterson's Field Guide was found in Newburyport. There was no name or address inside. The owner may recover it by contacting Helen C. Bates, 1341 Plumtree Road, Springfield, Massachusetts 01119.

For Sale: Binoculars, Nikon 7X35, shallow and regular eyecups, excellent case \$90 ppd. Scope, Swift Zoom excellent with screw clamp and UV filter \$90 ppd. J. Wall, 76 Brambach Road, Scarsdale, N.Y. 10583.

The following is reprinted from Nature's Ways by Wayne Hanley, Massachusetts Audubon Society.

For an excellent view of young ospreys ready to fledge, one might visit the Wolf Neck Woods State Park in Freeport, Maine.

From Station No. 2 on the Wolf Neck trail map, one may gaze across a deep but narrow gouge that Casco Bay has made in the solid stone coast and watch two young ospreys no more than a couple hundred feet away. So near, in fact, that markings on the birds can be seen clearly without the use of binoculars. In a nearby tree on this rock known as Goggins Island the adult ospreys frequently perch, alert to scatter any interlopers that might endanger the young.

The tableau will not last much longer for the young already are flapping their wings and occasionally becoming airborne above the heap of sticks that serve as a nest. Any day, one of them will discover that the world is larger than a hundred pounds of limbs latticed in a dead tree top. They should, however, devote much of the remainder of the summer to sunning themselves on perches on the island.

It is encouraging to see a Maine nest with two young, for Massachusetts ospreys have done rather poorly this season. Gilbert and Jo Fernandez of Dartmouth, who devote each summer to monitoring ospreys along the Westport River, report that only nine were hatched this summer, compared to 24 last year.

The Wolf Neck Woods ospreys are a dependable enough feature to rate an interpretative board on the coastal trail at the Casco Bay park.



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