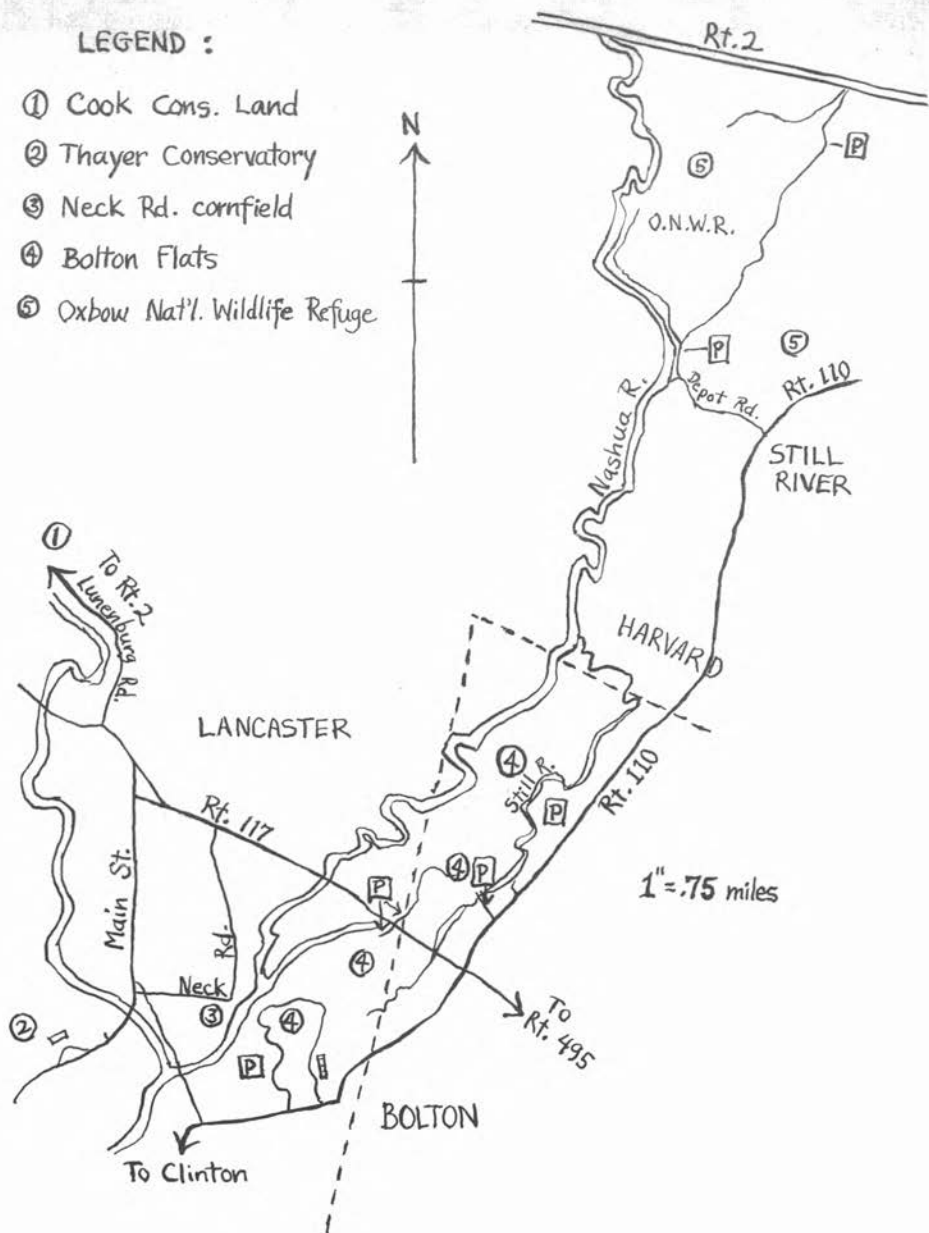


LEGEND :

- ① Cook Cons. Land
- ② Thayer Conservatory
- ③ Neck Rd. cornfield
- ④ Bolton Flats
- ⑤ Oxbow Nat'l. Wildlife Refuge



## FALL AND WINTER BIRDS IN THE LANCASTER AREA

by Harold L. Merriman, Lancaster

There are many natural "hot spots" like Plum Island, Monomoy, and Mt. Auburn Cemetery that provide the birder with chances of seeing rare stragglers. But many other less frequented places can be very profitable also.

Lancaster, the oldest town in Worcester County, is situated in the valley of the slow-moving Nashua River, which during rainy weather floods the low-lying fields adjoining it. This attracts many species of water birds that do not regularly occur inland. The Lancaster region offers about the best birding in Worcester County. Personally, I have identified over 230 different species in the last five years, with other birders seeing others. There are a few birds quite common around Lancaster that are rarer near the coast--Wood Duck, Ruffed Grouse, American Woodcock, Solitary Sandpiper, Great-horned and Barred Owl, Pileated Woodpecker, and Rusty Blackbird.

### Cook Conservation Land

The newly established Cook Conservation Land is located in Lancaster along Lunenburg Road, two miles from Route 2. It lies on the western side of the road near the power lines. The 400 acres should be good for Ruffed Grouse and Great-horned Owl. The northern branch of the Nashua River flows through part of the land.

### Thayer Conservatory

The old Thayer mansion, now the Thayer Conservatory of Music, provides a picturesque link with the past. John E. Thayer, one of the many members of the Thayer family that grew up in the mansion, was an active ornithologist who studied the Lancaster area as well as many parts of the world. A sample of his enormous collection was housed for many years at a bird museum in Lancaster but was moved in 1973 to the Worcester Science Museum. In the town library one may find Thayer's bird notes and his rare book collection, which includes one of the few complete extant *Elephant Folios* by Audubon.

The expanses behind the Conservatory and along the Nashua River are especially good for Pileated Woodpecker. The best time to observe this bird is in the early morning or late evening. Also behind the Conservatory are cornfields belonging to Atlantic Union College. When they are flooded in the fall, shorebirds and other open-field birds may be found. One day in September, Osprey, three species of falcon, and nine species of shorebirds appeared. Before hunting season the pond attracts Wood Duck (breeders) and American Bittern. The thickets along the Nashua River should be scoured for warblers and sparrows. Lincoln's Sparrow is frequently seen. Northern Shrikes are sometimes observed perched on the trees or wire fences. The wooded swamp behind the farm is excellent for Rusty Blackbird, which infrequently will number as high as 100. (Caution--boots should be worn when the cornfields are flooded.)

In the winter this location is excellent for holdovers. A small sewer

swamp, located behind 400 Main Street just past the Conservatory, usually holds many traditional wintering birds. Species found last winter include Common Snipe, Belted Kingfisher, Winter Wren, Lincoln's Sparrow (rare), and Swamp Sparrow. Along a path over an underground steam pipe, a Chipping Sparrow spent the winter of 1976-77. This pipe runs from the corner of George Hill Road and Main Street to the Conservatory. Other birds that have been seen along the pipeline path or in the vicinity of the mansion include Hermit Thrush and Gray Catbird. Even a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker passed through in December.

### Neck Road Cornfield

Between Neck Road and the Nashua River is a cornfield that is well worth investigating, I have birded there only one fall and have already seen a flock of 17 Golden Plover and a Buff-breasted Sandpiper in October. This field also harbors inland shorebirds like Common Snipe, Pectoral Sandpiper, and Dunlin. The many dead trees provide excellent perches for Red-tailed Hawk, American Kestrel and an occasional Merlin.

### Bolton Flats

The best-known locale for birds in the Lancaster area is Bolton Flats. This is where the Purple Gallinule, which was discovered on July 4, 1976, spent a few weeks. The flats have recently been purchased by the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife which has installed several parking lots, as indicated on the map. The fields are very popular during the hunting season, so caution is necessary when walking. The best time to visit is Sunday, when hunting is prohibited.

Strangely, spring is the best season, with many species of ducks and shorebirds present. (See the article on the Bolton-Lancaster flats by B. Blodgett in Bird Observer Vol. 2, No. 3.) The most popular and productive access point is along Route 117 beside the Lancaster-Bolton town line. Woodpeckers, blackbirds, and sparrows are to be found in the meadows south of Route 117.

In the fall, the cornfields and marsh should be searched thoroughly since almost any feathered creature is possible. The most recent unusual bird was a grey-phase Gyrfalcon sighted in December, 1977. Species that regularly occur in the cornfields and marsh include American Bittern, Wood Duck, Hooded Merganser, Marsh Hawk, Common Snipe, Solitary Sandpiper, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Pectoral Sandpiper, Horned Lark, Water Pipit, Rusty Blackbird, and Snow Bunting. Longspurs also occur in mixed flocks of larks and buntings.

The grassy edges bordering the cornfields are exceptional for the numbers of sparrows. Vesper Sparrows are sometimes detected near the gravel pit. The numerous dead trees at Bolton Flats furnish excellent perches for accipiters, Osprey, Peregrine Falcon and Merlin. One should be on the lookout for Short-eared Owl and Pileated Woodpecker.

Winter birding doesn't yield many species, especially if the fields are buried with snow, though occasionally Rough-legged Hawk, Snow Bunting, or Eastern Meadowlark can be discovered. Because of plentiful fields with dead trees, the entire Bolton-Lancaster area supplies choice habitat

for Red-tailed Hawk, American Kestrel, Great-horned Owl and Hairy Woodpecker.

#### Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge

Probably the least known birding spot is the Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge located in Fort Devens. To reach the refuge take Route 110 to the Still River Post Office (in Harvard), and proceed down Depot Road. Take a right after the railroad tracks on the dirt road and park along the river. The U.S. Army is not fighting a battle against birders, even though a few jeeps travel the dirt road. Since the refuge isn't well-known, it has been birded infrequently. The ONWR has potential and has already proved to attract many landbirds, especially Rusty Blackbirds and finches. (Unusual spring migrants include Worm-eating and Brewster's Warblers, while Yellow-throated Vireos breed.) Great-horned Owl and Wood Duck are regular along the Nashua. Connecticut Warbler has been spotted among the other species of warblers. A bicycle will come in handy while combing the many trails.

The Lancaster area affords interesting birding along with scenic countryside. If you are tired of the crowded coastal spots, you will enjoy Lancaster.

#### PELAGIC TRIP TO CONTINENTAL SHELF PLANNED

A pelagic birding trip is planned by the Federation of New York State Bird Clubs for Saturday, May 20. This should provide some spectacular birding. About 90 miles south of Montauk lies the continental shelf with its "canyons" leading down into the depths. The waters above the shelf have an abundant food supply attractive to a wide variety of marine mammals and birds.

The boat will be Captain Forsberg's sturdy 102-foot "Viking Star" which has a heated cabin and a large number of foam-cushioned bunks and reclining seats. The distance makes a midnight departure necessary with return in the evening. Cost of the trip will be \$26.00. The trip is limited to 70 participants.

The May 20 trip will be at the height of the spring offshore pelagic bird movement and the list may include Fulmar, Manx, Greater, Cory's and Sooty Shearwaters, Wilson's and Leach's Storm Petrels, Gannet, Red and Northern Phalarope, Skua, all three jaegers and Arctic Tern.

For further information regarding the trip write to Stephen Dempsey, 533 Chestnut Street, West Hempstead, New York 11552, or to Barbara Spencer, 154 Dayton Street, Sea Cliff, New York 11579. Or you can phone Tom Davis in evenings at (212) 847-0860.

For reservations mail your check payable to "Federation of NYS Bird Clubs, Inc." to Barbara Spencer (address as above). Be sure to indicate that it is for the May 20th trip and give the names of all persons the check is paying for. Please enclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope with your check so a receipt, directions to the boat, list of accommodations at Montauk, and other information may be sent to you.

A SIGHT RECORD OF THE LARK BUNTING  
AND ITS HISTORICAL OCCURRENCE IN MASSACHUSETTS

by Richard S. Heil, Peabody

On September 19, 1977, I was birding in South Peabody near Sidneys' Pond in the vicinity of an industrial dump operated by the Eastman Gelatin Company. The area is characterized by extensive grassy fields, brushy borders, and abundant growths of ragweed. It is located approximately three miles inland from Salem Harbor. Weather conditions during the period of observation were cloudy with light west to southwest winds and a temperature of about 21°C. The time was approximately 6:00 P.M.

While traversing a dirt road within the dump area, I came upon a small flock of birds feeding among the ragweed along the roadside. The flock was comprised of Savannah Sparrows (Passerculus sandwichensis), Field Sparrows (Spizella pusilla), Song Sparrows (Melospiza melodia), and several House Finches (Carpodacus mexicanus).

As I flushed groups of sparrows out of the weeds, most would land on the chain link fence bordering the road, which allowed for good observation. One bird which was flushed from the ragweed was noticeably larger than the other sparrows, and when it landed on the top of the fence about 20 feet away, I noted the following details through 8 X 40 binoculars: the size was easily larger than a House Sparrow (Passer domesticus). The bill was heavy and conical and blue-grey in color. The throat was white with a dark malar stripe. The brown cheeks were set off by a light superciliary and a noticeable thin, white eye ring. The underparts were heavily, but sharply, streaked with brown and showed a dark brown smudge in the center of the breast. The wings were dark brown with a large buffy wingpatch. The outer tail feathers were very thinly edged with white on an otherwise dark brown tail.

After viewing the bird for about two minutes, it flew into a nearby group of bushes. At that time I concluded that the bird I had just seen was a basic (winter) plumaged Lark Bunting (Calamospiza melanocorys). The bird remained until September 23, being viewed by many observers on the subsequent days.

To help update the record, the following list of fall Massachusetts Lark Bunting records since 1949, is included. Records were kindly provided by Richard Forster.

Sept. 3, 1949	Nauset	(R. Mason)
Sept. 1, 1957	Nauset	(R. Mason)
Sept. 1, 1965	Monomoy	(R. Forster, J. Rhome)
Oct. 30-31, 1965	Plum Island	(R. Eldred, W. Petersen)
Aug. 26, 1968	Monomoy	(J. Baird)
July 10, 1969	Chatham	(H. Copeland)
Sept. 1, 1969	Rockport	(L. Jodrey)
Sept. 4-5, 1970	Nauset	(W. Petersen, C. Goodrich)
Sept. 6, 1970	Monomoy	(R. A. F., R. Jenkins)
Sept. 20, 1970	Monomoy	(R. A. F., and tour)
Sept. 22, 1970	Chatham	(R. A. F.)

Sept. 28, 1974	S. Wellfleet	(R. Jenkins)
Aug. 28, 1975	Plum Island	(W. Drummond)
Sept. 19-23, 1977	S. Peabody	(R. Heil)

There are also two recent spring records, both of adult males in alternate (breeding) plumage:

May 18-21, 1969	Marshfield	(V.O.)
June 2, 1971	Newbury	(J. Kenneally)



Lark Bunting: Photographed by Richard A. Forster at Nauset, Sept., 1970

As can be observed from the records, the typical areas where stray Lark Buntings occur are at the coastal landbird traps; in particular on barrier beaches, especially on Cape Cod. They should also be expected to eventually be recorded on Nantucket or Martha's Vineyard. New England birders have long realized the importance of coastal landbird traps in consistently producing western rarities in the fall, and this point was never better summarized than by Davis Finch in the March 1977 issue of American Birds (Vol. 31 (2): 225).

The South Peabody sighting, being about three miles inland, is the only fall state record away from the immediate coast. What is more unusual is that the South Peabody bird lingered for five days in an area where there were no physical barriers, such as the ocean, to prevent it from leaving, despite a northwesterly wind during part of the time it was present. The Lark Bunting's fondness for the area was possibly due to an abundance of its favored food, grasshoppers, as well as an extensive area of suitable habitat.

The Lark Bunting breeds in short and tall grass prairies, and cultivated clover fields, from s. British Columbia, s. Saskatchewan, and s.w. Manitoba in the north; south to c. New Mexico, the Texas panhandle, and w. Oklahoma; and in the west locally from Idaho, Utah, Wyoming east to w. Minnesota, e. Nebraska, and c. Kansas. Peculiar to the Lark Bunting are its irruptive eastward range extensions which manifest themselves when the birds become common one year in an area where they were non-existent

for perhaps several previous seasons. For example, in 1964 there was an amazing increase in numbers, and an eastward range extension of the Lark Bunting in the Northern Great Plains Region. This was combined with a relative scarcity in areas further west. In 1965, however, Lark Buntings failed to return to the same areas where they had bred the year before, but were returned abundant further west, although some also appeared east of their normal range in Oklahoma (Bagg 1965).

It would seem likely that in those breeding seasons when there is an eastward range extension, that fall vagrants would be more likely to occur in fall on the east coast. However, large weather fronts sweeping eastward across the plains and eventually reaching the east coast with accompanying westerly winds may be a more important factor. At any rate, in the fall of 1969 and 1970 there were 2 and 2-3 Lark Bunting records, respectively, in Massachusetts. The previous breeding seasons did see an eastward range extension on the plains. In c. Kansas numbers were termed ten times greater than normal, and several new breeding colonies were discovered on the eastern edge of the species' range in w. Missouri.

It seems curious that since 1970 there have been only three additional records, despite an increase of observers concentrating their efforts on coastal localities. The 1974-1976 breeding seasons on the plains saw no eastward range extensions, with normal numbers being recorded in the interior of the Lark Bunting's range. This may be a factor explaining the recent absence of Lark Bunting records in Massachusetts since 1970.

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