

IPSWICH RIVER WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

- TRAIL
- == DIRT ROAD
- MARSH

44528

INTRODUCTION TO BIRDING AT IPSWICH RIVER WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

by James S. MacDougall, Gloucester

Massachusetts Audubon Society's Ipswich River Wildlife Sanctuary in Topsfield is a vast expanse of floodplain and upland, situated 20 minutes driving time from Plum Island and 30 minutes from Boston. Its variety of habitats and degrees of successions make it attractive to a great number of birds, but its large size is intimidating for birders. Tides, time of day, and weather patterns have been correlated with different species of birds observed at such hot spots as Plum Island, Andrew's Point, and Marblehead Neck. These fine birding areas also offer their avian visitors within 100 yards from a parking lot or access road. At Ipswich River, however, the birder must allow much time and use a few tricks of the trade to be successful. (And luck always plays a role in the outcome of any birding venture.) One must allocate a great deal of footwork to reap the benefits that the Ipswich River Sanctuary has to offer.

The sanctuary is the former Thomas Proctor Arboretum, which boasted a total of 3,500 varieties of flora from around the globe. Since its purchase by the Massachusetts Audubon Society in 1951, pioneer trees and shrubs have invaded the fields and clearings, thus providing valuable cover and food for nesting and migrating species. During the fall migrations, one can expect to see Purple Finches, Yellow-rumped, Nashville, and Blackpoll Warblers feeding on the European Buckthorn, Japanese Cork-tree, and yews.

While remaining close to the buildings and fields, there is a good chance of observing Sharp-shinned Hawks harassing the Blue Jays and American Robins in the dead elms at the fields' edges. This species of hawk has shown a marked increase in activity at Ipswich River over the past three years. The best time to see them is in September and October during the early morning hours.

A prime area for birding by the fall visitor is from the observation tower on Bunker Meadow. The area is a 48 acre flooded meadow conspicuously covered with Buttonbush, which provides an ideal location for migrating waterfowl to spend the night. An early morning vigil with a spotting scope will bring into focus such fall visitors as the Black Duck, Mallard, Gadwall, Green-winged Teal, Blue-winged Teal, American Coot, Pied-billed Grebe, and Wood Duck. Less common are the Pintails, Hooded Mergansers, American Wigeon, Ruddy Ducks, Ring-necked Ducks, and the Bufflehead. On moonless September nights, this meadow is used by the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife to catch waterfowl for banding. A statistic that we are proud of is the highest number of Wood Duck to be caught in Massachusetts in one night. Of 128 ducks captured, 92 were woodies. At other seasons, this area will attract Purple Martins, Rusty Blackbirds, Cliff, Rough-winged, Barn, and Tree Swallows, Belted Kingfishers, a variety of heron, Glossy Ibis, Spotted Sandpipers, Yellowlegs, and an occasional transient Osprey. Soras do exist, but to see one by day would be rare. Using the nest boxes are Wood Duck, Black Duck, and Hooded Mergansers. The Bunker Meadow observation tower should be on your list of stops during a morning visit. The afternoon light makes identification more difficult, and unless you're an expert on silhouettes, the tower is not worth the effort.

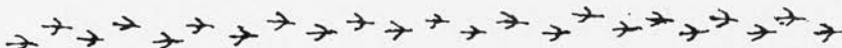
Where do we go from here? If time is of the essence, confine your birding to the drumlin area which is outlined by Arboretum Road. This location will produce a variety of warblers, woodpeckers, thrushes, vireos, grosbeaks and sparrows. Since the area is overgrown, many species can be overlooked, so keep your ears open for calling and singing birds. Also, by producing squeaks and mimicking calls, your number of sightings may improve.

Spring warblers are best seen as you slowly walk Arboretum Road and venture out to the Rockery area. If you have never visited the Rockery, plan a quiet morning in early June to see the Rhododendrons and Azaleas at their peak. To view a Northern Parula nestled in a Royal Azalea certainly adds to the thrill of the spring warbler migration.

A review of "Bird Life of the Ipswich River Wildlife Sanctuary", a field card of recorded species compiled by the Ipswich River Audubon Club, indicated that 171 of the 221 species have generally restricted their appearance to the Drumlin, Rockery, and Bunker Meadow areas.

Sightings of Great Horned Owl, Barred Owl, Ovenbird, Brown Creeper, Eastern Wood Pewee, Long-billed Marsh Wren, Virginia Rail, Least Bittern, Common Gallinule, and sometimes Pileated Woodpecker have basically centered in the Averill's Island, Hassocky Meadow and North Esker regions of the property. To include these into a visit requires even more time and energy. For the best birding, walk the edge trails between the marshes and upland.

In January, 1973, the river opened up for a week and attracted a magnificent adult Bald Eagle to the Great Wenham Swamp, a meandering section of the river adjacent to Averill's Island. This is the kind of rarity any birder hopes to see and can, if he or she takes the time to explore the many nooks and crannies of the Ipswich River sanctuary.



ARIZONA HIGHWAYS--February, 1979

Would you pay \$1.00 for a score of the most exciting paintings of hawks and owls ever to appear in a magazine? Augment this treasure-trove with a similar number of pencil sketches, and you've got the greatest raptorial rip-off ever. The entire 52-page February issue of Arizona Highways is devoted to the art and prose of Larry Toschik, a gigantic achievement by a contemporary artist/naturalist.

Write Arizona Highways, 2039 W. Lewis Avenue, Phoenix, Arizona 85009. Enclose \$1.00 per copy. Order now, while copies may still be available.

Leif J. Robinson