

Paintshop Pond, Wellesley

Clark Ewer

Birders are often dismayed these days to find that a new shopping mall has replaced a productive sparrow field, or that access to productive wetlands is now denied. One of my favorite birding destinations, Paintshop Pond in Wellesley, has undergone drastic alterations in the past few years: old habitats have been destroyed and new ones created. In this case, the rewarding place I knew was lost, but I am now finding exciting birding discoveries as the area develops in its planned regrowth. Here are some of my reflections.

Years ago I saw signs at the northwest corner of Lake Waban in the vicinity of Paintshop Pond. The signs read, "Warning, Lead Contaminated Sediments. No Swimming. No Wading." At the time I wasn't sure what the signs were about and assumed they had something to do with the old paint factory. I had spent many years birding this area and had often seen different colors of paint on the ground surface. One year the ground would be red, another year green. Then one day a fence appeared. This chain link fence went around Paintshop Pond, a good-sized area of about thirty acres or more. One of my favorite spots was off limits. It was now a hazardous waste site.

Paintshop Pond is a sliver of water that lies between Morses Pond and Lake Waban. Water from Morses Pond flows into Paintshop Pond, and from there it runs over a small dam into Upper Waban Brook and then into Lake Waban. The area used to be wooded with a mix of pines and deciduous trees. There was a swamp between Paintshop Pond and Lake Waban, which attracted birds. Dead trees in the swamp made good perching spots. Occasionally, I would see a Great Crested Flycatcher or an Eastern Kingbird sitting on one. The swamp, with its dense undergrowth, was a favorite place for Yellow Warblers, American Redstarts, and Common Yellowthroats. One year a pair of Blue-gray Gnatcatchers may have nested there. Large cattails grew near the border of Lake Waban, attracting birds like Marsh Wren and Swamp Sparrow. Birds such as Warbling Vireos and Baltimore Orioles were common. Every spring I could count on seeing Wood Ducks in this swamp. It was the only place I had seen rattlesnake fern, the largest of the grape ferns. Cinnamon and royal ferns could be found here as well as skunk cabbages and little hillocks of grass.

The wooded hillsides around Paintshop Pond attracted Wood Thrushes as well as other birds. The narrow pond was a great place for Hooded Mergansers and an occasional Pied-billed Grebe. Other ducks such as Common Mergansers and Green-winged Teal could be seen on the pond occasionally. Once, an unusual visitor, a male Canvasback, stayed for a week. Although I never had a very rare bird, Paintshop Pond was a fun area to bird.

Remnants of the old paint factory were visible. When there weren't many birds around, I would stand on the old dam and watch the brownish water flow into Upper Waban Brook. Some of the dead branches in the brook had been there for years. The

stream was six to eight feet below ground level and lined with old stone walls covered with ferns and moss. There were remnants of brick foundations near the dam at the lower end of the pond, the remains of the Henry Wood's Sons paint factory. Although I knew little about the paint factory, I had walked around the ruins many times.

Before moving to Wellesley Lower Falls, Henry Wood, an English emigrant, had opened a pigment-grinding business in Boston. He moved again to what was then called Natick Brook and established the Henry Wood's Sons paint factory in 1848. It operated until 1928 when it closed due to financial problems. At the peak of its success, from 1897 to 1910, the factory produced six tons of paint pigments per day. The factory also made tinted Portland cement and artists' oil paint in tubes. It was quite an operation, with living quarters for the employees and the owner. There was even a railroad spur that crossed Upper Waban Brook.

To prevent further industrialization, Wellesley College purchased the paint factory site in 1932. The remaining buildings were torn down, leaving just the foundations. In 1975 Wellesley College was informed by the state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), then called the Department of Environmental Quality and Engineering (DEQE), that the site posed a serious public health hazard. High levels of lead and chromium had been found in the paint pigments at the old factory site. The Henry Wood's Sons paint factory had contaminated a site of roughly sixteen acres by dumping 100 pounds of lead waste into the water every day. The area would have to be cleaned up at an enormous cost. [Editor's note: The Wellesley College Public Relations Department puts the total cost of cleanup and reconstruction at \$40,000,000.]

Working with the DEP and other agencies, the college developed a cleanup plan. This major project would take a year and a half to complete. It involved clearing about thirty acres of land east of Paintshop Pond and south of Route 135. All the trees, vegetation, and wetlands would have to be removed. Paintshop Pond would be drained. All the bad soil, an estimated 36,000 cubic yards of soil and sediment, would be excavated and taken away or treated. The area would be filled with clean soil and the wetlands re-created by introducing a variety of plants and shrubs. A "clean pad" would be created above the water table. This would serve as an engineered barrier to prevent the leaching of contaminants into the groundwater.



Figure 1: Restoration of Paintshop Pond. Photograph courtesy of Wellesley College.

Work started in March of 2001 and lasted into the fall of 2002. During this time I didn't do much birding in the area. Occasionally I would view the progress of the project by walking along the ridge west of Paintshop Pond. This higher area was some distance away, requiring binoculars to see what was going on. I was amazed that the whole area looked like a huge open pit mine, the kind you would see out west. The whole site had been bulldozed and excavated by large earth-moving equipment. I

was surprised by the large scope of the project. Even though I knew it had to be done, it was sad to see the site completely demolished.

During the project I learned that most of the site would be converted to playing fields, a move that would be bad for birds and all wildlife. I feared that no good habitat would be available. The most a birder could expect would be a Canada Goose. Although I realized the college had to do something with the land and needed more playing fields, as a birder I felt bad. What I didn't know then was that the wetlands would be re-created and Paintshop Pond filled once more with water. There is a law that wetlands must be reestablished.

My thoughts were confirmed when I first saw the completed site in the fall of 2003. The area looked completely sterile, with few trees. Four large playing fields dominated the landscape. The new Paintshop Pond looked quite different, as did the reconstructed marsh between Lake Waban and the pond. The entire area was open and flat with no dead trees. The marsh dumped into the lake and resembled an alluvial plain. A boardwalk across the new marsh had replaced part of the old path and seemed out of place. Three benches had been constructed on the boardwalk, however, indicating that wildlife viewing may have been considered. The dam on the pond had been completely rebuilt as had the stone work lining the banks of Upper Waban Brook. There was no moss on these stones, but the work had been nicely done. A marsh had been created on the east bank of Paintshop Pond. I learned later that this acre of marsh was more than what was required. The entire area had been transformed, and only the new marsh offered potential habitat.

I didn't return to the "complex" until early winter of 2004, I believe in February. I started my walk around the playing fields, which are arranged in a tri-level fashion. At the bottom field, which has a track encircling it, I noticed a few birds in the distance near the dam. When I got to the dam they were gone. I walked down to the boardwalk and was halfway across when I spotted an eastern bluebird in the marsh. There was a flock of six bluebirds that seemed to like the short marsh grass. This was my first clue that I might see significant birds here. I had seen a few other birds such as Red-tailed Hawk and Chipping Sparrows.



Figure 2: Upper Waban Brook emptying into Lake Waban. **Left:** 2004, Clark Ewer photograph; **Right:** September 2005, John Marsh photograph.

When I visited the site several times in March and April of 2004, I observed Hooded Mergansers on Paintshop Pond. Seeing them was a welcome surprise since these ducks prefer secluded spots. I saw an Osprey catch a fish in the pond in April.

By May and June I felt better about the reconstructed area. In mid-May I discovered a flock of ten Least Sandpipers, some Killdeer, and two or three Spotted Sandpipers putting on a good show. The boardwalk offered me excellent looks at the Least Sandpipers running around and looking for food. I was so close I didn't need binoculars. The sandpipers stayed for a few weeks, before dwindling to one bird. During this time I also had a Solitary Sandpiper and a Greater Yellowlegs. The mudflats of the new marsh were good for shorebirds. To my surprise, the Spotted Sandpipers and Killdeer were still there in mid-June. The Killdeer may have been nesting.



Figure 3: Boardwalk entrance to the project site. **Left:** 2004, Clark Ewer photograph; **Right:** September, 2005, John Marsh photograph.

The birding was now completely different. With the loss of the dense swamp vegetation, there were no more Yellow Warblers or Common Yellowthroats. American Redstarts no longer sang. Marsh Wrens and Swamp Sparrows were missing. There were no dead trees for perching. All the woodlands had been replaced by playing fields with only newly planted small trees. There were no Wood Thrushes or Wood Ducks.

But some land birds did like the newly created environment. Song Sparrows seemed always present. Orioles and mockingbirds preferred the small trees. Chipping Sparrows and goldfinches were common in the perimeter areas. There was even a small flock of Savannah Sparrows during much of May. Eastern Kingbirds and various blackbirds took residence. Several types of swallows could be seen flying around the dam area. I observed at least five Bank Swallows swooping over the brook. An immature Red-tailed Hawk was seen frequently, often perching in a tree. One day I saw him soaked by the rain, sitting on a post for over an hour.

Waterfowl also frequented the new area. Carolyn and John Marsh, who have birded the site since March 2003, have seen various ducks there. Their list includes American Wigeon, Ring-necked Duck, Green-winged Teal, Common Merganser, and Hooded Merganser. They have also found two winnowing Wilson's Snipe. As

expected, Canada Geese have raised young at the pond. The site is very good for sparrows, of which the Marshes have seen large numbers. In the fall of 2003 they had a high count of at least thirty Song Sparrows. In October of the same year they saw over 100 Chipping Sparrows. They have seen a few species of warblers, including Yellow-rumped, Blackpoll, and Palm. Their list since March 2003 totals forty species.

The feeling of the old Paintshop Pond is now gone, but the new site is unique. The open elevated playing fields allow a splendid vista of Lake Waban. The topiary and the Hunnewell mansion are clearly visible on the other side of the lake. This is a new view of a lake mostly surrounded by trees. It is a great place to watch the sky and may be good for hawk observation. The site has also increased the number of habitats: marsh, pond, brook, dam, playing fields, small tree perimeter, small mudflats, lake, and outlying forest. More habitats may mean more species of birds, even though the playing fields are not good habitat and take up a much of the area. I guess one could call it a “mixed environment.” A paved path has been created between the track and Paintshop Pond. From this path I can scan the entire pond and some of the marsh. I can see birds in the small marsh, the “extra acre” along the eastside of Paintshop Pond.

As I suspected, the transformation of the Paintshop Pond landscape had a major impact on the birds. The swamp-loving birds are gone, but, fortunately, other species have moved in. The birding here is interesting and unexpected, and may well become even better once the new trees get a bit larger. Continuing to monitor the changing avifauna should be an interesting challenge. 🐦

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