

AN INTRODUCTION TO WINTER BIRDING AT QUABBIN

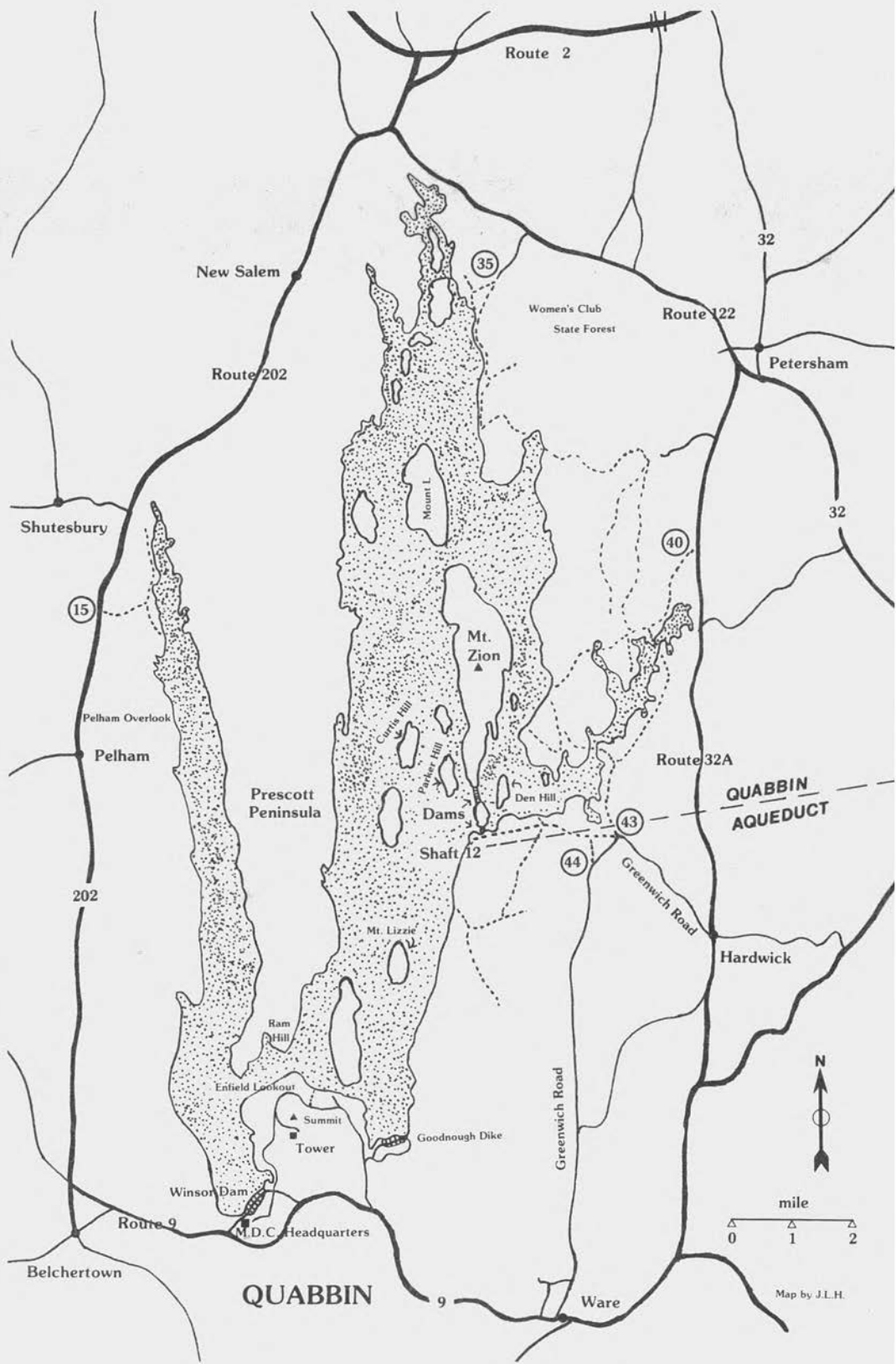
by Mark Lynch, Worcester

Winter birding in Massachusetts can be symbolized in a few distinct images: a Harlequin drake off Bass Rocks on Cape Ann, a Snowy Owl on Plum Island, and a Bald Eagle soaring the icy skies over Quabbin Reservoir. Indeed, for many observers, Quabbin is the premier place to see these majestic raptors. However, Quabbin also offers much exciting birding for the hale and hearty birder as well as for those who prefer to stay close to the reassuring warmth of a well-heated automobile. In this article I will discuss a few of the winter birding possibilities at Quabbin. I emphasize few, because Quabbin and the surrounding area is such a vast wilderness. Keep in mind that compared to areas such as Cape Cod, Quabbin only recently came into being and that its ornithological exploration is still in its infancy. Quabbin awaits its Griscom, Thayer or Forbush.

A Little Background and Some Statistics.

Let us begin by stating the obvious: Quabbin was not always there: originally it was the peaceful and beautiful Swift River Valley: the name comes from the Nipmuck Indian word for "meeting of the waters"- Qaben. Later, white settlers pushed out the Indians and founded the towns of Prescott, Enfield, Dana and Greenwich. By the late 1920s, metropolitan water planners began to consider the feasibility of creating a reservoir in the valley to help alleviate the water needs of Boston. There is a strange and melancholy history surrounding the displacement of 3500 residents. By 1939, the destruction of the above-mentioned towns and the construction of the reservoir was complete, and by 1946, the valley was flooded. Thomas Conuel has written an entertaining and informative book about Quabbin, Quabbin: The Accidental Wilderness, published by the Massachusetts Audubon Society in 1981. Mr. Conuel has included some photos of the original residents and buildings of these lost towns that can only be described as haunting, adding an eerie dimension to any visit to the region.

Quabbin as it exists today is one of the largest wild areas in Massachusetts. It is managed by the Metropolitan District Commission. It is 18 miles long, with the entire watershed being 186 square miles. There are 118 miles of shoreline, and at its maximum, the water is 150 feet deep. This all adds up to the gargantuan total of 412 billion gallons of water. The Quabbin landforms include islands (formerly mountains), evergreen, mixed, and deciduous forests, streams, ponds and swamps. Besides birds, wildlife includes Bobcat, Black Bear, Coyote, Mink, River Otter, Fisher, and Beaver, as well as the more typical Porcupine, Raccoon, and Woodchuck. Most amazing are the persistent, albeit very



rare, reports by responsible observers of mountain lion, thought to be absent from the northeast since the late 1880s.

The towns now bordering the reservoir are Ware, Hardwick, Petersham, New Salem, Shutesbury, Pelham, Orange and Belchertown. Quabbin is easily reached via the Massachusetts Turnpike, Routes 9, 122 or 2. A glance at any roadmap will reveal this largest inland body of water in Massachusetts, looking like a sky blue amoeba stretching toward the north and south borders of the central part of the state.

A Word of Caution.

The time period covered by this article is from late fall to early spring with a primary focus on winter. It is recommended that you NOT explore Quabbin during the deer-hunting season, which generally falls somewhere between late November and early December. Some of the gate accesses to southern Quabbin are closed at this season to discourage poachers, and as I was warned by MDC police, it is plain stupid to walk around the woods at this time without bright orange clothing.

Also serious is the very real possibility of frostbite and hypothermia. Quabbin can get frighteningly cold in January and February, and the wind whipping across the vast expanse of frozen water compounds the problem. I have seen birders at the Enfield Lookout standing outside their cars for only a few minutes contract the first symptoms of frostbite. Learn to recognize frostbite and how to treat it. For walking, especially longer hikes, proper clothing is essential. Appropriate thermal covering for head, ears, hands and feet is the rule for any extended winter hike into Quabbin. Winter birding here is often the litmus test of just how good one's long underwear really is! On long hikes, know your limitations, and don't overextend yourself. Food, and especially water, should always be carried. The sense of solitude and peace that one experiences far outweighs the difficulty of proper preparation for a long walk into this wilderness.

South Quabbin.

For many observers, the ornithological exploration of Quabbin starts here. Access is simple and there is no need to wander far from the car. There are three major entrances to Quabbin along the north side of Route 9, a few miles west of the town of Ware. The gates are generally opened from about 7 A.M. until dusk, but access may be delayed if there has been snowfall the night before, and the MDC is plowing the roads. We will start our trip by entering the gate farthest west, turning north at the sign for Winsor Dam and the MDC Police Headquarters. In short order you arrive at the MDC Headquarters on your right and a car pull-off with a nice overlook on the left. Rest rooms, usually deliciously heated, are down the stairs on either side of

the overlook. If it is prior to freeze-up (usually January) carefully scan the water for loons, all three species of grebes, and for diving ducks, and gulls. Ospreys will occasionally fly by, especially in November. Black Ducks usually hug the shore to the left. A peninsula also on the left and somewhat distant contains at times a sitting Bald Eagle, especially after freeze up. (As a rule, in winter, one should carefully check all trees along any visible shore at Quabbin for eagles.) There are several small fruiting trees around the overlook and building that may contain Evening Grosbeaks and waxwings. If there has been a lot of snow, check the bushes on the far side of the wall of the overlook near the entrances to the bathrooms. I have kicked up Ruffed Grouse here on several occasions.

Continue driving past the building and over the Winsor Dam. This earthen dam is 2640 feet long and 170 feet above the riverbed. The road swings right after leaving the dam and you are faced with three choices: straight, which takes you back to Route 9; left through a gate to Quabbin Summit, Enfield Lookout, and Goodnough Dike; or sharp right on a short road that dead ends at a power station. Taking the right, the road rapidly descends in back of the dam and ends in a small parking lot. The pines here often shelter Ruffed Grouse, both nuthatches, kinglets, Brown Creeper, Black-capped Chickadee and, very rarely, a Boreal Chickadee. On your way back up the road you will notice another stand of pines on your right that contains many of the same species.

Continue across the road, through the gate towards Quabbin Summit. It was on the left that I saw my "life" Gyrfalcon attacking two Red-tailed Hawks perched in the trees. You would have to have extraordinary luck to duplicate that experience; however, the Red-tails often perch here and, rarely, a Bald Eagle (especially in the morning). If there is no eagle here, be sure to check the trees on a small peninsula on the far side of the small inlet on the left. Before freeze-up, Buffleheads can usually be seen swimming and diving here. Continue along the road checking for grouse and for chickadees, Tree Sparrows and other passerines. I have even seen several Turkeys along here, but that was the Sunday following the close of the deer season, and traffic had not been permitted in the area for a week. Especially if there has been a fresh snow, watch for turkey tracks on the sides of the road wherever you are at Quabbin. They are about twice the size of the Ruffed Grouse's tracks and sometimes, with luck, you may follow the trail to their source. However, Wild Turkeys are very wary birds, and they will probably hear you coming long before you see them. Turkeys are massive birds and in late fall and early winter can be heard noisily shuffling through the fallen leaves.

At the rotary, turn right up to the tower at Quabbin Summit. In the parking lot, there is often a small flock of Snow

Buntings though their plumage may make them hard to see against the background. Occasionally hawks, mostly Red-tails, will be seen from the hill, but generally, the tower/hill area in winter is too cold to make the stop worthwhile. Retrace your route back to the rotary, continue east along the road, and shortly you will come to a pulloff on the left - the well-known Enfield Lookout. During winter weekends this spot can be crowded with eager eagle watchers, and for good reason. The chances of seeing an eagle here, especially from late December on, are excellent, and you can often scan for them from the warmth and comfort of your car.

The total number of eagles at Quabbin fluctuates due to weather conditions. As few as eight and as many as twenty-two have been counted during the official winter eagle census of the Division of Fish and Wildlife. What one overlooks at the Enfield Lookout is the southern tip of the Prescott Peninsula, a large finger of land (off limits to the public) stretching the length of the Quabbin. Because of its access restrictions, birders' imaginations leap at the possibilities of this vast wild area. It is this pristine aspect that probably attracts the eagles and turkeys, but the thought of opening up the Prescott Peninsula to any form of recreation makes me cringe. Facing out from the Enfield Lookout one sees an obvious hill on the right of this part of the Prescott Peninsula (Ram Hill), and the land flows off to the left and terminates. The peninsula continues north and away from the Enfield observer. Eagles are often seen flying over the Prescott Peninsula on clear windy days, usually around 9:00 A.M. or a little later. They may often perch on any tree there, but careful and persistent scoping is necessary to reveal their presence. Most birds will be immatures, but full adult birds are often present. Very rarely, a Golden Eagle will put in a brief appearance. It is beyond the scope of this article to review points in identification of a species, but birders should use extreme caution in calling a Golden Eagle, as it is a bird often confused with the immature Bald Eagle. By and large, the very few Golden Eagles that appear in Quabbin seem to favor the more northern, remote areas of the reservoir. When Quabbin freezes, the eagles that remain become scavengers. Occasionally a deer will die, and the carcass becomes the focus of intense eagle activity. Sometimes a deer carcass from a road-kill or dog-kill is put out on the ice by the MDC or Massachusetts Fish and Wildlife personnel in a location visible from the Enfield Lookout, at which time the chances of seeing eagles increase dramatically.

There is other birding to do here besides eagle watching. This is a good place to scan for Wild Turkeys, which have been introduced on the Prescott Peninsula. Be sure to scope carefully Ram Hill, the smaller hills, and the edges of the forests on the peninsula. Turkeys are easier to spot when there is snow on the ground, and they appear as slow-moving

large black rocks. A severe winter may make them more obvious at this end of the peninsula, as they are forced to search out acorns and other food. The chances of seeing turkeys here are not the best, but every effort should be made to search for them as they are seen every year.

Before freeze-up, the water between Enfield Lookout and Prescott Peninsula often contains grebes, mergansers, Black and other ducks. Winter finches sometimes pass overhead, and Northern Shrikes occasionally put in an appearance. A birder doing only south Quabbin should plan on spending at least an hour at the Enfield Lookout, unless the weather is inclement.

Tearing yourself away from Enfield Lookout can be difficult, but continuing east along the road about 0.7 mile will bring you to a large open area on the left with picnic tables and an extensive area of low scrubby bushes sometimes called "the blueberry patch." A walk down to the water here (it is longer than it looks) at times offers views of eagles and, before freeze-up, grebes and ducks. The blueberry patch is also home to grouse, chickadees, sparrows, and in the winter of 1982-83, at least one Northern Shrike was often visible, perched on top of the bushes.

One half-mile further along, on the sharp left, is Gate 52. The walk down to the water is not too long and may afford the birder somewhat closer looks at eagles. Prior to freeze-up, this is a good place to check for ducks, especially mergansers, early in the morning (look across to the waters near the island). Grouse and the common winter passeriformes are found in the trees. Watch for Beavers, or at least signs of beaver activity, along the stream and at the water's edge. I have sometimes found a Beaver in the culvert under the Gate 52 road in the winter.

Proceeding on towards the Goodnough Dike, look for Tree Sparrows along the road and, if the water is open, ducks. Two miles from Gate 52, take a left to the dike (continuing straight will bring you out to Route 9). The road soon forks, but it is a loop and you can take either road. The left goes directly to the dike. Just prior to the rotary at the dike, there is a large pulloff on the left. Stop here and carefully scope the opposite shore for a perched Bald Eagle, and scan the skies for flying birds. Drive across the dike, where the road swings right and down behind the dike. You will see a small marshy area on your left, with water that often stays open long into winter. This is an excellent place for sparrows, and the dead trees are attractive to jays and woodpeckers. I have also seen Northern Shrike here. Continue along the road and eventually out to Route 9.

Stopping and searching anywhere in south Quabbin that looks

promising can produce birds like Barred and Saw-whet owls, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Pine and Evening grosbeaks, both nuthatches, creeper, and Black-capped Chickadee.

A Quick Tour Around Quabbin.

Coming out to Route 9 from the Goodnough Dike, take a left (east) on Route 9 toward Ware. About 1.9 miles along, you will see a farm on the left with a large open field. A flock of turkeys has been spotted, off and on, in this field during the past couple of years, primarily in the morning and late afternoon. Only time will tell if this amazing occurrence of seeing Wild Turkeys from your car on Route 9 will be repeated. I have seen Northern Shrike in the trees on the opposite side of the road. If you drive 1.8 miles east from the red barn at the farm, you will see, appropriately enough, Eagle Street on the left. Take Eagle Street to Crescent Street. Turn right and stay on Crescent until you come to Greenwich Road on the left. Greenwich Road runs up the east side of Quabbin to the town of Hardwick. Approximately 7.3 miles north on Greenwich you will come to Gate 44 on the left. Parking is limited here especially after snow.

Gate 44 offers access to one of several favorite hikes into some of the more remote areas of Quabbin. Birders wishing to hike in here should be prepared to hike four to five miles, though mostly on paved or hardpacked surfaces. Winter conditions often make these roads icy, and walking can be tricky for those not surefooted. Once packed up and ready, walk around the gate and down the road until it is intersected by another paved road: Gate 43. Turn left and begin the long hike to Shaft 12 and the baffle dams. Birds along this road can be few and far between, but the diligent and quiet observer may find Ruffed Grouse and Pileated Woodpecker. There are two small marshy areas along this road (one on each side) that are attractive to sparrows and Yellow-rumped Warblers. The dead trees often have Downy and Hairy woodpeckers. After what can seem like a cold eternity, the paved road will dead end at a stone building by some pines and picnic tables. This is Shaft 12. To the left of the building and across the waters lie the Prescott Peninsula and Mount Lizzie and to the right of the building Mt. Zion and the baffle dams. This is an excellent area for eagles, especially if you can time your arrival for early morning. Before freeze-up, look for loons, grebes, and diving ducks, including even scoters. In the pines are apt to be chickadees, both nuthatches, and occasionally lingering Yellow-rumped Warblers. Patience and quiet are required in watching eagles here. Try to stay under the pines and not in the open. From here on carefully check for Golden Eagles, for one or two usually winter. Also watch for ravens, especially if there is a carcass on the ice. The Common Raven, though still a rarity here, is increasing and with recent reports of breeding at Quabbin, may optimistically be looked

for. Again, caution in identification is advised. I have heard crow vocalizations that could be mistaken for those of a raven.

Returning up the Gate 43 road, watch for a dirt road on the left, a few hundred yards from Shaft 12. This is the road to the baffle dams and Mount Zion. After heavy snow, this road can be difficult going. The baffle dams help circulate and clean the water from the Ware River. Before you get to the first baffle dam, look for typical winter birds: grouse, chickadees, nuthatches, as well as lingering Yellow-rumped Warblers, an occasional late Winter Wren, and Pileated Woodpecker. Pileateds, at least in the northern part of their range, are shy and elusive. They may drop off a tree and fly low directly away at the first sound of human presence, thus escaping undetected. However, they also fly from one area to another, sometimes above the trees in sight; so watch the skies. I find these magnificent birds every bit as exciting to watch as eagles. Scan the water on either side of the dam, while still under the cover of trees, for loons, grebes and ducks. Walk across the dam and follow the path north along the east side of a small island. This small island usually seems to hold little other than the typical winter birds. Always keep a sharp lookout for eagles, taking time to scan the skies and trees, and be sure to check for a carcass. This whole area is an especially good place to watch for Coyotes and, rarely, Bobcats. Soon you will come to the second, longer baffle dam that stretches north to Mount Zion and where the trail ends. To the east is Den Hill and Island and the mainland; to the west: Parker Hill Island, Curtis Hill Island, and in the distance, the Prescott Peninsula. This second baffle dam is an excellent place to watch for eagles, but remember to stay out of sight. What I love to do is cross the dam to Zion and wait under the cover of some trees. Even though there may not be a carcass about, patience will usually be rewarded with some exciting views of eagles, and who knows, maybe a Golden Eagle or a raven. The trail continues for a little while on Zion and then ends. The usual birds are found here, but I have also found signs of turkey. Mount Zion is a very long island, and only the hearty should try to walk over it to its northern tip; but by scouting around some distance on either side (especially to the east), you can look into areas not previously visible that may harbor eagles. Although you may be tempted, **DO NOT** walk on the ice. The Quabbin Reservoir Quadrangle geological survey map is helpful in understanding your exact position. This entire hike is easily a day trip. Returning to your car (easier said than done), proceed north along Greenwich Road about 0.5 mile to the Gate 43 parking area, very obvious on the left. This can be the starting point of yet another great adventure.

Facing Gate 43, you have several choices. Straight will lead to the Gate 44 intersection and eventually Shaft 12.

If you go straight a little and then bear right, you will soon come to a little nook of the Quabbin where eagles have occasionally been seen. (I have found Eastern Bluebirds here in March.) If you take the immediate paved road to right, this leads to the Gate 43 fishing area, a walk of about 1.7 miles that can be rewarding. In the morning, in flight years, listen for winter finches overhead. The typical Quabbin winter birds including the Pileated Woodpecker are found along the road. Great Horned Owls nest along this road, usually in old crow or squirrel nests; and Barred Owls can show up anywhere. Rarities have been found along here such as Gray Jay and Black-backed Woodpecker; but experience has shown that you should be satisfied with a Brown Creeper or kinglet. When you finally reach the water, you will cross a bridge over a spillway from Hardwick into Petersham. Before freeze-up check both sides for loons, grebes, and ducks. When fishing season is in full swing, this area is packed with sportsmen, but in winter it is usually deserted. The road goes by a small wooden shack and curves to the right and into the woods. If one were to follow this path, it would eventually lead to the Gate 40 road. After heavy snows this stretch between the fishing area and Gate 40 can be impassable. This walk should not be attempted except in early winter or in spring. To avoid hiking this stretch both out and back, birders can park one of two cars at Gate 40, ride to Gate 43 to park the second car, hike in at that point, and then ride back. This offers excellent winter birding opportunities with good chances for eagles, hawks, owls, woodpeckers, as well as the more typical woodland birds. Geological survey maps, a compass, a quiet manner, and a good sense of direction are valuable aids.

Back at the fishing area, you can cross the sandy area to the main body of Quabbin and scan in all directions for eagles. By moving north along the shoreline one will come across several inlets and views of areas where eagles can be seen. Give this whole area some time, be patient, and remain inconspicuous whenever possible. The Gate 43 fishing area is perfect for a day's birding. Both paved roads are usually kept plowed during the winter for MDC workers need access to Shaft 12 and to the spillway area.

Back in your car (you may be getting exhausted by now), proceed on Greenwich Road 2.7 miles to the center of Hardwick, a small, pretty New England town. In spring, Turkey Vultures pass by overhead, and usually there are flocks of sparrows and Evening Grosbeaks, and other birds in town. Turn left on to 32A and follow it 6.7 miles to the entrance to Gate 40 on the left. This gate offers birding opportunities similar to Gate 43, but also has historical interest because the Gate 40 road passes through the town common of the former town of North Dana of pre-reservoir days. It is a long hike from this gate to the main body of Quabbin but worthwhile. A marshy area on the left features many ducks and sparrows.

From this spot I have watched good numbers of Turkey Vultures in early spring. Back on Route 32A, continue from Gate 40 3.1 miles to the junction of Route 122 and turn left, heading west, 4 miles to the Federated Women's Club State Forest on the left. This area offers fine spring and summer birding, but I know nothing of winter birding here. There are many evergreens, and the area has possibilities for future exploration; and there is access here to Quabbin. One-half mile beyond this state forest on 122 you will notice an unnamed road on your left. As of this writing there is a sign facing away from you that says "122, Petersham 5 miles/Barre 13." Also there is usually a sign featuring pies for sale. Take this road, and follow it for a mile until it dead ends at Gate 35, which is unmarked.

Of the gates in this area this is my favorite. Park, go through the gate and take the road on the left, which soon takes a swing right and goes straight to the reservoir. This is a much shorter walk to the water than the hike from Gate 40 or 43. The road passes under some power lines where you should check for hawks, shrikes, and sparrows. The reservoir is on the right as you walk south along northeast Quabbin and the Prescott Peninsula is to the west. Before freeze-up this area is excellent for ducks, especially Hooded and Common mergansers as well as for Bald Eagles or even Golden Eagle. Walk south on this trail as far as you can (the road eventually swings inland). There are several small islands here where eagles often perch on the trees. The island to the south is Mount L, and eagles can be seen soaring here and over the peninsula. Late in winter, activity here slows down. This is a perfect place for a day hike, and early mornings are best. Continuing west on 122 for 2.9 miles will bring you to Route 202, which you can take south towards Route 9.

Quickly Along Route 202.

In general, west Quabbin is the least familiar to eastern birders, the author included. I have only begun to explore it. About 2.8 miles south on 202 from the junction with 122, there is a small, almost insignificant pulloff on the left overlooking north Prescott Peninsula. Eagles are sometimes seen here. Nearly eight (7.7) miles farther along (10.5 miles from 122) you will see Gate 15. I have never birded here in the winter, but in the summer of 1983, ravens were reported to have nested here. Walk down the path until you get to a "T." Follow the path right until it ends at the water. Here ravens were seen by several observers during the summer, as well as summering loons. An Acadian Flycatcher was in the hemlocks by the stream in the summer of 1983. This may be a good place to check out in the winter; it is only about a mile hike. South from Gate 15 (1.6 miles) you will reach the scenic Pelham Overlook on the left with an obvious area to pull over. Eagles may be seen soaring over Prescott Peninsula, and ravens and winter finches are often reported from this spot. From the Pelham Overlook it is 8 miles to the junction of Routes 9 and 202.

I have only touched on a small number of winter birding possibilities at Quabbin - including some of my favorites. You may have some of your own. No one has yet fully explored all of Quabbin's exciting birding possibilities, but the best way to start is simply to find a gate and walk in. The birding picture is still developing with the possibility of nesting ravens and with the program of releasing captive immature Bald Eagles. Quabbin is a recent wilderness and may yet be colonized by additional species. What a joy it would be to see Bald Eagles nesting there. A fine article about the eagle release program's first efforts written by William J. Davis appeared in the March-April 1983 issue of Massachusetts Wildlife. However, the future of Quabbin is far from trouble free. Acid rain poses a very real threat to the entire Quabbin ecosystem. There is also mounting pressure from hunters, fishermen, cross-country skiers, snowmobilers, and hikers to open up even more areas to increased recreation. Right now Quabbin combines a delicate balance of the remote and the accessible, and this is what makes it so attractive. There is more than enough area currently open to explore, hike, and bird. It is truly one of the great wild treasures of Massachusetts.

MARK LYNCH teaches a course on birding in the Worcester Adult Education system. An experienced birder in the U.S., he has also studied birds in Mexico, Costa Rica and Panama. Mark is an instructor at the Worcester Art Museum and head of the rock music department at WICN Public Radio Station in Worcester.



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THE EAGLE PROJECT

The Audubon Society of New Hampshire (ASNH) is seeking to identify local eagle wintering areas, including perch sites, feeding areas, and night roosts, and to record behavior patterns and food habits of eagles wintering in New Hampshire and vicinity. This data will be used to help minimize the effects of possible winter oil spills in New Hampshire and nearby waters. The findings will also be used in planning energy development projects in the Merrimack Valley and along the coast, so that such projects will have minimal effect on the eagle population of the region.

ASNH asks that you inform them of any eagle sightings in New Hampshire or adjacent areas, providing as much detail as possible on the bird's plumage. Also note the date, time, and exact location of the sighting, and if any colored wing tags or leg bands were seen.

Last year, Bird Observer (December 1982) published a sixteen-page article on eagle identification. The article included two pages of blank eagle silhouettes that are easily photocopied. Plumages can be "sketched in" on the photocopy of the eagle silhouettes, which would make an excellent report form.

Whatever form your eagle sighting reports are in, please send them to: Eagle Project (NHESP), Audubon Society of New Hampshire, P.O. Box 528-B, Concord, NH 03301. The author and illustrator of the eagle identification article, Paul and Julie Roberts, would also appreciate copies of reports on eagle plumages. Please mail these to 254 Arlington Street, Medford, MA 02155.

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