

## BIRDING THE MUDDY RIVER

by Kenneth Hudson, Boston

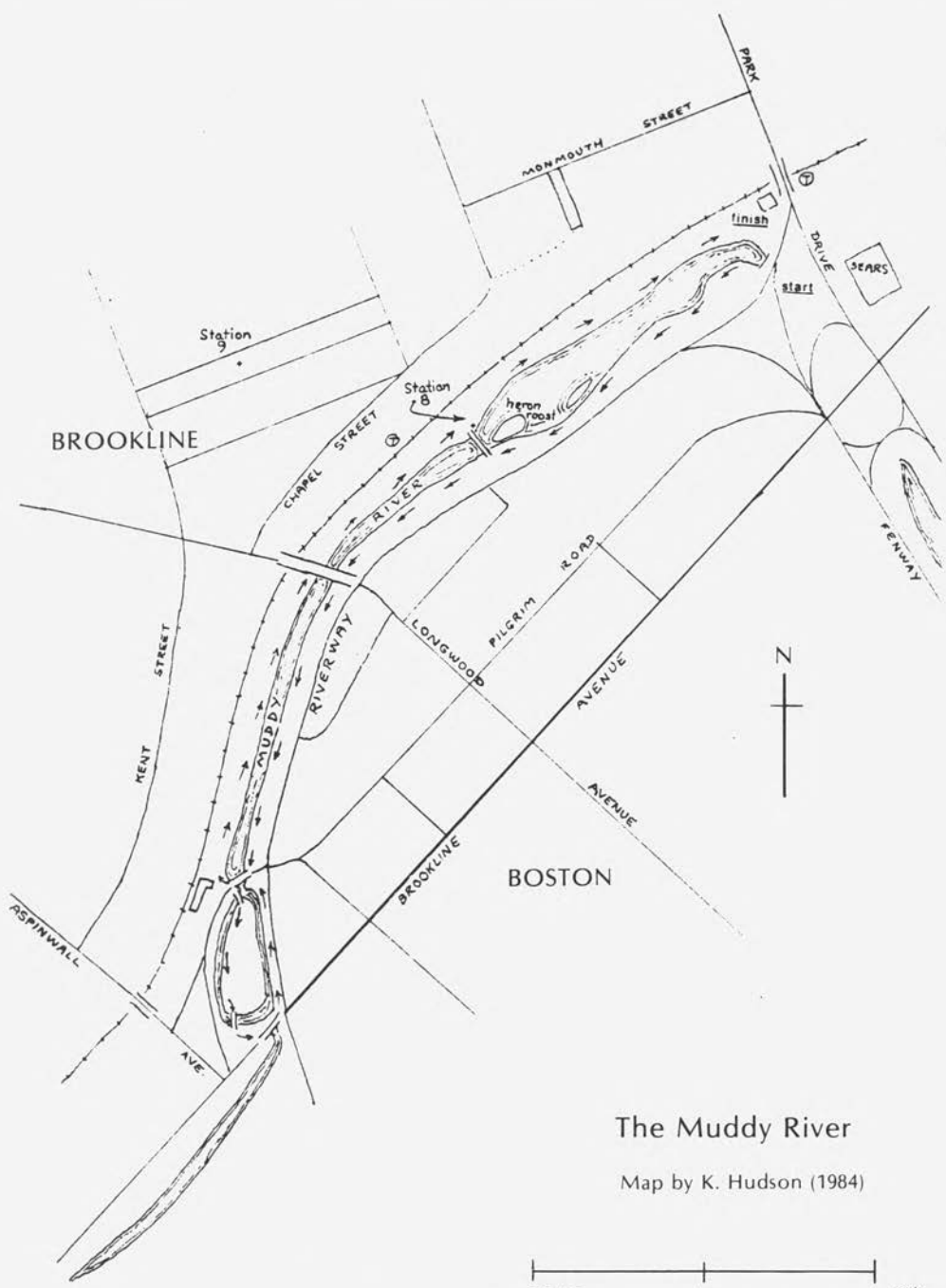
The section of the Muddy River that I will report on here forms part of the boundary between Boston and Brookline, just east and south of the MBTA Riverside trolley tracks. It is bounded on the north by Park Drive, on the southeast by the Riverway, on the south by Brookline Avenue, and on the west by the trolley line. A fairly spry individual can easily do a thorough and leisurely job of birding the area during the course of a comfortable forty-five minute stroll - including the time required to double back along the opposite bank to return to the starting point. An early start is strongly recommended in order to avoid rush-hour noise disturbance from automobile traffic and from the commuter trolleys.

Note the pair of Bur Oaks at the very start of this walk, just across the street from the Sears building. Sometimes the ground beneath these trees is liberally strewn with huge fringe-cupped acorns. In December of 1983, an immature Red-headed Woodpecker lingered here for a week or more, gleaning acorns from the ground as a Blue Jay would. From the middle of May into the late summer you should find kingbirds in the upper branches. In proper flycatcher fashion, these belligerent birds dash out over the stream to snap up flying insects, then promptly return to their original perch. The loud, sputtering, angry-sounding calls can be heard clearly even when the birds are hidden by the foliage.

Along the streambanks grow dense ranks of lofty reeds - phragmites, to be precise - that provide shelter for a number of birds and other organisms. Redwings and night-herons are to be expected in considerable numbers during the milder months. Although the blackbirds tend to depart before the end of summer, one or two herons may linger quite a bit later, sometimes until the water freezes over in December. A complete list of all species of birds observed in these reeds would, I suspect, surprise many birders. Flocks of chickadees, song sparrows, Blue Jays, goldfinches, and even Downy Woodpeckers industriously search for food among the swaying stalks. Once I literally ducked to avoid being struck in the head by a nighthawk that had swooped low in hot pursuit of some six-legged morsel. On another occasion, a Red-tailed Hawk flew past almost at arm's length, grasping the bloody carcass of a plump rodent.

Farther south along the path, which is fine for walking or cycling, you will come to a long narrow sandbar or island that has been thickly overgrown with a variety of trees and shrubs. This is a fine place to look for birds: Green-backed Herons occur every summer, and night-herons fish and roost here; a kingfisher, sometimes a pair of them, can appear at any season if the water is free of ice; and during May and again in autumn, a myriad of warblers throng the bushes. One tree on this little islet looks to me like a Kentucky Coffee-tree. Note the Sweetgum trees while you are here. One grows by the path opposite either tip of the island, the characteristic reddish-brown seed clusters hanging from the twigs in the fall or littering the path in winter.

The next island is greatly favored by night-herons as a roosting place. As many as a dozen birds at a time might use it, but unless the light



### The Muddy River

Map by K. Hudson (1984)



is very good or the herons are moving about, it is amazing how hard it can be to see them all. That a creature of this large size and so boldly patterned can so easily escape detection while perched on the limb of a small tree in broad daylight never fails to surprise and amuse me.

At the small stone footbridge just south of the heron roost, pause for a few minutes to look and listen. This is an excellent spot for spring birding that is rarely visited for that purpose. I am not speaking of rarities, but of a fine assortment of common landbirds that can be easily and comfortably observed by an average birdwatcher or alert novice. Both waterthrushes have been heard here as well as a decent number of warbler and sparrow species, Warbling and Red-eyed vireos, tanagers and grosbeaks, wood-pewee, Chimney Swift, and kestrel - the characteristic suburban garden species. The second half of May is best, naturally, other seasons tending to be less spectacularly productive, but with a little luck, perseverance, and alertness, you can do very well birding here, whatever the month. In spring I often use a portable tape recorder to preserve the songs and calls until I get home to sort them out at my leisure. The music coming at you from every direction, the experience can be likened to trying to follow several separate and distinct conversations at one time - each parley being conducted in a different language!

From this spot southward, to and beyond the Longwood Avenue bridge, the action quickly becomes less intense. In winter, you might find only a few chickadees, titmice, nuthatches, cardinals, and woodpeckers - plus the puddle ducks, of course. American Black Ducks far outnumber Mallards from midautumn through early spring, whereas in summer the reverse is true. The current here usually keeps this stretch of the Muddy River mostly free of ice except during severe cold spells. Even then, however, a few ducks usually can be seen in small, widely scattered openings in the ice. The continuous presence of open water is, I suspect, a prime factor in the attractiveness of the Muddy River to birds and living things in general. Wood Ducks are occasional visitors to the area in the cooler months, associating with the blacks and Mallards, and subsisting apparently on the abundant crop of acorns. One year a pair of Wood Ducks spent the winter at the northern part of this walk. Now and then a scaup will drop in during migration, and coot, Hooded Merganser, and Pied-billed Grebe have been noted. One summer a cormorant loitered on the water for a couple of weeks. No doubt it had acquired a taste for plump goldfish! Each winter a single black-backed gull stands on the ice near the heron roost from time to time, apparently a confirmed solitary.

The low bushes along the path on the southern part of the walk should be checked in April and May for thrushes. All five species of spotted thrush have been seen here during migration. On some spring mornings, the undergrowth seems to be full of thrush song. One autumn, this section of the walk was frequented for a few weeks by a Black-backed Woodpecker. In summer, Northern Orioles hang their sock-like nests from the drooping tips of oak trees overhanging the stream; these nests remain intact almost until the following spring. If you are quiet and the noise level is minimal, you can distinguish the song of a wood-pewee high overhead, but I challenge you to find the singer, with or without



*Black-crowned Night-Heron*

*Illustration by W. E. Davis*

binoculars. Just before you come to the island at the southernmost end of the walk, notice a large clump of Japanese knotweed and a pair of tall Tulip-trees that grow here. This is an excellent spot for autumn birding. Sit on a bench and let the birds come into view. Waxwings, while not common, do occur here every year. Warblers and vireos, kinglets and creepers, nuthatches and sparrows and much more can be expected in September and October. Try to be here in early when the Tulip-trees flower - the blooms are impressive.

Near the stone footbridge leading to the island, there is a Witch-hazel bush at the roadside that might be in flower any time from October to January! Notice also a handsome Sugar Maple here. The footbridge is a good vantage point from which to observe White-throated Sparrows in the weeds and bushes at the water's edge (April and October) and to listen to the songs of Red-eyed and Warbling vireos (both nest here), orioles, house finches, song sparrows, redwings, Yellow warblers, and - bullfrogs! These bulky amphibians occur all along the stream and can be heard both here and at the northern end of the walk. Green frogs also are commonly encountered, but their song is less impressive - the sound of a single plucked banjo string. A family of raccoons is rumored to inhabit this locale, but I've failed to find more than a few tracks in the mud. I did see a coon one year on the path under the Longwood Avenue bridge and another in a tree behind the Longwood MBTA stop. Both Northern Rough-winged and Bank swallows have loitered here at the island in late spring, often perching on overhead telephone wires that parallel the path. Sometimes in late fall a Red-tailed Hawk appears here, either perched in a tree or soaring overhead. A mob of furiously cawing crows or hyper-active Blue Jays will tip you off to the presence of this magnificent bird of prey.

In this brief sketch of the Muddy River I have touched upon only the obvious highlights. A wide-awake beginner or a veteran birder with his senses finely honed can be sure of finding much more. Many species of birds occur regularly, and once in a while, a comparative rarity crops up to add spice to the mixture. A botanical education awaits anyone willing to devote time and energy to the study of the trees, shrubs, and weeds growing in the area. Mammals are more frequently seen than would be surmised from my cursory overview, and the array of summer insects will delight the amateur entomologist. I hope this essay will stimulate some of you to explore the Muddy River. This area has been neglected by most local birders, and it deserves better from us. For a relatively small area within a heavily urbanized zone, it gives a very good account of itself. Take an hour sometime to stroll along this pretty little park.

KENNETH HUDSON describes himself as "a maverick naturalist-artist-writer." He began his birding career in 1962 and has been birding in Boston where he now lives since 1970. In 1978, Kenneth began teaching the art of urban birding to beginners and transplanted Bostonians. He is now writing a book based on his local fieldwork and innovative approach to local urban birding. He conducts Guided Field Trips and runs a subscription phone-in service, Nature Hotline, now in its fourth year of continuous service. A collection of maps, "Twenty-seven Bird Walks in Boston, Cambridge, and Brookline," can be obtained for \$7 from Guided Field Trips, 310 Franklin Street, Suite 322, Boston, MA 02110.

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