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WHERE TO FIND BIRDS AT OXBOW NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

by Mark Lynch, Worcester

Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge, located in the community of Harvard, Massachusetts, is a choice segment of riparian woodland that offers excellent birding opportunities in spring, summer, and fall. Located along the Nashua River, the Refuge consists primarily of wet deciduous woods and wooded swamps with a few conifer thickets. Breeding birds include Wood Duck, Ruffed Grouse, Yellow-billed and Black-billed cuckoos, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Yellow-throated Vireo, Scarlet Tanager, and Indigo Bunting. Among the breeding warblers in the area are Blue-winged, Pine, Black-throated Green, and Ovenbird. During migration, when a wide variety of hawks, warblers, and sparrows occurs, the refuge is an exciting place to bird. For the herpetologist, Blanding's Turtle and Blue-spotted Salamander, two species found only in isolated locations in the state, also occur.

Oxbow is located off Route 110 just north of the Bolton Flats Wildlife Management Area which should also be checked for ducks, marsh birds, and seasonal shorebirds. I often bird Bolton Flats early in the morning and bird at Oxbow later. Oxbow is located along one side of Fort Devens which is *STRICTLY OFF LIMITS* to the birder. The refuge is within earshot of various gunnery ranges on the fort so that startling sound effects may occur while you are birding. However, the birds do not seem to mind the occasional din as much as humans do.

To reach Oxbow from the junction of Routes 110 and 117, proceed three miles north on Route 110 and watch for the Still River Depot Road on your left (west) next to the Still River Post Office. If you are coming from the center of Harvard (the junction of Routes 110 and 111), proceed two miles south on Route 110 to Still River Depot Road.

Still River Depot Road.

This half-mile road, which descends from the post office and terminates at the refuge, offers excellent birding in the spring and fall, although it is often overlooked. After passing the houses, you will come to several rather unimpressive-looking cow pastures, hay fields, and weed fields bordered on both sides of the road by trees. These fields are private property, and the area must be birded from the road. Sparrows find the fields on both sides of the road attractive, especially in the fall (mid-September until the beginning of October). Most of the birds will be of the more common varieties - juncos, White-throated, Song, and Chipping sparrows - but White-crowned, Lincoln's, and Vesper sparrows occur regularly. It is best to work the road on foot because a passing car may flush the birds far out into the fields and out of sight.

Warblers, including Orange-crowned, occur in the few trees toward the bottom of the road (before the railroad tracks) during the spring and fall. If the fields are plowed, watch for pipits and flocks of blackbirds, including Rusty Blackbird. A breeding-plumaged Snow Bunting appeared here in April 1982.

The edges of the fields have many dead trees, used for perching by migrating hawks. Those hawks which I have seen in or over these fields have been Turkey Vulture (every year), Sharp-shinned Hawk (every year), Cooper's Hawk (twice), Northern Goshawk (several times), Merlin (several times, in both the spring and the fall), and the more common Broad-winged Hawk, Red-tailed Hawk, and American Kestrel.

Breeding birds along this road include Bobolink, Eastern Meadowlark, and Northern Mockingbird. Even in midsummer, this road should be birded rigorously. In July 1985, I found three singing Sedge Wrens in the fields on the south side of the road. The birds remained about a week until the hay fields were mowed. One might hope that they will return!

The Refuge Proper.

Continuing down Still River Depot Road, you will cross over railroad tracks. You can either park your car in the dirt area beside the tracks or continue driving down to the left and park along the road or in the dirt beside the river. *DO NOT* drive over the bridge: it is the property of Fort Devens. You will see the entrance sign for the refuge at the beginning of a wide dirt road that runs parallel to the railroad tracks. Civilian cars are not permitted beyond this point.

This dirt road continues for over a mile and a half until it terminates at a locked gate (Fort Devens) under Route 2. Be forewarned that the army uses the road freely, and it is not unusual to meet rapidly traveling jeeps or even larger military vehicles along the way. If you hear a car coming, get off to the side of the road. Because of this traffic, ruts often develop and the road can get muddy, especially in the spring, so dress accordingly. Mosquitoes and deer flies can be downright deadly in the summer months, so insect repellent is a must. The usual route is to walk down the road a bit, cross over the railroad tracks, and double back along the tracks to the car.

When you get out of the car, bird in the immediate area of trees and bushes surrounding the parking area. The common breeding birds you should note here are Hairy and Downy woodpecker, Northern Flicker, Gray Catbird, Brown Thrasher, Eastern Kingbird, House Wren, Red-eyed and Warbling vireo, and Northern Oriole. The common breeding warblers are all present in this area, including Chestnut-sided, Black-and-white, Yellow, and American Redstart. At dusk or in the very early morning, Eastern Screech-Owl can be heard and sometimes seen. During migration this parking area may attract Ruby-throated Hummingbird, various flycatchers,

Philadelphia Vireo, and many warblers, including Magnolia, Wilson's, and Canada.

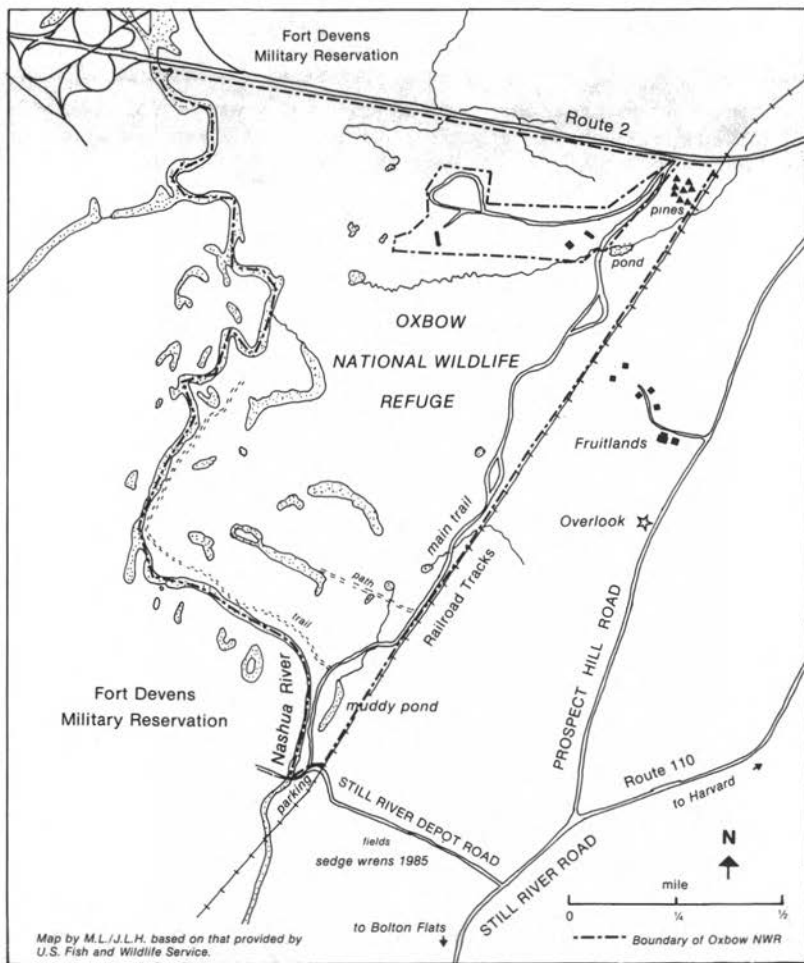
As you continue north along the road on foot, watch for a small brushy field immediately on your right. Field Sparrows are often present here during migration, and they sometimes linger. Blue-winged Warblers also find this area attractive. Beyond the field there is a stand of swampy woods. Listen for the calls of Yellow-throated Vireo, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher (which has nested here), Rose-breasted Grosbeak, and both cuckoos. This area has also been good for migrants, including Orchard Oriole. Common Yellowthroats and American Redstarts will be calling all around during the breeding season. In spring, the wet areas on the road and on the side of the road usually have a Spotted or a Solitary sandpiper.

After a short walk you will notice a path on the left that leads away from the main road and parallels the river closely. This continues for some distance along the river and becomes rather overgrown. Many of the species previously mentioned are found along this path, and along the river you can also find a Great Blue Heron or a Green-backed Heron. In migration, Osprey fly along the river, as do low-flying military helicopters!

Back on the main road, you will eventually come to a small, algae-covered, muddy pond on the right. It is difficult to get a clear look at it because it is screened from view by bushes. Despite its unpromising appearance, this area usually has Spotted and Solitary sandpipers in the spring, and occasionally other common shorebirds such as Least Sandpiper, American Black, Mallard, and Wood ducks are usually present, and Green-winged Teal may linger. The biggest surprise of all was in May of 1985 when I found twenty newly hatched Hooded Merganser ducklings with one or two ducks present! It remains to be seen whether or not the Hooded Mergansers will continue to nest in this area. Warblers find the pond attractive. The Northern Waterthrush is regular, as are flocks of Yellow-rumped and Palm warblers in the spring and fall. Check the area for Yellow-throated Vireo and Great Crested Flycatcher.

Shortly beyond the pond, where the phone lines emerge onto the road, the road swings close to the railroad tracks. If things are quiet and birds are not much in evidence, it is best to cut over to the tracks and return to the car.

If you continue along the main road, you will find that the road swings upward to a small area of sandy soil and tall pines. Usually there is a pair of Pine Warblers here. On the left, just past the area of pines, there is a narrow, overgrown path. This once connected to the path that runs along the river; and although it is now washed out in two places, it may be passable during extremely dry periods. This path may be taken to return to the main road. It is worth the trip, for it is an excellent



place for Wood Duck, Ruffed Grouse, both cuckoos, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Yellow-throated Vireo, and Swamp Sparrow, as well as migrants. After you have walked this road, you should check yourself for ticks.

The main road continues for over a mile to its termination at Route 2. The vegetation here is wet woodlands and offers excellent opportunities for finding warblers, tanagers, and orioles. Migrants found along this road have included Worm-eating and Kentucky warblers in addition to the more typical Bay-breasted, Cape May, Black-throated Blue, Tennessee, and Magnolia warblers. Flycatchers include Least, Great Crested, and Eastern Wood-Pewee. Toward the road's end, it opens up to a bushy field where Field Sparrows and Blue-winged Warblers breed. I found Alder Flycatcher near here in 1985. You will pass a small pond on the right and an old building on the left. Just as you leave

the posted refuge area, you will see Route 2 in front of you. Usually there are Indigo Buntings and Field Sparrows in the area. Keep an eye skyward for Broad-winged Hawk and Northern Goshawk. On the right you will see an area of short pines with a path through them. If you follow this path, you will soon be back on the railroad tracks so that you can return to your car.

Along the Railroad Tracks.

The walk of 1.5 miles back along the tracks offers much the same type of birding as along Oxbow's main road. Migrants are somewhat easier to spot along the tracks, and one is more apt to note Brown Creeper, Yellow-throated Vireo, and Pine Warbler. Occasionally, Golden-winged Warblers have been found among the more common Blue-winged Warblers. Here, too, keep an eye skyward for hawks.

Perhaps the most consistently good birding area along the tracks is the area from Still River Depot Road north to the overlook of the muddy pond. For reasons that elude me, migrants are often concentrated in this area. The muddy pond is better viewed from the tracks - so watch for ducks and shorebirds. Also watch for the Solitary Sandpipers along the stream on the east side of the tracks opposite the pond. Indigo Buntings are usually present in this area. A small stand of pines holds Pine Warblers and, rarely, Red-breasted Nuthatch. From these pines to Still River Depot Road is a small area of bushes and trees bordering a cow pasture. This is a good area to check for migrant sparrows and warblers. Fox, Lincoln's, and White-crowned sparrows and even Yellow-bellied Sapsucker have all been found at this spot.

Proceed south along the tracks beyond Still River Depot Road until you reach a railroad bridge across the Nashua River. This short stretch can be productive if migrants are in evidence elsewhere. Do not cross the railroad bridge: this is Fort Devens property!

The Fruitlands Overlook.

Drive back up Still River Depot Road, turn left onto Route 110 north, and proceed a quarter-mile to the first left, Prospect Hill Road. After 0.6 mile, on the left you will see an obvious pull-off along a stone wall where there is a scenic overlook of Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge, Fort Devens, Mount Wachusett, and beyond. The field in front of you is the property of the Fruitlands Museum and is private. This is a good location for watching hawks in migration. Although the numbers are not impressive, I have noted Northern Harrier, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Northern Goshawk, Broad-winged Hawk, and Turkey Vulture. A pair of Red-tailed Hawks and American Kestrels are usually present. It is best to arrive at this spot between 9:00 and 11:00 A.M. I have seen Northern Goshawk here on several occasions - even in winter - so it may breed somewhere nearby. During April, May, and September you can easily bird Oxbow early in the morning for passerine migrants and still get to the Fruitlands overlook in time to see hawks.

Conclusion.

I have said little about birding Oxbow in winter because of the small number of species present. Flocks of American Tree Sparrows join flocks of hardy chickadees, titmice, and nuthatches. Great Horned Owls and Eastern Screech-Owls can be heard in the area. I have yet to find a Northern Shrike along Still River Depot Road - but I am still hopeful!

Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge offers a pleasant alternative to coastal birding. Its birding history is still in its infancy, and reports of new species are added each year; so who knows what you may find? For me, it has been one of the consistently better birding spots in central Massachusetts for migrants and a fine place to spend a few relaxing hours in summer.

[Author's note: Land in the vicinity of the refuge and surrounding towns is selling at premium prices, and much of this part of Massachusetts is being developed rapidly. Witness the homes being built adjacent to Bolton Flats. Although the refuge itself is still safe, surrounding areas such as Still River Depot Road will always be at risk. I hope that this area remains in the condition it was at the time of this writing.)

ABSTRACT

Place. Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge, 660 acres of marsh, swamps, and oxbows of the Nashua River, Harvard, Massachusetts. Located off Route 110, north of Bolton Flats and Route 117. Managed by U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Great Meadows N. W. R., Weir Hill Road, Sudbury, MA 01776 (617-443-4661). The Weir Hill headquarters would appreciate written reports of wildlife sightings at Oxbow.

Breeding Birds. Wood Duck, Hooded Merganser, Ruffed Grouse, Black-billed and Yellow-billed cuckoo, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Yellow-throated and Warbling vireo, Blue-winged, Pine, and Black-throated Green warbler, Bobolink, Eastern Meadowlark. Northern Goshawk may breed in the area, and Sedge Wren may have attempted to breed in 1985.

Migrants. A good selection of migrants both spring and fall. Many species of warblers (including records of Worm-eating and Kentucky), sparrows (including Lincoln's, White-crowned, and Vesper), and hawks occur.

Best time to bird. Spring (mid-April to late May) and fall (late August to early October). Summer is also good.

Cautions. The refuge is next to Fort Devens, which is strictly off limits. Roads may be muddy in spring. Deer flies and mosquitoes are a problem in summer.

MARK LYNCH is a teacher and tour guide at the Worcester Art Museum, teaches a birding class in Worcester Adult Education, and leads bird tours for the Worcester Science Center. He has birded in Mexico, Costa Rica, Panama, England, and Scotland, in addition to the United States. Mark is currently researching a "Where to Find Birds" article on Gate 40 at Quabbin Reservoir.



Thank you, Thank you!

The first Bird Observer Fund-Raiser, held on February 22, 1986, at Mary Baird's Lexington home with special guests Susan Allen and Davis Finch, was a great success, beyond our expectations. A TOTAL OF \$2600 WAS CONTRIBUTED. This sum, along with funds from the boat trips, will be used toward the purchase of Bird Observer's first personal computer with word-processing software. This equipment will help our all-volunteer staff to produce more easily a journal of improved appearance.

All of the staff and our friends who contributed time, expertise, energy, labor, food, and hard cash can be proud of so bountiful a result. And what is more: "We all had a real good time." The people listed below, who helped Bird Observer, merit heartfelt thanks and recognition.

Dennis Abbott
Susan Allen
Carroll Arbogast
Arthur and Margaret Argue
Rolf Arvidson
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