

Map based on USGS topographic Cohasset section map, Wompatuck state park maps, Trustees of Reservations Whitney and Thayer Woods map, information provided by J. Flaherty and H.C. Floyd and site visits. J. L. Heywood, June 1986.

## BIRDING WOMPATUCK STATE PARK

by Jerry Flaherty, Scituate

Wompatuck State Park is an extensive tract of woods, fields, brooks, and ponds located in the southeastern corner of Hingham (over half the park) and adjacent areas of Cohasset, Scituate, and Norwell. Before becoming a state park, the 3500-plus acres of Wompatuck were part of a United States military reservation. The federal government took control of this land in 1941 for use by the U. S. Navy. Added to other thousands of acres in Weymouth and Hingham, this rugged land, designated "Cohasset Annex," was used to conceal hundreds of thousands of tons of high explosives offloaded from the Seventh Fleet prior to dry-docking operations at Quincy and the Boston Naval shipyards.

The federal government declared most of present-day Wompatuck "excess baggage" during the Vietnam War and "gave" it to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in 1968 for \$300,000 (about \$100 per acre). The commonwealth promptly turned the miles of ammunition railroad linkages into bicycle paths and in 1970 opened a 400-site campground. To this day, the park is underused. Other local campgrounds know they always have a spillover area in Hingham.

From the Greater Boston area, Wompatuck State Park is most easily reached by driving south on Route 3 to Route 228 (Exit 14) in Rockland. At the end of the exit ramp, turn left to Route 228 north. After about one mile, you will come to the intersection with Route 53. Continue straight through this intersection on Route 228 north. At 3.0 miles from this intersection, there will be a sign on the right for Wompatuck. Turn right here onto Free Street. At 0.8 miles from this turn, just after a sharp curve to the left, you will see on the right the large sign marking the main entrance to Wompatuck. Turn right here onto Union Street, and continue 0.2 mile to the gate.

Access to Wompatuck is limited. Although several roads lead to the park, gates block entry by car at all but the Union Street entrance in Hingham. The Union Street gate is open from 7:30 A.M. to dusk year round. During the camping season, it is open later to campers only. Entry on foot, by bike, or on cross-country skis is available at any time at any of the gates. Elsewhere, the perimeter of the park is guarded by an eight-foot-high chain-link fence, topped with barbed wire. The other gates are located at South Pleasant Street in Hingham, Mt. Blue Street in Norwell, and Doane Street in Cohasset. Parking is limited outside the gates. Be certain not to block them.

Driving access within the park is likewise limited to Union Street, which runs 2.5 miles through the heart of the park to the Mt. Blue Street gate in Norwell. (Actually, the road changes name within the park at the Hingham-Norwell line, just short of the Mt. Blue Street gate.) The only way to get to the outlying areas, aside

from attending the summer interpretive programs described at the end of this article, is by walking or bicycling. Wompatuck has almost twenty miles of paved bike paths and roads that are suitable for bicycles. Where these intersect Union Street, gates prevent entry by motor vehicles. Some off-road parking is available at most of these locations. Again, be careful not to block the gates.

The Mason D. Foley Memorial Visitors Center, on the right 0.2 mile from the park entrance, offers comfort stations, telephones, and useful information any time it is open. It is a worthwhile stop for any first-time visitor. In the lobby are some small displays, several of mounted native birds, and one of items of historical interest. On the walls are posters showing native birds, mammals, trees, and wildflowers and two detailed maps, one showing Wompatuck's trails and another its general vicinity. Copies of a map showing Wompatuck's major trails and topography should be available at the desk, but the current version is not up-to-date. Staff on duty are happy to answer questions about the park.

Current (1986) Visitors Center hours are 7:30 A.M. to 4:00 P.M., seven days a week. In camping season, currently April 15 to October 15, other toilets are available at any hour throughout the camping area (on the right 1.6 miles from the park entrance). A large covered pictorial map of Wompatuck can be viewed any time just outside the Visitors Center entrance. If dates and hours of access are a particular concern, an advance call to the Visitors Center at 617-749-7160 would be wise. Dates and hours may be affected by state funding from year to year.

Because of Wompatuck's large size and limited accessibility, birding the entire park in one visit would tax the energy and enthusiasm of even the most ardent birder. I have therefore described separate birding trips for five major sections of the park. One or more may be tackled in a day depending on one's time and energy.

#### Woodpecker Pond and Accord Brook.

This trip covers the section on the west side of Union Street from the main entrance to South Pleasant Street. It includes the Visitors Center, described above.

Park at the Visitors Center, and walk back toward the main entrance. As you approach the gate, turn left and follow the fence. You will be heading south. This road will lead you to Woodpecker Pond. This and all other bodies of water in and around the park are man-made. Green-backed and Great Blue herons, Black-crowned Night-Herons, Wood Ducks, and kingfishers are possible here.

After exploring the pond and the area beyond, return to the road you came on, and turn right where the road forks just northwest of the pond. This pleasant road through the woods will bring you back toward Union Street. Rufous-sided Towhee, Wood Thrush,

and Brown Thrasher are often found along this path. As the blacktop comes into view, you will intercept another path. A left here will return you to the Vistors Center via a nature trail. A right will take you to a meadow, wet well into the summer. Finches, sparrows, Common Yellowthroats, and House Wrens abound here. Rose-breasted Grosbeaks are often heard since they nest in the woodland beyond.

Continuing along this path will eventually bring you to Accord Brook and a drier field beyond. Blue-winged Warblers and/or "Brewster's" Warblers are frequently found here. "Pishing" at openings around the brook usually produces a good variety of songbirds. Occasionally, a screech-owl will answer a mimicking birder. This section is completed by walking to South Pleasant Street by way of some woodland trails and clearings, where one should regularly look skyward for soaring hawks.

#### The Camping Area, Holly Pond, Prospect Meadow, and Prospect Hill.

Even at the height of use in midsummer, a large portion of the southwestern end of the camping area is not used, and hemlock groves and planted Norway spruces provide some interesting habitat. Finches, creepers, and Red-breasted Nuthatches are customarily found here. The conifers should also provide extraordinary cover for roosting owls, although none have yet been seen here.

Access to this section is from South Pleasant Street, from the campgrounds in the off-season or if you camp, or from the first access road on the right (0.3 mile) after well-marked Mt. Blue Spring. (The spring is a magnet for local people. Bring a few



*Illustration by William E. Davis, Jr.*

jugs and get some water for yourself.) This last access road allows you to investigate Holly Pond and a prime area of spruces and hemlocks just to the northeast and connects as well to the road leading to Prospect Meadow and Prospect Hill. The meadow is a good place to find Indigo Bunting, and I have seen many hawks in the area over the years. Unfortunately, the summit of Prospect Hill is not cleared and does not reward the hiker with a vista.

#### Fox Pond Loop.

This area is best seen by making a loop that includes a part of Mt. Hope Street outside the park. Park at the Mt. Blue Street gate, which can be reached from either inside or outside the park. Again, do not block the gate. Follow the road that runs north-eastward, initially along the fence. After passing Fox Pond, named for the furrier who summered here, bear left, and follow the path through one of the most beautiful parts of Wompatuck. This climax beech, oak, and hemlock forest is impressive for Plymouth County, and the rocky cores exposed by the glacier are reminiscent of coastal Maine. It sometimes takes the voice of the Hermit Thrush to return your focus to birding in these pristine surroundings.

This wooded road eventually takes you to the southwestern tongue of the Cohasset Reservoir, a section that predates the present body of water and served once as a resource for a turn-of-the-century ice house. Herons, kingfishers, and hawks are regularly seen in this area.

When leaving the reservoir, instead of returning the way you came, continue back southeastward along a road that runs east of the power lines. Look for a grove of Sugar Maples and one of White Birches along this path. These species are oddities for southeastern Massachusetts. By following this path, you will eventually come to Mt. Hope Street, just north of the Norwell-Scituate line. By taking a right here you can return to where you parked your car. Be sure to take another right at the junction of Mt. Hope and Mt. Blue streets, just after Bound Brook Pond. Check the pond carefully for herons and waterfowl. A Red-shouldered Hawk can sometimes be seen or heard here.

#### Cohasset Reservoir, Heron Pond, and the Nature Study Area.

Inclusion of the nature study area, in the far northeastern corner of the park, makes this a long trek and should therefore be considered optional. To begin, park at the supply building lot, which is on the left 0.1 mile after the entrance to the camping area. After walking past the building, bear right, and continue walking until you come to the reservoir, which was completed in 1977 and is not shown on most maps. There are a number of lookouts along the way on the right. It is not unusual to rouse a slumbering Great Horned Owl or to find a photogenic Great Blue Heron at one of these.

Heron Pond and a northern tongue of the reservoir are reached by returning along the road you came on and turning at the first right. Ospreys can be seen at this part of the reservoir late into June and, in some years, later. An Osprey platform is being

installed on a small island here as this article is being written. A nesting Osprey would provide a precious ornament in the crown that is Wompatuck State Park. But watch here as well for Green-backed and Great Blue herons.

By following the road bearing right past the reservoir, you will come to Heron Pond. Take the time to cross the footbridge, sturdy despite its appearance. Wood Duck is almost a sure thing here, but just the wild beauty at the back end of the pond makes this visit compulsory.

A visit to the Nature Study Area can be included by continuing your walk northward after returning to the road from exploring Heron Pond. However, because of the distance involved, this might be done more easily through Whitney Woods. Entry to Whitney and Thayer Woods Reservation can be made opposite Sohier Street on Route 3A in Cohasset. An excellent map to this reservation can be obtained at the Mobil station at the corner. About 0.9 mile from the parking lot, a short trail branches from the main reservation path and leads into Wompatuck through an opening in the fence. A boulder with a commemorative-path plaque happens to lie at this branch point. Alternatively, the Nature Study Area can be visited by parking at the Doane Street walk-in gate and following the bike path. A trip to this area is well worthwhile; the nature study section is remarkable for the size of its hemlocks, pines, beeches, and black birches and apparently has been left uncut for several generations. The Black-throated Green Warbler nests here.

By returning on the road that brought you to Heron Pond and turning right at the reservoir, you will come into a more upland



*Black-throated Green Warbler*

*Photo by Allan D. Cruickshank  
Courtesy of MAS*



part of this section. Another right will eventually return you to your car. The voice of the Hermit Thrush makes this part of the trip memorable. In spring listen as well for the occasional Winter Wren. Cardinal Flower blooms here in August, and Sweet Pepper Bush assails the senses throughout July.

#### Triphammer Pond and the Swale.

The wildness and quiet beauty of this area make the difficulties of getting into it a worthwhile challenge. This section has only recently been turned over to the state park system by the U. S. Army, who used it as a reserve training facility from 1941 to 1983. A fence still separates it from the rest of the park.

Triphammer Pond and the Swale are outstanding summer birding spots. Redtails and Great Horned Owls nest here, and Great Blue and Green-backed herons are commonly seen. In the three dozen times I have visited this area, I have had close contact with one or another of these species more than half the visits. It would be an ideal spot for a blind, and the park system may arrange something like this eventually.

Triphammer Pond lies outside the park, but the southeastern neck of the pond abuts the park fence. Discretion and stealth are absolutely necessary if one is to gain access through one of the several holes in the fence and spot the wildlife before they spot you. To enter this section, park at the Visitors Center. Walk back across the lawns toward the main gate and take a right at the first road crossing Union Street. (A left here leads to the park headquarters and garage complex.) Walk to the fence separating the old and new sections of the park, and pass through where the fence is conveniently rolled back. Triphammer Pond is almost immediately on the left. Some searching will locate another convenient hole in the fence separating you from the pond. A faintly worn footpath can be found once you are on the other side. This path goes around the entire pond and eventually loops back upon itself.

The Swale is reached via Burma Road, which is in the new section and roughly parallels the fence separating this section from the rest of the park. From the entry through this fence described

above, turn right immediately and follow Burma Road southeastward until the woods open up into a more open and wet area. This is the Swale. Red-tailed and Broad-winged hawks nest close by, as do Great Crested Flycatchers, whose nests can be readily approached and photographed in July.

If you continue along this road, you will eventually come to another hole in the fence, where you can return to Wompatuck proper. If you turn right once through the fence, you can return to Union Street at the supply building. However, since the supply building is 1.5 miles from where you parked, you may prefer to return from the Swale by reversing your path on Burma Road. Of course, the reverse of the route just described provides access to the Swale from the supply building.

As I indicated at the beginning, birding Wompatuck presents certain problems of accessibility, and therefore some parts may not appeal to everyone. Nevertheless, once the park is visited, these problems pale against the richness and surprising diversity it offers.

An alternative to birding Wompatuck on your own is to join the summer bird program, which is presented every Saturday through July and August. These meetings are designed to take both novice and experienced birders by car into parts of the park that are hard to reach. Maybe we will see you there in the summer. In the meantime, I hope you will find these directions helpful.

I would like to acknowledge the help I received in writing this article from several members of the birding community, especially Neil and Sharon Osborne and Bob Campbell.

JERRY FLAHERTY, a teacher in the Scituate Public Schools, is uniquely qualified to write about Wompatuck State Park. During summers since 1980 he has worked for the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Management as Wompatuck's interpretive naturalist. His varied programs there, including birdwalks, bicycle tours, and astronomy outings, reflect his own broad interests in nature. Jerry has also worked as a naturalist at the South Shore Natural Science Center, and he is active with the South Shore Bird Club.

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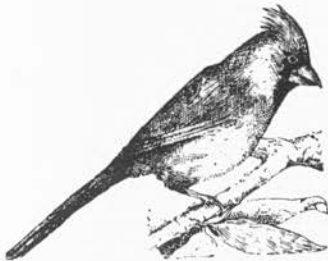
July 6-12: *ADVANCED FIELD IDENTIFICATION* - Susan Allen and Davis Finch; includes boat trip to Machias Seal Island; limited to 20; cost \$340.

July 13-19: *BIRD AND NATURE PHOTOGRAPHY* - Michael Hopiak; includes boat trip to Machias Seal Island; limited to 14; cost \$385 + \$30 lab fee.

July 27 - August 2: *SEABIRDS* - Charles Duncan and Peter Vickery; includes 3 boat trips; limited to 20; cost \$385.

August 3-8: *SHOREBIRDS* - Blair Nikula; optional boat trip to Machias Seal Island (August 9); limited to 20; cost \$305.

For information about enrollment, write or call -  
Dr. Charles D. Duncan, Director, U. M. M., 9 O'Brien Avenue,  
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