



THE BIRDS OF GATE 40, QUABBIN

by Mark Lynch

The coyote froze in his tracks, as did we. For the space of a few heartbeats, we scrutinized each other. Then, abruptly the canid turned and raced off the road to our left, toward Pottapaug Pond.

Sheila Carroll and I were seeking the Black-backed Woodpecker that we had found a month earlier at Quabbin's Gate 40, and had begun the two-mile walk to Dana Commons before dawn on January 1, 1986. Objects were clearly visible in the eerie blue twilight but without color. We were moving along enjoying the quiet and the solitude when the coyote appeared from around a bend in the road about two hundred feet ahead of us. We were still relishing the thrill of this confrontation with Quabbin wildlife when around the bend ahead came two more. The animals paused briefly and then, like the first, ran off the road toward Pottapaug. A short distance farther along, over a small hill on the right and coming directly toward us was yet another coyote! Startled by the encounter, the animal stopped abruptly but slid through the snow to within a few yards of us, then took off down the road.

The thrill of this experience with four coyotes -- the closest encounter with this animal I have ever had -- actually eclipsed our sighting of the Black-backed Woodpecker a little later that day. It illustrates what is special about birding at Quabbin. Nowhere else in the state can a comparable wilderness be found. Because of the sheer enormity of Quabbin Reservation, a sense of exploration is present whenever one enters this vast area.

Quabbin Reservoir is a new wilderness. Originally it was the site of four towns -- Dana, Enfield, Greenwich, and Prescott. By the 1920s water planners for metropolitan Boston had decided that the only way to provide for the increasing water needs of the city was to form a vast reservoir by flooding the Swift River Valley. The complete story of how this came about is told in J. R. Greene's 1981 book, *The Creation of the Quabbin Reservoir: The Death of the Swift River Valley*. By the late 1930s, the towns' 3500 residents had been relocated, and the construction of the Winsor Dam and Goodnough Dike were completed. Flooding began in 1939 and was finished by 1946.

Quabbin Reservation as it now exists is very large and is managed by the Metropolitan District Commission (MDC). Forty thousand acres of this land are open to the public, but an additional 14,500 acres are not and thus provide an undisturbed wildlife sanctuary. The closed areas include the Prescott Peninsula (Gates 17-21) and all of the islands. The reservoir (25,000 acres of water) has 118 miles of shoreline and a capacity of 412.24 billion gallons. There are fifty-five numbered "gates" or access roads.

This article covers what I have learned about the birds found in the area of Quabbin known as Gate 40. Gate 40 comprises the site of the former town of Dana and is therefore an interesting place for people curious about the history of the Swift River Valley. Dana was formed from parts of Petersham, Hardwick, and Greenwich and was first settled in 1735. Eventually the town contained four villages -- North Dana, Doubleday Village, Dana Center, and Storrsville. By 1860 the population peaked at 876 residents, and there were five churches, a Grange Hall, a Lodge of Good Templars, several inns, sawmills, gristmills, and a few small factories.

Many of Quabbin's "gates" are characterized by fairly steep descents, but the Gate 40 area provides an easy hike on fairly level ground, at least as far as Dana Commons, and is perfect for a weekend stroll.

Requirements for Birding at Quabbin.

An essential tool for any trip to Quabbin is a good map and a compass. There is now a fine, very detailed map of Quabbin by cartographer Christopher Ryan available at the Visitors Center of the MDC Headquarters in South Quabbin off Route 9. A laminated copy will last longer in the field.

Before you go there, familiarize yourself with the MDC regulations for the Quabbin Reservation, which is open year round but only from dawn to dusk. During the summer months, if rainfall has been below normal and the fire hazard is high, Quabbin may be closed. Quabbin may also be closed during the deer-hunting season. It is best to check with the MDC Headquarters *before* making a long trip (telephone: 413-323-7221).

The following prohibitions are enforced: unauthorized vehicles, dogs, alcoholic beverages, smoking, hunting, skiing (including cross-country), skating, ice-fishing, and swimming.

Groups of more than twenty are required to notify the MDC in advance of their trip and to tell the MDC where they plan to go. There have been some problems in the last year or so with large birding groups wandering around, even in unauthorized areas. For instance, Shaft 12 and the Baffle Dams are off-limits, yet birding groups still include those areas in the itinerary without first seeking permission.

Seasonal Precautions.

In the summer, particularly in June and July, the insects can be fierce, especially mosquitoes. A good insect repellent is a necessity. Some people may wish to wear mosquito netting around the head and face. Because the fields contain ticks, shorts are not recommended.

In the wintertime, birding Gate 40 can present a more formidable problem. This area of the state can get very cold, so full winter gear is a necessity. Learn to recognize and be alert to the first signs of frostbite. The road to Dana

Commons is usually passable after snowfall provided MDC vehicles have preceded you. But these narrow tire tracks can be very icy. Good footwear as well as a good sense of balance are important. Often in January and February, the snow on the roads beyond Dana Commons is too deep, and the roads are impassable.

Other Wildlife to Watch For.

At Gate 40, I have seen more varieties of animal life than at any other spot in the state. Amphibia and reptiles found at Quabbin include American Toad, Northern Spring Peeper, Gray Treefrog, Wood Frog, Green Frog, Eastern Painted Turtle, Eastern Garter Snake, Northern Ringneck Snake, Northern Black Racer, and Eastern Milk Snake. Many of the snakes are seen only when they cross the road or when heavy rains force them more into the open.

Mammals, which are often hard to observe, abound in the Gate 40 area. An early start and a quiet approach will usually reward the observer with a view of Whitetail Deer, especially in the vicinity of Dana Commons. Beavers are found throughout but are easiest to see in the north end of Pottapaug Pond, and I have also watched otters catching fish and sliding on the ice in early winter here. Mink can be seen hunting the edges of the waterways. A tap on a tree that has a suitable hole will sometimes produce a Northern Flying Squirrel, another common resident of the area. Other mammals found here include the ever-present Red and Eastern Gray squirrels, Shorttail Weasel (look for them hunting mice around stone walls), Bobcat, Coyote, and Raccoon. Porcupines become more obvious in the fall when they can be found asleep in the newly denuded trees.

Certainly, the mammal of mystery in Quabbin is the Cougar (also known as Mountain Lion, Puma, or Panther). Although supposedly extirpated from New England, there are persistent reports of sightings in the area. If you see one, report it as soon as possible to the Quabbin Visitors Center in Belchertown. There are zoologists investigating the occurrence and survival of this animal in the state.

Birding at Gate 40

How to get there.

Gate 40 is on the west side of Route 32A. From the center of the small but picturesque town of Hardwick, go north on 32A for 6.7 miles. The entrance to the gate is on the left in the white road-guard fence. It is easy to miss, so slow down as soon as you see the fence. There is a small parking area. Be careful not to block the gate. In winter the parking area may be snow covered or icy and not suitable for most cars.

An alternative approach is to take Route 2, turn south on Route 32, then northwest for a very short distance on Route 122 to 32A. Gate 40 is 3.1 miles from the junction of Routes 122 and 32A.

Birding along Route 32A.

Whichever route you take, be sure to bird along Route 32A. North from Hardwick, there is a sign for the Eagle Hill School on the right. Bohemian Waxwings have been seen here on 32A and along the parallel road on which the school is located. Eastern Bluebirds have lingered in this area well into December. Other birds to watch for include Great Horned Owl, Barred Owl, Ruffed Grouse, and Common Raven. In the early spring Louisiana Waterthrush can be heard singing along this route.

North from Gate 40, along 32A, is a series of houses with bird feeders that attract numbers of winter finches. Even in a poor flight year, there may be Evening Grosbeaks, Common Redpolls, and Pine Siskins here.

Hiking into the Gate 40 area.

Petersham Road. Once past the gate proper, you will be on the main road, Petersham Road, which leads to Dana Commons, a distance of about 1.75 miles. Birding along this road is good at most seasons, sometimes spectacular. The key is to arrive early. Just before dawn is best, especially during the fall migration.

Petersham Road attracts a variety of birds because there is a number of fields along its length, a habitat in short supply in this part of Quabbin. Some of these fields have been recently created by clearing trees such as the Eastern Red Pine for the purpose of creating a more varied habitat for wildlife. As more of these clearings are created and filled in with a variety of plant life, additional species of birds will undoubtedly be drawn there. Along the fields are many Wild Cherry Trees, whose fruit and insects attract numerous birds, especially during fall migration.

During migration periods, these fields should be rigorously checked for flycatchers, warblers, vireos, and sparrows. Since the erection of several bluebird nesting boxes along the road, the Eastern Bluebird is almost a certainty during the nesting season.

Pottapaug Pond and Dana Commons. Farther down Petersham Road, on the left is the East Branch Swift River, which flows into Pottapaug Pond. A highlight of any hike into Gate 40 is to spend some time at this pond. A small trail that leads down to an overlook at the marshy northeast end of the pond can be found across the road from the southern end of the second, rather long, field on the right or northwest side of Petersham Road. At the place where the river flows into the pond, there is an area of brushy marsh. Find a beaver lodge, take a seat, and be patient. This is an excellent area for ducks of all species, for Great Blue Heron, for Red-shouldered Hawk and other hawks in migration. One fall, I

spent an hour here watching three Sharp-shinned Hawks, which had taken up temporary residence at the marsh, playfully harass any bird that came into the area, including flickers and jays, a kingfisher, a Pileated Woodpecker, and even an Osprey! This is also a great spot to watch for mammals like otter and mink.

Return to Petersham Road and continue along it past a hill on the right and some more Red Pine until you find a small field on the right that is bordered along the road by a stone wall. Just past this field, note a small road on the left (south) that shortly dead-ends at a very narrow neck of Pottapaug. In the fall, there may be sizable flocks of Hooded Mergansers and Ring-necked Ducks.

When you return to Petersham Road, you will have arrived at Dana Commons. Just off the road the cellar foundations of the original residences can be seen. The large open fields of this area may contain sparrows, bluebirds, and warblers. Watch for hawks, including Bald Eagle. As the road descends a little and swings to the left, watch for a small wet marshy area on the left. Canada and Wilson's warblers can be found here, and twice I have seen Connecticut Warbler at this spot. And it was here that Sheila Carroll first sighted a Black-backed Woodpecker in December 1985.

Continue a little farther along on Petersham Road until you note a path on the left that passes a well-preserved and rather attractive cellar foundation, continues through a grassy field, and ends at a hill overlooking yet another area of Pottapaug. From this lookout, scan for ducks, Great Blue Heron, and raptors.

Return once again to Petersham Road. You are now at the center of Dana Commons. Note a narrow grassy triangle on the road with several roads that branch off. This is a good spot to decide whether to turn back or to continue.

Trails from Dana Commons. From this point there are three main hikes, each with a different character. Just beyond Dana Commons, a road veers off to the left (south). This is the shortest of the three hikes and leads down a peninsula into Pottapaug. The vegetation is mostly pines and ferns. From this trail can be seen ducks, Ruffed Grouse, raptors in migration, and Pileated Woodpecker. The distance to the end is a little more than a mile over fairly level terrain.

The road going west from Dana Commons is **Greenwich Road**, which has several interesting features, the most important being the Cotton Grass Marsh that is on the right (north) side of the road. This is the area to search for Alder Flycatcher, which has bred here several times. Other marsh birds, like Virginia Rail and bittern, generally scarce in Quabbin, can be found here. Farther along Greenwich Road, an arm of the Pottapaug crosses the road to connect with the marsh. This area is good for ducks such as Wood Duck and Hooded Merganser. Sometimes raptors are about, and Barred Owls have nested close by. The road continues for another mile and a half through several stands of Red Pine and areas of deciduous woods and finally reaches an area of the reservoir that is

opposite Southworth Island and Mount Zion. The area has ducks, raptors of all kinds including Bald and Golden eagles and, if the water is low from August into October, shorebirds. Watch for Wild Turkeys by scanning the shores of Mount Zion. From this vantage point, the Baffle Dams can be seen to the southwest. Greenwich Road eventually dead-ends at School Hill, closer to the area of the Baffle Dams. From Greenwich Road, another road cuts off to the left (south) that eventually connects to Gate 43 at the Spillway (also known as Boat Mooring Area No. 3). From Dana Commons to the Mount Zion overlook is about two miles, one way, so consider well before you attempt this hike.

The third choice from Dana Commons is to head northwest, to the right. The first road on the right, Tamplin Road, goes east of Whitney Hill and ends at Dugway Road and Gate 39. A better choice is to take the second right, up **Skinner Hill Road** and eventually to Graves Landing. This hike is the longest and the steepest of the three, especially on the way back when you least appreciate a hill's angle of incline. If you decide to go beyond Dana Commons, this is the best birding trail and is described in detail below.

Just before Skinner Hill Road begins its long gradual ascent along the south side of Skinner Hill, there is a small area of water and dead trees that also extends across Tamplin Road. This is really an eastern extension of the Cotton Grass Marsh mentioned earlier. In migration there are warblers and sparrows. The Black-backed Woodpecker spent most of its time in this swamp, so watch those dead trees and listen for tapping!

Skinner Hill Road can sometimes be quiet, but birds of interest that I have found there include Ruffed Grouse, Black-billed Cuckoo, Barred Owl, Northern Goshawk, Red-shouldered Hawk, and Pileated Woodpecker, especially on the downward slope toward Graves Landing. This is a good area for Wild Turkey. Some birders have seen them crossing the road even in summer.

After the road reaches its crest, it then descends steeply, and there is an obvious curve, appropriately named Dead Man's Curve. Just past the curve, there is a path off to the left (west). A short distance along this path, there is an intersection with a choice of three paths. If you go right (north), you will come to Graves Landing. If you continue ahead (west), you will come to Stevens Island. The trail to the left (south) parallels the water by the former Sunk Pond and dead-ends at the shore opposite Mount Zion, north of where Greenwich Road emerges, an area where Wild Turkey may be seen.

But perhaps the best thing to do is to explore the area of the intersection itself. In the spruces here have been found Barred Owl, Northern Saw-whet Owl, Ruffed Grouse, and Boreal Chickadee.

Graves Landing, Leveau Island, and North Dana Flats. From the intersection, return to Skinner Hill Road, which continues on to a vast open area known as Graves Landing. Look off to the north and note Rattlesnake Hill and

farther away, Soapstone Hill. The island in front of you is Leveau Island. This is one of the most important birding areas in all of Quabbin. When the water is high in spring, concentrations of ducks will occur. In spring and especially in fall, raptors of all kinds may be present. When water levels are low in the fall, shorebirds of a surprising variety can be found. These flats may extend east and north of Leveau Island and are sometimes referred to as the North Dana Flats. In an extended period of low water during the sixties and seventies, these flats produced nesting Grasshopper and Vesper sparrows, and even Sedge Wren bred in the area. Fall migration here produces Water Pipit, Horned Lark, Lapland Longspur, and Snow Bunting. In November watch for Northern Shrike.

The farther out on the flats you can get, the better the birding. Birders in the know often bicycle in Gate 40, whizzing by other areas in order to spend most of their time at Graves Landing and these flats. If you do bicycle here, do not take your bike out on the flats, but lock it up under the trees off Skinner Hill Road.

Skimming through the Year at Gate 40

January and February. Bleakest months for birding. Access beyond Dana Commons very difficult. Flocks of winter finches overhead: Evening Grosbeaks, both crossbills, siskins, and redpolls. Also flocks of chickadees, both nuthatches, Downy and Hairy woodpeckers, and a few Tree Sparrows. Common Raven and Pileated Woodpecker are present. A good time to track mammals. Scope for raptors over Graves Landing from an overlook of the North Dana Flats approached from Gate 37.

March. Eagle watching at Graves Landing if snow accumulations past Dana Commons permit hiking. Horned Larks and Snow Buntings on the flats. Ducks everywhere as water opens up: Canada Geese, American Black, Ring-necked, Bufflehead, Common Goldeneye, Common and Hooded mergansers, and possibly, American Wigeon and Northern Pintail. Wood Ducks, Great Blue Heron (by end of month), Turkey Vulture and Red-shouldered Hawk (after March 15) at Pottapaug. Fox Sparrows scratching. Winter Wren along Skinner Hill Road. Eastern Phoebe and Eastern Bluebird in fields along Petersham Road.

April. Ducks more numerous, also phoebes and bluebirds. Osprey anywhere. Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers on main road and kingfishers at Pottapaug. Yellow-rumps, Palms, and Louisiana Waterthrush on hike to Dana Commons. Beautiful song of Hermit Thrush at dusk. Fishing season opens: outboard motors from now until October.

May. Pine, Blackburnian, and Black-throated Green warblers everywhere. Blue-gray Gnatcatchers nest-building right over the road. Least Flycatchers call from every direction. Also, most of the flycatchers, both cuckoos, and the usual migrant warblers.

A Summary of Some of the Breeding Birds of Gate 40

Resident Breeders: Wild Turkey, Ruffed Grouse, Pileated Woodpecker, Red-breasted Nuthatch.

Migrant Breeders: Common Loon, Great Blue Heron, American Woodcock, Red-shouldered Hawk, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher; Solitary, Yellow-throated, and Red-eyed vireos; Yellow, Chestnut-sided, Black-throated Blue, Black-throated Green, Blackburnian, and Pine warblers; Ovenbird, Scarlet Tanager, Northern Oriole.

Casual Breeders (breed irregularly or very rarely in the Gate 40 area): Black-billed and Yellow-billed cuckoos, Alder Flycatcher, Grasshopper and Vesper sparrows.

Possible Breeders: Red Crossbill, Pine Siskin.

June and July. Breeding birds: Ruffed Grouse beyond Dana Commons, Cooper's Hawk along Greenwich Road, Northern Goshawk on Skinner Hill Road, and Red-shouldered Hawk at Pottapaug. Alder Flycatcher possible in marsh west of Dana Commons. Surprises: Red Crossbills at Dana Commons and Greenwich Road in 1985. Summering Bald Eagles in Mount Zion area. House Wrens noisy and numerous.

August. Increased activity after midmonth. Small flocks of warblers. Ruby-throated Hummingbirds. First shorebirds at North Dana Flats depending on water level.

September. Best month. Birds everywhere. Migrant warblers in treetops at dawn. Several Scarlet Tanagers and Rose-breasted Grosbeaks. Red-eyed and Solitary vireos in numbers. Philadelphia Vireo, Connecticut and Orange-crowned warblers have been noted. A frustrating assortment of *Empids*. Numbers of wood-pewees, phoebes, Great Cresteds, kingbirds. Occasionally an Olive-sided. Shorebirds at the flats. Sharp-shinned Hawks working the fields. A wide variety of hawks. Sapsuckers in trees in the fields. Sparrows building up. Lincoln's Sparrow in the far side of fields on the north side of Petersham Road.

October. Gorgeous foliage. Winter Wren in wood piles and brush. Palms and Yellow-rumps in small flocks with phoebes and bluebirds. Some shorebirds still on the flats with Water Pipits. Golden-crowned Kinglets more numerous. First winter finches at month's end. Fishing season ends, and quiet returns.

November. Ducks, loons, and grebes undisturbed by boats. Last of Great Blue Herons at Pottapaug. Bald Eagles more obvious as are turkeys and Pileated Woodpeckers. Golden Eagles rare but regularly reported. Yellow-legs and Black-bellies linger in first week. Northern Shrikes appear at Dana Commons or on the flats. First appearance of winter finches. Occasional late Hermit Thrush. Flocks of Snow Buntings and Horned Larks along the shore. A decision about long underwear must be made.

December. Ducks present in deeper open water. Time for last trip to Graves Landing. Dusting of snow makes turkey-tracking possible on Skinner Hill Road. Dark-eyed Juncos. Always the possibility, as in 1985, of Black-backed Woodpecker. And the croaks of Common Raven a fitting symbol of deepest winter at the Quabbin.

Conclusion

This article and month-by-month survey are not intended as the last word on the birds of Gate 40. In another five years, five to ten species will probably be added to my bird list with a status change of just as many. Quabbin is a relatively new area with changing and developing habitats. New species may yet colonize the area, much the way that the Acadian Flycatcher has now become a breeding bird on the west side of Quabbin. With increased coverage new species of migrants will certainly be discovered. Exciting birds to be on the lookout for include Acadian Flycatcher, Orchard Oriole, and Summer Tanager, as well as the unpredictable rarities. I would have thought Gate 40 one of the last places to find a Say's Phoebe; so who knows what will show up next?

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Acknowledgments. The author would like to thank Brad Blodgett, Tom Gagnon, Erik Nielsen, and Scott Surner for their help in fleshing out his knowledge of the birds of the Gate 40 area. With their records, Mark has completed an annotated bird list of Gate 40. This is available by sending a self-addressed, stamped envelope to him at the above address.

Note. An organization concerned with all aspects of Quabbin and very deserving of attention and support is The Friends of Quabbin who can be reached through the Visitors Center, Winsor Dam, Belchertown, MA 01007.