



SUMMER BIRDS OF HIGH RIDGE

by Charles B. Quinlan

The High Ridge Wildlife Management Area, located in the townships of Westminster, Gardner, and Ashburnham in Worcester County, twenty-six miles north-northwest of the city of Worcester, comprises eighteen hundred acres of rich and diverse uplands. High Ridge derives its name from a east-west ridge that runs through the middle of the area. The region is characterized by soft rolling hills with relatively few flat sections and elevations ranging from 900 to 1200 feet.

Scattered throughout this upland complex are mixed hardwoods-spruce forest, numerous fields, wooded swamps, streams, and shallow marshes. There are several ponds, one of them an old beaver pond, and both paved and dirt roads dissect the property. These diverse habitats entice a rich and colorful avifauna, as well as other wildlife.

During a survey of breeding birds conducted in the summer of 1987, no fewer than a hundred and ten species were recorded, some of the more notable being American Bittern, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Sora Rail, Eastern Bluebird, and Kentucky Warbler. Five species of vireos were observed, the White-eyed Vireo being the most remarkable. Nineteen species of warblers reside here. In the spruce woods, Yellow-rumped, Black-throated Green, and Blackburnian occur. Black-throated Blue Warblers frequent the cool, moist woods in association with Mountain Laurel and other understory growth. In 1987, a Kentucky Warbler was present from May 27 through July 27 along a streambed community by the Overlook Road parking lot. Winter Wren and Louisiana Waterthrush occur along the major streams. Both Black and Yellow-billed cuckoos were recorded along with other interesting species such as Blue-gray Gnatcatcher and Ruby-throated Hummingbird. The elusive Pileated Woodpecker is resident here also. In the fields Chestnut-sided Warblers, Indigo Buntings, Bobolinks, and Red-winged Blackbirds occur frequently.

The State Bluebird Trail. One of the most alluring features of High Ridge is the State Bluebird Trail. In 1984, under the auspices of the Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program of the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife (MDFW), twenty-five bluebird-nesting boxes were set up along the major roads and fields in the Gardner and Westminster sectors and yielded two nesting pairs that first year. The following year, sixty houses were established, and six pairs of bluebirds nested. During 1986 a hundred and twenty houses yielded eight pairs. By 1987, the installation of one hundred and ninety boxes resulted in nine pairs of bluebirds. A census on May 28, 1987, recorded eighty-one Tree Swallows, one Black-capped Chickadee, nineteen House Wrens, nine

pairs of Eastern Bluebirds, and one Flying Squirrel occupying the houses. Seventy-nine vacancies can be attributed chiefly to the late installation of seventy boxes by the Westminster Cub Scouts. The Overlook and Smith Street trails are the best places to observe bluebirds.

History of High Ridge. High Ridge is situated on the former grounds of the old Gardner State Hospital. In 1984, several years after the hospital was closed, the MDFW began to manage the area for wildlife purposes jointly with the Environmental Management Department and the Food and Agriculture Department. Two hundred acres of the original two thousand located in the southwest sector were set aside for the installation of a corrections facility. This area is strictly off-limits to unauthorized persons and is well marked by signs. The old hospital buildings are still standing, and the fields are utilized for agriculture. One of the buildings located in the northeast sector houses the MDFW Law Enforcement Offices of the Environmental Police Officers (EPO).

Vegetation. This region lies in a transition zone between Northern Hardwoods and Hardwoods-Spruce forests. Predominant tree species include Red Oak, Beech, Yellow Birch, Sugar Maple, Eastern Hemlock, and White Pine. White Ash is a very common hardwood here. Other hardwoods in this area are Red, Mountain, and Striped maples, canoe birches, hazelnut, Quaking and Bigtooth aspens, and cherry trees. Boreal elements found along the higher elevations to the north and west are Red Spruce and Balsam Fir. There are several planted stands of Red Pine and Norway Spruce, and many ornamental shrubs and trees occur around the former state hospital buildings -- Common Mock-orange, Bridal Wreath, Common Lilac, and Morrow Honeysuckle, to mention a few. Russian Olive and Morrow Honeysuckle form extensive hedgerows along the fields and roadsides. Some interesting herbs that can be seen here are Narrow-leaved Gentian and White Beardtongue.

Animals of High Ridge. The variety of amphibians present throughout the wetlands here are the following: Northern Spring Peeper, Gray Treefrog, Bullfrog, Green, Leopard, Pickerel, and Wood frogs. Some reptiles recorded here include Eastern Painted, Common Snapping, and Wood turtles, the latter preferring the wooded banks of streams, and the Eastern Garter Snake is also fairly common. The mammals at High Ridge, being secretive or nocturnal, are elusive, but Whitetail Deer frequent the marshes and ponds along with Raccoon, Red Fox, Mink, and Muskrat. Beavers occupy one of the small ponds in the northeast section. Common rodents are Red, Eastern Gray, and flying squirrels, Woodchuck, Shorttail Shrew, Star-nose Mole, and Deer Mouse. Eastern Cottontails and Snowshoe Hares are also resident.

Directions to High Ridge. There are four access areas to the property that contain gates and a parking lot. The Overlook Road and the East Gardner Road entrances can be reached via Routes 2 and 140. Take Route 2A into

Westminster Center. Follow Bacon Street north about 0.7 mile north to the intersection of Overlook Road (unmarked) and N. Common Street (marked). Bear left onto Overlook, and follow the road about one mile to the gate. East Gardner Road can be reached by bearing right onto N. Common Street instead of left along Overlook. Follow N. Common Street about 1.5 mile, and on your left will be East Gardner Road. Continue down the road until you come to the end, about one mile, where there is a gate. The Chapel Street and Smith Street entrances can be reached from Route 140. From Route 2, take the 140 North exit. The Chapel Street access road is about 1.6 miles from the intersection of Route 2 and Route 140 North. A marked driveway to the North Central Correctional Institution (NCCI) occurs about 0.5 mile before the Chapel Street turn. The Smith Street entrance lies about 0.5 mile north of the Chapel Street access. [Editor's note. These directions were tested by *Bird Observer's* staff and found to be accurate. A new section of Route 140 in the Gardner-Westminster area was opened in 1983. Confusion may result because this rerouting does not yet appear on some road maps, including the 1988 Arrow Series Central Massachusetts atlas.]

The trails discussed below are recommended. They are short walks, average about 2.5 miles round-trip, and reveal to the birder a fairly rich segment of the bird population.

The Overlook Road Trail.

This is one of the trails that is certain to produce bluebirds. At the parking lot just before the gate, there is a stream that cuts across the road. This is an excellent area for attracting Louisiana Waterthrush. Black-throated Blue Warblers reside along the cooler, well-shaded areas of the brook. Scarlet Tanager, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Gray Catbird, Red-eyed Vireo, Common Yellowthroat, and Wood Thrush nest here also. This is the area that the Kentucky Warblers frequented for a period of eight weeks last summer. The author, R. Jenkins, and C. Ewer recorded the presence of two birds. Although no nest was found, what seemed to be a younger bird with shorter rectrices was also observed by the author. During mid-July a White-eyed Vireo occurred in this area. Keep alert here for Ruby-throated Hummingbird and Ruffed Grouse, both of which have been observed in the area as well.

Continuing along the main trail, you will note a field on the right and on the left some stands of spruce. Red-winged Blackbirds and Bobolinks are noticeable in the fields, and Chipping Sparrows feed along the borders of the spruces. In the spruces, search for Golden-crowned Kinglets and Purple Finches. House Finches on occasion may be heard flying over the area, which may lead to confusion. The call notes of the Purple Finch usually given in flight have been described as a metallic tick. The rich warble of a Purple Finch enlivens the day no matter what the weather. A short distance farther on, you will come to a well-

Summer Bird List for High Ridge

The following terms are used to indicate relative abundance. These terms are based on the categories given in John Bull, *Birds of the New York Area*, 1975 Dover edition, page 51.

C = Common, 21-50 individuals per day

FC = Fairly common, 7-20 individuals per day

U = Uncommon, 1-6 individuals per day

R = Rare, 1-6 individuals per season

I = Irregular and erratic, not reported annually

Species	Status				
American Bittern	U	Great Crested Flycatcher	U	Yellow-rumped Warbler	U
Great Blue Heron	U	Eastern Kingbird	FC	Black-thr. Green Warbler	FC
Green-backed Heron	U	Tree Swallow	FC	Blackburnian Warbler	U
American Black Duck	U	N. Rough-winged Swallow	U	Pine Warbler	U
Mallard	U	Bank Swallow	U	Prairie Warbler	U
Wood Duck	U	Barn Swallow	FC	Black-and-white Warbler	FC
Hooded Merganser	R	Blue Jay	FC	American Redstart	FC
Turkey Vulture	U	American Crow	U	Ovenbird	C
Sharp-shinned Hawk	U	Black-capped Chickadee	C	Northern Waterthrush	U
Broad-winged Hawk	U	Tufted Titmouse	U	Louisiana Waterthrush	U
Red-tailed Hawk	U	Red-breasted Nuthatch	U	Common Yellowthroat	C
American Kestrel	U	White-breasted Nuthatch	U	Kentucky Warbler	R
Ruffed Grouse	FC	Brown Creeper	U	Canada Warbler	U
Northern Bobwhite	U	House Wren	FC	Yellow-breasted Chat	R
Virginia Rail	U	Winter Wren	U	Scarlet Tanager	FC
Sora Rail	U	Golden-crowned Kinglet	U	Northern Cardinal	U
Killdeer	U	Blue-gray Gnatcatcher	U	Rose-breasted Grosbeak	FC
American Woodcock	U	Eastern Bluebird	FC	Indigo Bunting	FC
Herring Gull	I	Veery	FC	Rufous-sided Towhee	U
Rock Dove	FC	Hermit Thrush	U	Chipping Sparrow	FC
Mourning Dove	U	Wood Thrush	FC	Field Sparrow	U
Black-billed Cuckoo	R	American Robin	C	Savannah Sparrow	U
Yellow-billed Cuckoo	R	Gray Catbird	C	Song Sparrow	C
Barred Owl	U	Northern Mockingbird	U	Swamp Sparrow	FC
Common Nighthawk	U	Brown Thrasher	U	White-throated Sparrow	FC
Chimney Swift	FC	Cedar Waxwing	FC	Dark-eyed Junco	U
Ruby-thr. Hummingbird	U	European Starling	FC	Bobolink	C
Belted Kingfisher	U	White-eyed Vireo	R	Red-winged Blackbird	C
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker	R	Solitary Vireo	U	Eastern Meadowlark	U
Downy Woodpecker	FC	Yellow-throated Vireo	U	Common Grackle	FC
Hairy Woodpecker	U	Warbling Vireo	U	Brown-headed Cowbird	FC
Northern Flicker	FC	Red-eyed Vireo	C	Northern Oriole	FC
Pileated Woodpecker	U	Blue-winged Warbler	U	Purple Finch	U
Eastern Wood-Pewee	FC	Nashville Warbler	U	House Finch	U
Alder Flycatcher	U	Yellow Warbler	U	Pine Siskin	I
Willow Flycatcher	U	Chestnut-sided Warbler	C	American Goldfinch	FC
Least Flycatcher	FC	Magnolia Warbler	U	House Sparrow	U
Eastern Phoebe	FC	Black-thr. Blue Warbler	FC		

shaded spot that contains a dried-up stream. The Northern Fox Grape borders the road here, and the thickets, brambles, Elderberry, and Arrow-wood are of rank growth. Species to watch for here are Least Flycatcher, Wood Thrush, American Redstart, and Northern Oriole. A Philadelphia Vireo was observed here during the fall migration.

As you leave the area and ascend the hill, you will see the EPO building. Along the fields you should scan for Tree Swallows, possibly Barn Swallows, and Eastern Bluebirds. American Kestrel, Chimney Swift, and Barn Swallow nest in the old buildings. If you look south from the top of the hill, you will note a prominent blue gray hill. This is Wachusett Mountain, famous for its fall hawk migrations. Although High Ridge cannot compare with Wachusett for viewing migrating hawks, this area is a good vantage point for raptors. Turkey Vultures can usually be seen from this spot during the summer months, and they may possibly breed here. Other species to be seen in this area are Brown Thrasher and Savannah Sparrow.

Leaving the EPO grounds, you will encounter a fairly steep descent that leads to one of the richest birding spots at High Ridge. Before you descend to the pond, note another prominent smoke-blue gray mountain just to the northwest. This is Mount Monadnock and is located in Jaffrey, New Hampshire. As you descend, listen for Chestnut-sided Warblers and Ovenbirds. Blue Jays and Brown Creepers may join the chorus here along with Rose-breasted Grosbeaks. At the bottom of the hill, take a left on East Gardner Road for about a hundred yards until you see a stony dirt road on the right that runs through some fields. Follow the road a short way, and you will see an open marsh with a pond on the left. On the right will be a wooded swampy area.

Beginning at the open marsh to the west, walk through the field quietly so as not to flush the ducks and any wading birds. Great Blue and Green-backed herons frequent the open marsh. Out in the deeper waters, Wood Duck, American Black Ducks, Mallards, and Hooded Mergansers have been observed here also. Listen for American Bittern. They nested here in 1987, as did Virginia and Sora rails. Swamp and Song sparrows reside here, and perching on the dead wood bordering the railroad tracks will be Eastern Wood-Pewee, Eastern Phoebe, Eastern Kingbird, and Eastern Bluebirds. Numerous swallows visit the pond for feeding, along with the Belted Kingfisher. Scan the skies for hawks and Turkey Vulture. A pair of Sharp-shinned Hawks were observed hunting in this area regularly during the summer of 1987. During the spring and fall migrations that year an Olive-sided Flycatcher was seen on top of the deadwoods.

Other birds to look for in this wetland complex are Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, cuckoos, both Black and Yellow-billed, and Northern Waterthrush. If you continue along the dirt road by the stand of White Pine, you will come out to an old beaver dam. Proceed to the stream outlet, and continue on a few yards to the

railroad tracks. Take a left along the tracks for about fifty yards, and you will be rewarded with a lovely view of the pond and open marsh. The railroad tracks are in active use; be on the alert for fast-approaching trains, and walk on the edge of the embankment, not on the tracks. The Sora Rails come up on the embankment under the shrub cover, where you may catch a fleeting glimpse of one as it moves from cover to cover.

Return to East Gardner Road and take a right, continuing until you reach the first electric lines. Check this area carefully for bluebirds and for warblers -- Blue-winged, Yellow-rumped, Pine, and Prairie. Field Sparrows are frequent along the electric lines. In the early morning hours just before sunrise or around dusk listen for Barred Owl. Common Nighthawk has also been observed in this area during a late afternoon thunderstorm.

The Chapel Street Trail.

This particular trail leads through mixed woods, by open sewer beds (now inactive) bordered by thickets and deadwood, and past a number of fields, old and cultivated, all of which make this trail an interesting walk when weather conditions are favorable. The diverse habitats found here entice some interesting migrant land birds, as well as breeding birds. The thickets and deadwood bordering the sewer beds and swampland attract migrants such as Olive-sided Flycatcher, Northern Shrike, and Yellow-breasted Chat, and some interesting nesters include Alder and Willow flycatchers, Black-billed Cuckoo, and Ruby-throated Hummingbird. Pileated Woodpecker has been observed in the deeper woods by the railroad bridge.



Black-throated Blue Warbler

Photo by Robert H. Stymeist

Swamp and White-throated sparrows may be heard singing in the swampy areas adjacent to the parking lot where the trail begins, and this is another good spot to watch for bluebirds. As you move beyond the gate, listen for the call notes of Broad-winged Hawks that nest in the woods to the right of the trail. Eastern Wood-Pewee, Hermit Thrush, Ovenbird, Scarlet Tanager, and Rose-breasted Grosbeak may be heard also. About a hundred yards down the road, scrutinize the hemlocks for Black-throated Blue Warblers. In the Red Pines bordering the east side of the trail, Red-breasted Nuthatches may be present along with Golden-crowned Kinglet and Black-capped Chickadees. You may come across Pine Warbler, and Northern Waterthrush has been seen just before the clearing and sewer beds along the east side of the trail.

When you reach the clearing, you will note thickets along both sides of the road where a stream cuts across it. The stream may be dry, depending on the rainfall. These thickets comprise Arrow-leaved Tearthumb, brambles, blueberry, dogwoods, and willows. On August 11, 1987, I found my "life bird" Yellow-breasted Chat in these thickets. Some of the breeding birds observed here were Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Black-billed Cuckoo, and American Redstart. Chestnut-sided Warblers are frequent here along with Common Yellowthroats. Red-tailed Hawks may nest along the southeast sector of the inactive sewer beds. A family of kestrels from a nest nearby frequented the beds last summer. Among the deadwood look for Northern Flicker, Downy and Hairy woodpeckers, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Great Crested Flycatcher, Tree Swallow, and Cedar Waxwing. Just before you reach the Smith Street Trail, check the bird boxes as you move along for Tree Swallow, House Wren, and Eastern Bluebird.

At the intersection, take a right on the paved road and follow Smith Street until you reach the fields on the left. These fields attract sparrows and with luck you may find a Vesper Sparrow or even a Grasshopper Sparrow. Pheasant, Ruffed Grouse, and Northern Bobwhite utilize the fields for feeding. Farther on, note a wooded swamp adjacent to the road, and on the right will be the inactive sewer beds. Alder Flycatchers nested in the wooded swampland, while not far away, at the edge of the sewer beds, Willow Flycatchers nested. As you continue, there are some more fields with bird boxes bordering the roadside. A family of bluebirds was present here during the summer months, and during the fall the corn fields harbor sparrow and blackbird species.

A short distance along, there is a railroad bridge. As you cross the bridge, you will observe another prominent hill, Mt. Watatic, located in Ashby along the New Hampshire border. Shortly you will come to some fields to the north and a small pond on the right. This is a lovely area at which to pause and simply let things come to you. Find a nice shade tree along the road that leads to the Corrections Facility and relax, but do not venture into the restricted area. Yellow-rumped, Black-throated Green, and Blackburnian warblers are breeders

in this area. Pine Warblers were observed during early July in the pines across from the pond. Other warblers found here are Northern Waterthrush and Canada Warbler. Solitary Vireos frequent the cooler woods as do Winter Wrens and White-throated Sparrows. A Belted Kingfisher is a regular visitor to the pond. During late spring, a Yellow-bellied Flycatcher was heard singing in the hemlocks by the building on the edge of the pond, and several other Yellow-bellied Flycatchers were observed a little farther east along East Gardner Road on May 23, 1987, by the Forbush Bird Club. Another interesting migrant flycatcher recorded about the same time period during a 1983 census was the Acadian Flycatcher.

Conclusion. This article touches upon several of the diverse trails found at High Ridge that are productive for birdwatchers. However, these trails typify a small fraction of the rich habitats that exist at High Ridge. It is hoped that this description of the area will draw visitors for further reconnaissance of the region, which may not only be self-enriching for the observer but may also enhance the current ornithological data of this unique wildlife management area.

Acknowledgments. The author would like to thank the following people for their assistance in the completion of this article. I am grateful to Bradford G. Blodget, ornithologist of the MDFW, for the information on the State Bluebird Trail, Tom Early for information on High Ridge, and for their field observations that enhanced the species list, to Simon Perkins of Massachusetts Audubon Society, Robert Stymeist, and Rodney Jenkins.

Summer Bird List for the High Ridge Wildlife Management Area. The bird list that accompanies this article (page 68) reflects mainly the author's field observations, recorded from May 23 through August 1 of 1987 and is at best only a basic indication of the species present.

CHARLES B. QUINLAN of Wellesley has had eighteen years of field experience with birds throughout New England and the South and was associated with the White Creek Field Station in New York. He has taught courses on birds and plants at Wellesley College in recent years, has been a contributing author to *Berkshire Trails for Walking and Ski Touring* by Whit Griswold, 1979, and to *Massachusetts Wildlife* (February 1978 issue), and illustrator for *The Birds of Wellesley* by Clark Ewer, 1982, published by the Wellesley Conservation Commission. A member of the Forbush Bird Club, Charles is very active in field botanical studies of Massachusetts' endangered flora.