



## BIRDING NORTHEAST QUABBIN

by Mark Lynch

Quabbin Reservation is a vast area offering a variety of exciting birding possibilities. This article presents an overview of several sites in the towns of Petersham and New Salem. Although hiking Quabbin has to be one of the great birding experiences in the state, the northeast Quabbin area has possibilities for seeing some of the Quabbin specialities close to the car. Patience and repeated visits will pay off.

### **Preparation.**

Birders should be familiar with the regulations of this Metropolitan District Commission (MDC) water supply before starting a hike. A trip to the Visitor Center at the Administration Building in Belchertown off Route 9 will give the new Quabbin birder an opportunity to become familiar with the reservation and to obtain up-to-date regulations and maps. Bird clubs and individuals should be sure to keep informed about any changes in the rules. While visiting the Center, purchase a copy of the Quabbin Reservation Guide prepared by cartographer Christopher Ryan. I consider this guide map a prerequisite for hiking in the area.

Summer visitors are well advised to bring an ample supply of effective insect repellent, for the onslaught of mosquitoes and assorted flies and midges in June, July, and August can be daunting. Ticks are present, so proper precautions are recommended.

In the winter birders should use common sense to avoid exposure, frostbite, and exhaustion. Be aware that at the water's edge there are often strong winds that increase the chances of frostbite.

During the late November and December deer-hunting season, do not even think about hiking in this area. At the time of this writing, hunting is prohibited in the Quabbin Reservation. However, surrounding areas are popular hunting spots, and poachers sometimes wander onto the reservation near access Gate 37. So even within Quabbin's boundaries you may not be safe. Report all illegal hunters at once to the MDC headquarters. In the near future, deer hunting may be allowed at Quabbin to control the deer herds and the damage they do to plant and tree growth. Check at the Visitor Center for the latest information on hunting regulations.

### **Access.**

The area described in this article comprises part of the town of Petersham (Worcester County) and a small part of New Salem (Franklin County) along Route 122. Petersham can be reached from Route 2 by going south at Athol on Route 32 or south on Route 202 to Route 122. From Worcester, Petersham can

be reached directly via Route 122. The tour outlined starts in Petersham at the intersection of Routes 122 and 32 and proceeds northwest along Route 122.

### **West Street Area.**

A half mile along Route 122 after leaving the intersection with Route 32, you pass a left turn for Route 32A, the road to Hardwick, Gate 40, and a number of other Quabbin destinations. Shortly past the Route 32A exit, you reach the West Street intersection. Turn left. This road leads to Quabbin Gate 37 but offers birding opportunities of its own.

Although this is a rather typical, winding, residential street, a number of interesting birds nest along its two and a half miles. Red-shouldered Hawks, Ruffed Grouse, Wild Turkeys, Pileated Woodpeckers, Winter Wrens, Yellow-throated Vireos, Yellow-rumped, Black-throated Blue, Black-throated Green, and Blackburnian warblers have all been seen or heard here during the breeding season. The Winter Wrens are rather thinly distributed, and generally only one or two can be heard in good years. Red-shouldered Hawks have consistently nested near the road and once tried to nest in a tree right on the road. They are most obvious in the early spring when they first return. Check along West Street from the cemetery to the farm described below.

Good birds can often be found at a small farm located 1.9 miles from the intersection with Route 122. Wild Turkeys are sometimes seen under the pines or in the fields pecking at cow manure. This is one of the most reliable spots for these birds in the Quabbin area, but even here they are far from a sure thing. Very early mornings and sometimes late afternoons in winter are best. Thoroughly check the woodland edges for the turkeys, but stay in your car, as they will flush back into the woods as soon as you get out. Birders should be cautioned that as of 1989 the owners of the farm have started to keep dark-colored domestic turkeys penned up in a barn. In winter, the owners often feed birds, and despite the plethora of cats, flocks of Evening Grosbeaks are usually present even in poor flight years. Other birds attracted to the spot have included all three accipiters (particularly if there are flocks around the feeders), Pileated Woodpeckers, occasionally Common Redpolls, flocks of migrant blackbirds in spring (mostly Common Grackles and Red-winged Blackbirds), and House Sparrows (a bird that can be difficult to find, believe it or not, in this part of Quabbin).

West Street ends at the intersection with Monson Turnpike Road (labeled 1 on the map on page 292). Directly across from West Street is a narrow dirt road, often impassable in winter and spring, that runs along the back of the state forest and connects with the paved road through the forest. Driving this dirt road is usually not advisable, but birds to be found breeding along it include Wild Turkeys, Barred Owls, Winter Wrens, and Louisiana Waterthrushes.

A right turn at the intersection (1) at the end of West Street puts you on a

section, 1.7 miles long, of Monson Turnpike Road that intersects with Route 122. This road is less residential than West Street, although it is being built up. Part of this road is not paved and may not be passable in the winter and spring. Breeding birds include an occasional Black-billed Cuckoo, Eastern Wood-Pewees, Least Flycatchers, Veerys, Hermit and Wood thrushes, and a variety of warblers including Black-throated Blue, Black-throated Green, and Blackburnian. A pond next to the road sometimes has Ospreys and Hooded Mergansers during migration. Eastern Bluebirds have been seen at a small farm near the intersection with Route 122.

A left turn at the West Street/Monson Turnpike Road intersection (1) leads to a dead end at the Gate 37 barrier. This 0.8-mile stretch is paved but deteriorating. The first half mile to the power lines is usually passable except in winter. If there is a lot of snow, ice, or mud, park your car well off the road near the power lines and walk. If you park at the barrier gate, pull off on the side of the road rather than in the small cleared space to the right of the entrance. This space is really a turnaround, and if you use it as a parking spot, expect the wrath of others who will not be able to turn their cars. There are birds even along this short road. Near the intersection there are several feeding stations that attract flocks in winter, especially Pine Siskins and Evening Grosbeaks. Watch for turkeys, woodpeckers, thrushes, warblers, and also owls. At the power lines listen for Prairie Warblers and Field Sparrows, and scan for hawks and ravens.

One last note on West Street. Please remember this is a country residential area, owned by people who enjoy their privacy. Try to stay in your car, be discreet, and do not trespass. If you stop your car, realize that there is more traffic on this road than you might expect, and pull off out of the way.

### **Gate 37 Area.**

The Gate 37 area offers a variety of birding possibilities for those willing to hike a bit. The terrain is mostly level, with few hills. The Quabbin Reservation Guide map is a necessity for exploring this complex of roads and trails. This area of Quabbin is subject to logging, and a spot that is good one year can be the scene of noisy cutting the next. Gate 37 is an excellent place to look for mammal species such as beaver, ermine, white-tailed deer, coyote, and bobcat.

Past the entrance gate, a dirt road descends through an area of mixed woodland. Breeding birds include Red-shouldered Hawks, Pileated Woodpeckers, Eastern Wood-Pewees, Red-breasted and White-breasted nuthatches, Black-throated Green, Blackburnian, and Pine warblers, and Scarlet Tanagers. Watch for hawks high overhead.

After about 0.6 mile, the dirt road crosses a small stone bridge (2) over the West Branch Fever Brook. Here one can choose from several destinations, each of which is described below.

*The Upper Marsh of the West Branch Fever Brook.* To explore this marsh,

choose the rough path on the right just before you cross the bridge (2). This path (not shown on the Quabbin Reservation Guide map) runs along the east side of the brook. After following this trail for about 0.2 mile, you will reach an interesting wooded marsh and pond. Several beaver lodges are evident. In the breeding season Tree Swallows dart among the dead trees, on which one can occasionally find the more common woodpeckers (Downy, Hairy, and Northern Flicker). Listen for Louisiana Waterthrushes along the brook. In spring and fall this pond attracts diving ducks, chiefly Ring-necked Ducks and Hooded Mergansers, which may breed. Wood Ducks do nest here and should be looked for by carefully scoping the trees on the far side of the pond. There is a nice view of Soapstone Hill, which should be scanned for eagles and ravens, especially in late fall and winter. The walking distance from the entrance gate to the pond and back is about 1.5 miles.

*Rattlesnake Hill, the East Branch Fever Brook, and Doubleday Village.* If you take the obvious dirt road that turns left (south) from the main road just before the stone bridge (2), you find an area that has been subjected to much logging in recent years but offers interesting birding. This dirt road ascends gently and eventually turns into what is called Dugway Road. About a mile from the bridge two trails branch off to the right. The area just beyond has been extensively logged.

One of these branching paths takes an acute right turn and swings back toward a small arm of the reservoir where the West Branch Fever Brook enters. A better choice is to take the trail that goes south from Dugway Road and runs between Rattlesnake Hill and the East Branch Fever Brook. Watch for a low stone wall that borders the recently cutover area and the beginning of this trail. The path skirts areas where the East Branch Fever Brook widens into several marshy ponds offering very different birds than other parts of Gate 37. Wood Ducks, American Black Ducks, Tree Swallows, Swamp Sparrows, and Red-winged Blackbirds are common. Great Blue Herons breed, and Green-backed Herons, not widespread at Quabbin, are present. The ponds attract migrating waterfowl, and I have even seen flocks of Blue-winged Teal here, a species very local in distribution at Quabbin. The slope of Rattlesnake Hill offers another type of habitat, where in years past Worm-eating Warblers have bred. Other bird species noted along this trail include Northern Goshawk, Red-shouldered Hawk, Wild Turkey, House Wren, Winter Wren, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Eastern Bluebird, Veery, Wood and Hermit thrushes, a variety of warblers including Canada Warbler, and Fox Sparrow in migration.

This trail eventually leaves the ponds, passes Rattlesnake Hill, and enters an area of mixed forest. A little more than a mile from Dugway Road, the trail forks. The left-hand path leads to an impassable ruined bridge over the East Branch Fever Brook. Take the right-hand path that runs along a ridge where the

East Branch Fever Brook enters the reservoir. Eventually you come to the summit of a small hill with a magnificent overlook of the reservoir, including the Dana Flats, Mount L, and in the distance, Mount Zion and the Prescott Peninsula. At any time of year this is a great place to spend some time with a scope. In the spring and again in the fall until freeze-up (usually January), watch for loons, grebes, and ducks. Species that are often present include Common Loon, Horned Grebe, Green-winged Teal, American Black Duck, Ring-necked Duck, Common Goldeneye, Bufflehead, Hooded Merganser, and Common Merganser. Common Loons breed close by. Through a scope you can sometimes pick out shorebirds across the water on the Dana Flats. This can be convenient if high water levels prevent access to the flats by way of Dana Commons and Graves Landing. Raptors are often observed, particularly during fall migration and winter. Species seen include Turkey Vulture (common in summer), Osprey (during migration), Bald Eagle (anytime but especially in late fall and winter), Northern Harrier (during migration), all the accipiters, the common buteos, Golden Eagle (in late fall and winter), American Kestrel (common during migration; may breed), Merlin (in fall when shorebirds are present in numbers), and Peregrine Falcon (rare in fall). Rough-legged Hawks are very rare in late fall and winter. Occasionally flocks of Horned Larks and Snow Buntings can be spotted on the flats in late fall and winter, and Common Ravens are always to be looked for. The walking distance from the entrance gate to the overlook and back is about six miles.

If you stay on Dugway Road and do not take either of the branching trails, you cross an extensively logged area. In these fields several bluebird boxes have been erected, and Eastern Bluebirds have taken up residence. During migration check the edges of the fields for flocks of warblers and other landbirds. A field on the north (left) side of the road is surrounded by an electric fence to keep out deer. This is to protect new growth and will help to evaluate the effect that deer have on plant growth at Quabbin.

Beyond the fields Dugway Road crosses a bridge (3) over the East Branch Fever Brook. This spot provides a view of a pond not visible from the previously described trails. A few nesting platforms of Great Blue Herons are visible along the south edge of the marsh, and occasionally Great Blues still nest here. A closer view of the nests can be had by walking down a short path that branches from the road just after the bridge and runs along the east side of the pond.

Continuing east on Dugway Road brings you to an intersection with Doubleday Road, which runs southwest to the reservoir through the remains of Doubleday Village, one of the four villages of Dana. All of this region offers rich birding during the breeding season. Common birds include Downy and Hairy woodpeckers, Eastern Wood-Pewees, Least Flycatchers, nuthatches,

Veerys, Hermit Thrushes, Solitary and Red-eyed vireos, Scarlet Tanagers, and a good number of warbler species.

The distance from the entrance gate to the shore at the end of Doubleday Road and back is approximately ten miles. Please note that some maps make it seem possible to hike down Doubleday Road to the Quabbin shore and then to cut back up to Dugway Road via the Rattlesnake Hill trail. My experience has shown that even in times of low water you have to cross the East Branch Fever Brook at some point, risking precarious scrambling over boulders or at least getting very wet. Beyond Doubleday Road, Dugway Road continues eastward past junctions with Whitney Hill Road and then Tamplin Road, both of which eventually lead to Dana Commons and the Gate 40 area.

*The North Dana Peninsula* is another destination that can be reached from the bridge over the West Branch Fever Brook (2). Just beyond the bridge, there is a recent cutover area that has several bluebird boxes. The first trail on the left runs south along the eastern shore of the peninsula and leads toward the site of North Dana, another of the four villages of Dana. Hike this trail until you have a good view of the reservoir—Mount L to the west, "the Pass" between Mount L and Mount Zion to the south, and the Dana Flats to the south and east. From November through the winter, this is a great place to scope for raptors, including both eagles. Golden Eagles are rare, but usually one is around this part of the reservoir during December and January and occasionally will pass over this spot. Repeated visits and patience will lead to eventual success. Bald Eagles can show up at any time and are often noticed flying over Mount Zion and "the Pass." Until freeze-up, loons, grebes, and ducks (including scoters during migration) are usually present. Watch for flocks of Snow Buntings along the shore, and check carefully for Lapland Longspurs. As you hike back to the car, be sure to scope Rattlesnake and Soapstone hills for raptors and ravens. The distance from the entrance gate to the end of the North Dana peninsula and back is about five miles.

*Other Hikes in the Gate 37 Area.* I will mention two other hikes only briefly; they offer the same birds as previously mentioned. One hike is to continue on the Gate 37 road, crossing the West Branch Fever Brook at the bridge (2), walking across the peninsula, and eventually arriving at the trail from Gate 35. Another possibility is to leave the Gate 37 road after crossing the bridge (2) and to hike north along the west side of West Branch Fever Brook, passing through the "Gorge" and eventually reaching a camping and picnic area in Federation State Forest. Breeding White-throated Sparrows and Dark-eyed Juncos are evident along this trail, which is not well marked. A map and compass are advised. Various circular routes can be devised.

### **Brooks Pond.**

Along Route 122 about a mile north of the West Street intersection, there is a pond on the north (right) side of the road. The pond is known by several names but is listed on most maps as Brooks Pond or Harvard Pond. A rough dirt road goes around the pond, but the water can be viewed with a scope from a pulloff on Route 122 or from a spot a short distance up the dirt road on the west side of the pond. Watch for the New Salem Road sign about 1.3 miles from West Street. Park well off the edge of this dirt road just before it crosses a small wooden bridge over a stream. Brooks Pond is good in fall and spring for waterfowl, including Wood Ducks, Ring-necked Ducks, both scaups, Common Goldeneyes, Buffleheads, and Hooded Mergansers. Raptors, including Bald Eagles, are often around. Check the large dead trees on the islands and the far shore. In spring, if the water level is low, a few shorebirds, such as Spotted Sandpipers, Solitary Sandpipers, Greater ~~throated~~

Yellowlegs, and Least Sandpipers, may be present on the small mudflats. Spotted breed in the area. The surrounding forest holds the usual breeding birds and can be quite good for spring migration. I have seen flocks of Yellow-rumped and Palm warblers near the stream, and even rarities such as Yellow-throated Warblers have been found. Great Blue Herons and sometimes Green-backed Herons are present in the summer. This spot is also a popular fishing place.

### **Federation State Forest (sometimes called Federated Womens Clubs State Forest).**

This small but interesting state forest can be reached from Route 122, 3.5 miles from West Street, just past the New Salem town-line sign. The marked entrance is on the south (left) side of Route 122. One paved road runs through the forest, and much birding can be done close to the car.

Breeding birds include Red-shouldered Hawks, Barred Owls, Eastern Wood-Pewees, Least Flycatchers, Tree Swallows, Winter Wrens, occasional Golden-crowned Kinglets, Veerys, Hermit Thrushes, Solitary Vireos, and Swamp Sparrows. Breeding warbler species include Magnolia, Black-throated Blue, Yellow-rumped, Black-throated Green, Blackburnian, and Canada, and occasionally Northern and Louisiana waterthrushes. About one half mile from the entrance, the road turns right. At the bend there is an interesting hiking trail that passes an overgrown marsh and an old Great Blue Heron rookery. A Cerulean Warbler was found along this trail in May 1989. About 1.5 miles from Route 122, the paved road swings right again. You can park at the pulloff on the left side of the road and walk down a trail leading to a small pond. Sometimes people camp here. Red-shouldered Hawks soar over the area, and goshawks also have been spotted. Wood Ducks, Great Blue Herons, Swamp Sparrows, and Red-winged Blackbirds frequent this beaver pond. The path continues to the



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## SPECIAL BIRDS OF NORTHEAST QUABBIN

- **Common Loon** - Breeder. Often seen in the summer from the Dana Flats overlook (Gate 37) or from the North Dana peninsula.
  - **Migrant waterfowl** - Look for diving ducks in March and April and again in late October (after the boat fishing season) through January. Check the North Dana peninsula (Gate 37), Brooks Pond, and Gate 35. For dabblers, check the marshes of the East Branch Fever Brook and the Dana Flats (Gate 37).
  - **Bald Eagle** - Breeder. In summer often seen over the Dana Flats. From late fall through the winter, regularly seen from the North Dana peninsula and Gate 35.
  - **Northern Goshawk** - Very uncommon, probably breeds. Most sightings from winter into spring. Repeated reports from the North Dana area and along West Street.
  - **Golden Eagle** - Rare, but at least one shows up every year. Look in November through February from the North Dana area or in the Gate 35 area. Deer carcasses on the ice increase the chances of seeing one.
  - **Wild Turkey** - Most consistently and conveniently seen in recent years at the farm on West Street in the early morning in winter and spring. Even here they cannot be counted on. In summer look around the Rattlesnake Hill and Doubleday Village areas.
  - **Barred Owl** - One of the two most commonly noted owl species of the area (the other being Great Horned Owl). Calling birds regular in the Gate 37 area during early spring. On several occasions, they have been seen and heard right from the entrance gate.
  - **Pileated Woodpecker** - Common, but thinly distributed. Summer is the hardest time to find them. Most often seen in the early mornings. Try along West Street, Gate 37 to Dugway Road (most consistent location), or Gate 35.
  - **Common Raven** - Uncommon in this area in summer when this species seems to prefer West Quabbin. During the rest of the year, particularly winter, try the North Dana area or Gate 35. Always be on the lookout, because ravens have been seen over every spot mentioned in the article.
  - **Winter Wren** - In 1988 and 1989, the local population of this species seems to have bounced back to former levels, but Winter Wrens are still thinly distributed. Try listening for them in Federation State Forest, along the Doubleday Road section of Gate 37, near Rattlesnake Hill, and even along West Street. More common during early spring migration. Sometimes individuals linger until late in the year.
  - **Eastern Bluebird** - With the erection in 1989 of nesting boxes in the cutover areas of Gate 37, this species may become as common here as in the Gate 40 region. Noted as a migrant along the shore. Also check along West Street and Monson Turnpike Road. Has bred in the marshes of the East Branch Fever Brook (Gate 37).
  - **Louisiana Waterthrush** - Breeds along the streams in Federation State Forest and along the West Branch Fever Brook in the Gate 37 area.
  - **Snow Bunting** - Regular in late fall and early winter around North Dana and over the Dana Flats.
  - **Winter finches** - Irregular winter visitors. Evening Grosbeaks are usually around West Street. Pine Siskins and occasionally Common Redpolls can also be found here in flight years. Red Crossbills are less predictable, but the species may have bred in sections of Gate 37. Summering birds have been photographed. Pine Grosbeak is the least often recorded winter finch in this area. Watch and listen for winter finches flying overhead while looking for eagles in the North Dana and Gate 35 areas.
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back of the pond where you may hear a Winter Wren singing.

The paved forest road continues along a stream where Louisiana Waterthrushes breed and can often be heard and seen close to the car. About 1.7 miles from Route 122, the paved road ends in a small parking area with one dirt trail running to the right and one dirt road heading to the left. The trail on the right goes under some power lines, through a camping and picnic area, and becomes the Gate 36 trail. To hike this complex of interesting paths, consult the Quabbin Reservation Guide map. All typical Quabbin breeding birds can be found here. The dirt road to the left runs along the back of the forest to the West Street/Monson Turnpike Road intersection (1). Do not try to drive this dirt road.

Winter birding in the state forest can be difficult because the road is not plowed and gets very icy, but in good flight years, winter finches are present.

### **Gate 35 Area.**

Gate 35 is at the end of the South Athol/Dana Road, off Route 122, about a half mile beyond the state forest turnoff. Look for a sign advertising C & M Roughcut Lumber on the left (south) side of Route 122. The South Athol/Dana Road has little of interest for birders, but one should check for winter finches at any feeders along its one-mile length. The road dead-ends at the Gate 35 barrier. Please park along the edge of the road, and leave the small area to the right of the gate for a turnaround.

After walking past the gate, take the trail immediately on the left. After less than a half mile, the trail passes under some power lines. During the evening or just before dawn in winter or early spring, check the area for calling Northern Saw-whet and Long-eared owls. Both are found here, but they are rare. The cleared area under the power lines can also produce Northern Shrikes, Tree Sparrows, and finches in the winter and may have some migrants in the fall. Check the area for raptors.

The trail runs along the western shore of the North Dana peninsula for several miles and offers good overlooks of the northeastern section of the reservoir (Mount L to the south and the Prescott Peninsula to the west). In late fall to freeze-up, the water holds many diving ducks, including scoters. Please notice that this area may freeze earlier than other sections around the tip of the North Dana peninsula. Generally, the farther south you hike the better your chances of seeing the eagles that are often around Mount L. Check in the trees on the islands for perched raptors and Northern Shrikes.

In the fall the trees and bushes along the shore may have concentrations of migrants. Other birds found along the Gate 35 trail include Pileated Woodpeckers, Common Ravens, and a variety of winter finches in good flight years. I have recorded Golden Eagle here several times. Eventually, the Gate 36 trail enters on the left and farther along the path joins the trail that crosses the North Dana peninsula and leads to Gate 37.

## Conclusion.

This article has touched on a few of the highlights of the northeast Quabbin area. There are numerous other roads, ponds, and marshes that one can explore from the car or on foot. Some of these spots have birds not mentioned in this summary. The Alder Flycatcher, for instance, is found in a few of the marshes nearby. Who knows what you will find?

**MARK LYNCH** is an instructor/docent at the Worcester Art Museum, does a talk show on the arts and sciences for radio station WICN-FM, and is a member of the advisory board of the Worcester branch of the Massachusetts Audubon Society. He has birded throughout the United States, in Central America and Europe, and has made two trips to Australia. Mark has also written an article on the birds of Quabbin's Gate 40, which appeared in *Bird Observer*, October 1987, 15(5): 220-229. He requests that birders send interesting sightings from the Quabbin area (unusual species, high counts, early and late dates, etc.) to him at 36 Carlisle Street, Worcester, MA 01610.

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### NEW ENGLAND HAWK WATCH CONFERENCE SATURDAY, APRIL 7, 1990

The New England Hawk Watch (NEHW) will hold a one-day conference on subjects related to raptors and raptor migration on Saturday, April 7, 1990, at the Holiday Inn in Holyoke, Massachusetts (the site of previous NEHW conferences). Following the day's events there will be a banquet at which Peter Dunne will be the guest speaker.

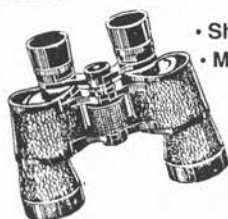
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## 1990 ROADSIDE RAPTOR CENSUS

Anyone who drives the highways of Massachusetts in the winter is familiar with the sight of the perched or soaring Red-tailed Hawk or the hovering American Kestrel. How many raptors are hunting or resting at the edges of roads? If you would like to participate during the morning of March 3 or 4, 1990, in a coordinated attempt to survey the raptors utilizing the roadside edge habitat, send your name, address, and telephone numbers to Robert Stymeist, 98 Boylston Street, Watertown, MA 02172. Please indicate what highways you would be interested in covering and include a self-addressed, stamped envelope.