

WATERFOWL IN THE BERKSHIRES

by Bartlett Hendricks

Being the furthest from the sea among Massachusetts counties and with an average altitude of fifteen hundred feet, Berkshire County would not seem to be a productive area for migrating waterbirds. In fact, birders visiting the Berkshires during the spring and fall are often pleased with the number and variety of waterbirds. While both the Connecticut and Hudson river valleys attract far larger waterfowl migrations, the birds are usually easier to observe in the Berkshires. This is because the Berkshires have more moderate-sized lakes and ponds, none of which are so large that birds cannot be identified from the opposite shore except on very dark or windy days, and on those occasions the far side can be reached without long detours.

Since 1946 the Hoffmann Bird Club of Pittsfield has conducted an annual waterfowl census, held on either the first or second Sunday of November. From loons to coots we have thus far recorded thirty-five species. We have not seen a Blue-winged Teal because they move south too early, and have only once recorded a Common Moorhen, which also breeds in the county. The largest number of one species we have seen in one day is over 870 Canada Geese. However, on November 12, 1979 (the day after our trip), a group of experienced members saw sixty-four Common Loons, over 3500 Snow Geese, over 3000 Canada Geese, three Red-necked Grebes, and four Surf Scoters, all at Onota Lake.

Other waterbirds identified over the years, many of them accidental, include Pacific Loon, Northern Gannet, Mute Swan, Greater White-fronted Goose, Barnacle Goose, King Eider (one dozen of which were photographed in one flock), Barrow's Goldeneye, Thick-billed Murre, and Atlantic Puffin. Some surprising other species that have occurred on Berkshire lakes include Parasitic Jaeger (seen at length from as close as twenty-five feet), Little Gull (identified by no less than the late Ludlow Griscom), Caspian Tern, Ruff, Hudsonian Godwit, Purple Sandpiper, and Lesser Black-backed Gull.

On our census trip we are often joined by groups from the Connecticut River Valley. We cover the Berkshire Valley from Cheshire Reservoir on the north to Gilligan's Pond in Sheffield, ending at Wood Pond in Lenox. In November this trip takes most of the day.

While the three Pittsfield-area lakes, Onota, Pontoosuc, and Richmond Pond, are usually the most productive, we have often had good luck at Cheshire Reservoir, Stockbridge Bowl, and various small ponds in and around Sheffield. Flights of waterfowl sometimes occur at the North Adams Reservoir and at such upland lakes as Buel, Garfield, and Otis Reservoir. Small ponds, such as Ashley Reservoir, may produce pleasant surprises, and so may the Housatonic and Hoosac rivers.

TABLE 1. Annual Waterfowl Census Results from the Hoffmann Bird Club, 1946-1991.

<u>Species</u>	<u>Number of Years Seen</u>	<u>Maximum Number of Birds</u>
Red-throated Loon	7	4
Common Loon	34	10
Pied-billed Grebe	28	17
Horned Grebe	26	74
Red-necked Grebe	8	4
Double-crested Cormorant	1	1
Snow Goose	2	1
Brant	6	1
Canada Goose	31	870
Wood Duck	24	100
Green-winged Teal	25	38
American Black Duck	35	303
Mallard	42	163
Northern Pintail	15	6
Northern Shoveler	5	4
Gadwall	3	7
American Wigeon	24	15
Canvasback	22	53
Redhead	15	11
Ring-necked Duck	19	80
Greater Scaup	42	136
Lesser Scaup	11	40
Oldsquaw	16	13
Black Scoter	11	42
Surf Scoter	8	6
White-winged Scoter	22	35
Common Goldeneye	41	117
Bufflehead	36	49
Hooded Merganser	24	17
Common Merganser	21	21
Red-breasted Merganser	9	8
Ruddy Duck	22	38
Common Moorhen	1	1
American Coot	40	128

In common with other parts of New England, over the years we have seen a huge increase in the number of resident Canada Geese and a decline in Black Ducks. There has been some increase in Mallards and Ring-necked Ducks and an unfortunate decrease in Canvasbacks, Redheads, other diving ducks, and coots. We have noted a recent increase in Gadwalls, but this may be due to improvements on the part of our observers and to better optical equipment!

Directions

The center of Pittsfield is a good place to start. At the oval park in the middle of town, set the odometer at 0, and drive north on Route 7. The south end of Pontoosuc Lake is reached at 2.7 miles. The park on the left at Hancock Road (traffic light) offers a good overview, but the YMCA boathouse further north is more satisfactory, and either of two restaurant parking lots at 3.6 miles is even better. Bull Hill Road at 4.2 miles leads to the north inlet, an area that often has extensive mud flats.

However, you may first want to take a side trip to Cheshire Reservoir, sometimes known as Hoosic Lake. If so, continue north on Route 7 to the center of Lanesboro, and turn right at 5.4 miles onto Summer Street. Go past the school, and turn left on Cheshire Road. Proceed north about 2 miles to Farnum Road. Turn right onto the causeway. This is generally the best vantage point, but good places can be reached on the east side of the lake along Route 8, which is at the other end of the causeway. The long, shallow, southern portion of the lake is seldom productive, so any venture onto Route 8 should be to the north (left).

Now go back south on Route 7 to the bridge on Bull Hill Road, just west of Route 7. After viewing from here you can get to the center and northwest corner of Pontoosuc Lake by following Bull Hill Road west and taking the first left from the Route 7 and Bull Hill Road intersection (Sunrise Street). Go to the end of the road, and look out over the lake. Then return to Bull Hill Road, and continue west to Narraganset Avenue, a dead-end road that goes past the west inlet for the lake. Look in both directions from the bridge over the inlet. Turn around, return to Bull Hill Road, and take a left on Balance Rock Road. Follow this road west and south, and turn right onto the Onota Lake causeway (Casey Memorial Drive). Spend some time here. You may want to walk out on the peninsula on the west side of the causeway.

Turn around, and go back to Balance Rock Road, which has now become Peck's Road, and go right (southeast) to the light at Valentine Road. Turn right, and continue to Lakeway Drive. Turn right to Burbank Park boat launch. While often good, this area is crowded on some days. A road (nameless) bearing north leads to a large parking area, which is often the most rewarding spot on Onota Lake.

Now return to Valentine Road, and reset the odometer at zero. Go south to West Street, turn right, and continue west for one mile to Fort Hill Avenue. (Just

past here, to the right off West Street, is Blythewood Drive, a private road along the southwest side of the lake. There are many homes, so be careful about trespassing.)

Go south on Fort Hill, and bear right after the railroad underpass onto Hungerford Street. Zigzag across Route 20 (a right, then a left to remain on Hungerford), and continue to Lebanon Avenue. Turn right, and at a sign saying "Dangerous Intersection" (3.7 miles), turn left, and go up the hill on Melbourne Road to Barker Road. Drive right to Tamarack Road. Here you may want to turn left for a brief stop at Mud Pond. Then return to Barker Road, and continue south to Bartlett's Orchards, a good place to stop for coffee, donuts, and cider. Here at Richmond Shores (6.3 miles), turn right, and at 6.9 miles, bear left at the "To Beach" sign to Richmond Pond.

To reach Stockbridge Bowl, return to Barker Road (Pittsfield Road in Richmond), and continue south (right) 2.4 miles to a road turning left and marked with a sign, "To Lenox." Follow the hard-surface road over the hill to Route 183. Turn right, and almost at once turn left on West Hawthorne Road, and follow this to the east side of the lake. After pausing here, go south about one mile to the public beach. The northwest side of the lake can be reached from a public beach and boat ramp off Route 183.

In the fall, if the waterfowling is dull and after finishing at Onota Lake, you may want to make a side trip to the Berry Mountain hawkwatch site at the Pittsfield State Forest in Hancock. Return to the causeway at the north end of Onota. Go west to Churchill Street, turn left, and follow it to Cascade Street. Turn right, and then right again to the forest headquarters. The road up the mountain is good but is one-way up, and a different road must be taken back down the mountain. The parking area at the top offers a good lookout, but it is better to walk a short distance north up the hill. Be prepared for this to be a very cold spot on a good day for hawks! Avoid the road if there is any snow or ice, because it is not plowed or sanded.

While huge numbers of hawks have not been seen at Berry Mountain, this is one of the best sites in the state for Golden Eagles and Common Ravens. Over twenty-four Common Ravens have been observed in one day. During the fall of 1991 the site was used 255 hours on sixty-two days. Fourteen species were seen, averaging a respectable 8.1 hawks per hour.

BARTLETT HENDRICKS, the founder of the Hoffmann Bird Club, has been organizing the club's annual waterfowl census since 1946. He is the retired natural history curator of the Berkshire Museum in Pittsfield and a life member of the Massachusetts Audubon Society. Bart is active in the Mount Greylock Protective Association and is an avid downhill skier.

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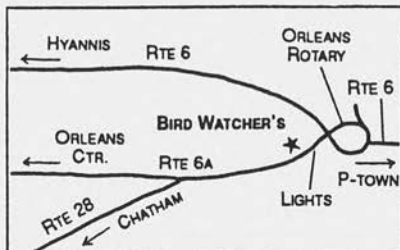
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