

A KEY LINK IN GREATER BOSTON'S WILDLIFE HABITAT: METROPOLITAN STATE HOSPITAL

by John Andrews and Lee Taylor

Boston-area birders are fortunate to have several urban parks, reserves, and privately owned lands that offer excellent birding and tranquil walks only minutes away inside Route 95. Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Arnold Arboretum in Jamaica Plain, Belle Isle Marsh in Revere, Blue Hills Reservation, and Fresh Pond in Cambridge are but a few locations well-known among birders. One relatively little known land area, the property of the closed Metropolitan State Hospital, is now threatened with development and is entering a critical time where its future use will be determined. This area is perhaps the last great piece of unprotected open space within Route 95.

The Metropolitan State Hospital property consists of 342 acres of land in the towns of Lexington, Belmont, and Waltham. In 1992 the property is being declared "surplus" by the state of Massachusetts, and is entering the state's real property disposition process which is managed by the Division of Capital Planning and Operations (DCPO). State and local agencies will be polled to determine whether they have proposals for use of the property. If no such proposals are acceptable to the state, the property will be offered to private developers.

Over eighty-five percent of the land (272 acres) is currently undeveloped. The property is the heart of a de facto greenway that includes the Metropolitan District Commission's (MDC) Beaver Brook Reservation, Belmont Rock Meadow conservation land, Habitat Institute for the Environment, Highland Farm Sanctuary, Lexington's "Clematis Brook" conservation land, and Cedar Hill Girl Scout Camp. The entire greenway constitutes more than one thousand acres. If the Metropolitan Hospital grounds are not preserved, the greenway will be fragmented, and all of the connecting properties threatened with degradation.

The property is ecologically rich due to its size, the extent of its wetlands, and the diversity of animal and plant species present in both wetland and upland areas. About one-quarter of the undeveloped area consists of wetlands (marsh or wet meadows and maple swamps). About one-half of the undeveloped area contains a mature oak-hickory forest in the upland areas of the property. This forest comprises mature trees estimated to be seventy to eighty years old with a canopy height of over seventy feet. The rest of the undeveloped area consists of dry open areas. In addition, about fourteen vernal pools are located on the land. An extensive network of trails and unpaved roads, reaching all habitats and nearly all of which are easily walked, enables the birder or other users to walk throughout the property.

Why should birders be concerned about the fate of the Metropolitan

Hospital grounds? A recent *Bird Observer* article pointed out the potentially devastating effects of forest fragmentation on neotropical migrant bird species (Askins, R.A. 1992 Forest Fragmentation and the Decline of Migratory Songbirds, *Bird Observer*, 20(1):13-21). As forest tracts near urban areas become smaller and smaller or are fragmented by new roads, power lines, and the like, these land tracts become increasingly isolated from similar habitat nearby. Such fragmentation is particularly harsh on woodland birds because it increases their susceptibility to predators, such as jays, crows, and raccoons, as well as to cowbird parasitism. While the Metropolitan Hospital grounds do not in themselves constitute a large enough forest tract to protect woodland birds from predators and nest parasites, its role in maintaining a much larger greenway is critical.

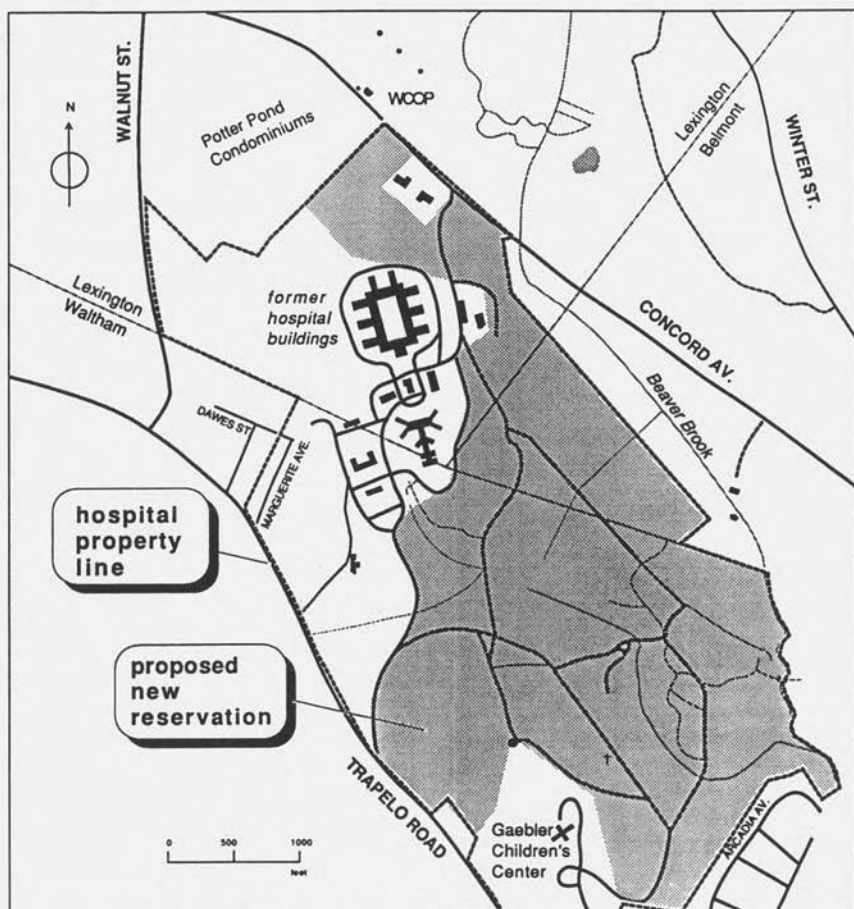
One of the authors (L. Taylor) has birded the area extensively since the late 1970s. He has made close to five hundred trips into the tract while participating in organized studies on one particular 6.7-hectare wooded plot, and in more informal trips throughout the undeveloped part of the grounds. The studies include an *American Birds* Winter Bird Population Study (WBPS) and the Spring Migration Watch conducted in the mid-1980s by Bird Observer of Eastern Massachusetts, Inc.

In the depths of winter, one generally encounters birds in mixed-species feeding flocks, which comprise predominantly the expected woodland species. Over the course of ten years of WBPS coverage, Black-capped Chickadee was the most common species, followed closely by Downy Woodpecker and Tufted Titmouse. The resident Great Horned Owls tend to be most conspicuous at this time of year, and the birder can often find them by investigating noisy flocks of crows enjoying a good owl mobbing. The mundane duties of the WBPS worker are occasionally enlivened by encounters with more unusual species, such as wintering robins and flickers, and on one occasion a Winter Wren.

In the breeding season the deep woods on the Metropolitan State grounds harbor good numbers of Eastern Wood-Pewee, Great Crested Flycatcher, Wood Thrush, Red-eyed Vireo, Scarlet Tanager, and Rose-breasted Grosbeak. In most years, Red-tailed Hawk and Great Horned Owl nests are also found; frequently they use the same nest structure in alternate years. The scrubbiest and edge habitats host Eastern Kingbirds, House Wrens, all three northeastern mimids, Blue-winged Warblers, Indigo Buntings, Northern Orioles, and American Goldfinches. Wetter parts of the tract are home to American Woodcocks, Warbling Vireos, Yellow Warblers, Common Yellowthroats, Swamp Sparrows, and Red-winged Blackbirds. A small Northern Bobwhite population breeds annually on the site, which is toward the northern and eastern fringe of this species' range. On one recent occasion, Solitary Vireos, which are quite local in the eastern part of Massachusetts, nested at the Metropolitan State grounds, although unfortunately without success.

During spring migration birding trips can be quite rewarding. In the early spring one can expect to encounter flocks of five to ten Palm Warblers foraging near the forest floor, and Ruby-crowned Kinglets in every thicket. Other spring migrants of note that are more or less regular include Virginia and Sora rails, Acadian Flycatchers, Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, Yellow-throated Vireos, Blackburnian and Mourning warblers, and Rusty Blackbirds. As the migration progresses into May, the oaks can be dense with warblers, with the potential for twenty-plus species in a day.

Early in the fall migration Empidonax flycatchers and Eastern Phoebes can at times be found working virtually every sunny opening. Olive-sided Flycatcher is also not uncommon around Labor Day. As the landbird migration peaks in September and October, Sharp-shinned Hawks, Ruby-throated Hummingbirds, Red-breasted Nuthatches, and Lincoln's Sparrows can be



Area proposed for new MDC reservation on grounds of former Metropolitan State Hospital. Map courtesy of Beaver Brook Watershed Coalition.

expected. Toward the end of fall, Hermit Thrushes and Fox Sparrows move through in moderate numbers. At that time one can also encounter interesting wanderers and lingerers, such as Carolina Wren, Northern Shrike, and the occasional warbler, even into December.

Over the years, Taylor's list for the Metropolitan State Hospital tract has grown to just under 150 species. Probably the most unusual bird he encountered was a Lawrence's Warbler. It is seldom, however, that a birding trip, no matter what the season, does not provide some reward.

In addition to its value for birders, the property has numerous other benefits that argue for its preservation. The wetlands are important for preventing flooding downstream and maintaining water quality in the ponds of the MDC Beaver Brook Reservation. Nearby residents use the property for other recreational activities, such as jogging, nature walks, and cross-country skiing.

Because of the prevalence of wetlands, over 190 acres of the property were classified as "undevelopable" in a preliminary assessment of the land by the DCPO. A local citizens group known as the Beaver Brook Watershed Coalition (BBWC) conducted a study that mapped environmentally sensitive areas, including wetlands, vernal pools, and steep slopes. The study concluded that by setting aside some 220 acres on the eastern side of the property as a public reservation, most of this environmentally sensitive land could be permanently protected, and the integrity of the Beaver Brook greenway could be preserved. A petition requesting that such a reservation be created has been endorsed by the Massachusetts Audubon Society, Appalachian Mountain Club, New England Sierra Club (Thoreau Group), Massachusetts Association of Conservation Commissions, Charles River Watershed Association, and several other local organizations.

A promising response to the idea of a new public reservation has come from the MDC. The MDC has called the site a "spectacular piece of land" and has noted that it would provide a logical enhancement of the MDC's existing Beaver Brook Reservation. However, the MDC has indicated that they will not pursue acquisition of the land unless there is clear support for the idea from the three affected towns (Belmont, Lexington, and Waltham). Each of the three towns has appointed members to a land use task force that is working with the DCPO on the disposition. Residents of the three affected towns need to express their interest in protecting the open space to their respective task force delegations (write to the Met State Land Use Task Force in care of town hall). Residents of other towns should write to Julie O'Brien, MDC, 30 Somerset Street, Boston, MA 02108. For further information on the status of the disposition and conservation efforts, call John Andrews at 617-862-6498 or Nancy Childs at 617-489-5050.

JOHN ANDREWS is vice-president of Citizens for Lexington Conservation and one of the founders of the Beaver Brook Watershed Coalition.

An active birder for many years, he has served as a sector leader on the Greater Boston Christmas Bird Count. Since 1973 John has written over ten articles in *Bird Observer*. This year John directed a breeding bird survey of the Great Meadows land in Lexington as part of a comprehensive ecological study of that area. John is an engineer and lives in Lexington.

LEE TAYLOR has birded Massachusetts since 1975, arriving on the scene days after the Newburyport Ross' Gull departed. He has been active in *Bird Observer* since the early 1980s, initially compiling field reports, subsequently participating in organizing field studies, and currently keeping the books. In recent years he has derived a great deal of enjoyment from intensively birding Arlington, where he resides, and neighboring towns.

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