

BIRDING THE HOUSATONIC VALLEY WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA

by David St. James

Established in 1968, the Housatonic Valley Wildlife Management Area contains over 850 acres in the western Massachusetts towns of Pittsfield, Lenox, and Lee. Owned and administered by the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife, the area is one of many parcels of land that have been set aside for hunting, fishing, habitat preservation, protection of rare and endangered species, or access to major rivers and streams. It contains a varied habitat that includes floodplain, northern deciduous woods, agricultural lands, and the swamps and marshes associated with the Housatonic River, which flows through the entire area. The birding is as varied as the land, and several rare and protected plant and animal species reside within its boundaries. Since 1970 over 190 species of birds have been recorded within the area.

The river valley serves as a major flyway for migrating birds in both spring and fall, and the hidden backwaters and marshes along the river harbor suitable habitat for nesting bitterns, rails, and a myriad of waterfowl and songbirds. Perhaps as important as the birds are the scenic vistas of pastures, meadows, and wetlands, backdropped by October Mountain and the Hoosac Range to the east. This is the land that inspired Longfellow, Melville, Holmes, and a host of other poets, authors, and artists for the last two hundred years.

Immediately to the north of the management area, the Massachusetts Audubon Society (MAS) owns and operates the 260-acre Canoe Meadows Wildlife Sanctuary. Pleasant Valley Sanctuary, another MAS sanctuary with 1150 acres of upland forest and meadow, lies a mere four miles to the west. To the east, the 16,000-acre October Mountain State Forest abuts the area, and directly to the south, 200 acres of Lenox Conservation Commission land complete a unique perspective of the Berkshires experience. These properties collectively constitute one of the largest arrays of wildlands available to Massachusetts today.

The management area is most easily accessible by exiting the Massachusetts Turnpike in Lee (Interchange 2) and traveling on U.S. 20 West for approximately 7.5 miles to New Lenox Road, which is a right-hand turn immediately adjacent to the Luau Hale Polynesian Restaurant. Proceed approximately 1.2 miles, through one intersection (East Street) and across a set of railroad tracks to the Decker Boat Launch site, which affords a central point of reference for locating the other portions of the area. The land can be divided into several discrete subunits that, despite their proximity to each other, offer a diverse assortment of habitats and their associated wildlife.

Daly Section

The Daly section is bordered by railroad tracks to the west, the Housatonic River to the east, Woods Pond to the south, and north to a property line abutting pasture and a large experimental station involved in the transmission of extremely high-voltage electricity. Parking lots along New Lenox Road allow easy access to both this section and the Decker Boat Launch site immediately to the east.

The most rewarding birding can usually be attained by parking near the railroad tracks and walking south along the tracks. A pleasant walk of approximately 1.5 miles to the confluence of Yokun Brook can yield a surprising number of species. In season, shorebirds and waterfowl can be abundant in Yokun Brook, which has been swollen into a broad marsh by beavers. On a May morning in 1982 eighty-four species of birds were recorded merely by walking this section of tracks and briefly birding the Brielman section (see description below). Nesting waterthrushes, Winter Wrens, and Blue-gray Gnatcatchers are easily observed. Large concentrations of American Woodcock perform their comical twilight courtship dances from the nearby alder thickets and wet meadows, while Rusty Blackbirds have languished into June, tempting the birder with the possibility of their breeding. Whip-poor-wills, an increasingly rare find in the Berkshires, have until recently bred in these fields. In winter it is not uncommon to find a Rough-legged Hawk perched nearby or a Northern Shrike surveying the fields for a careless mouse. This is the season when one can most easily hear owls calling up and down the valley. Up to seven Great Horned Owls have been heard at once in one of the most interesting choruses one could hope to experience. Saw-whet, Eastern Screech-, and Barred owls have all been recorded by merely standing along New Lenox Road by the tracks or by the nearby river bridge.

Canoe Trip from Decker Boat Launch to Woods Pond

The most pleasurable way of birding the area is by canoe. The Decker Boat Launch site on New Lenox Road is the best place to put in your canoe. (From September 15 to May 15, canoeists must wear a U.S. Coast Guard-approved personal flotation device.) Canoes cannot be rented in the management area, but they can be rented in nearby Hancock or Sheffield. In addition, MAS runs guided canoe trips from May to October. Call MAS at 413-637-0320.

While gasoline engines are prohibited by town ordinance, canoeing is leisurely and affords access to about six miles of flatwater river paddling with the opportunity to observe many birds and mammals normally too shy to be seen so closely. American Bitterns, Soras, and Virginia Rails have nested regularly at or near the launch site. Throughout the spring, Ospreys are commonly seen flying overhead grasping foot-long carp. Apparently, the high visibility of these fish makes them the preferred food for this species. The

goldfish were presumedly introduced into the system by people who tired of their pets and chose to dispose of them "humanely." They now constitute one of the largest components of the area's fishery.

Canoeing the river downstream (south) from the launch site sends the visitor through a series of habitats that gradually meld from one into another and with them their associated birdlife. The agricultural pastures of the first dozen or so meanders allow the canoeist close encounters with Bobolinks, Eastern Meadowlarks, Bank Swallows, and an occasional Spotted Sandpiper. Throughout the summer, swallows patrol these fields. A small colony of Cliff Swallows lives beneath the New Lenox Road bridge, and a short upstream paddle beneath this bridge allows for a view of their well-constructed nests. Early on a summer morning, just downstream of the launch site, one is very likely to see and hear an American Bittern that has nested here for several years. Virginia Rails nest alongside the launch site itself, and while it takes patience, luck, or a tape recording to draw out these shy creatures, the result is well worth the effort.

Gradually, the fields are left behind, and mature woodlands of silver maple, elm, basswood, and ash eventually become dominant. An occasional willow arches over the bank, and an understory of dogwood and willow makes an impenetrable barrier. Warbling and Yellow-throated vireos add to the cacophony of tanagers, orioles, thrushes, and warblers. Green-backed Herons commonly flush before the canoe; Blue-gray Gnatcatchers nest in the trees along the stream.

Just as gradually as the fields passed into woods, the woods now cede their dominance to broad marshes playing host to a multitude of backwaters that tempt and beg for a closer inspection. Common Moorhens have until recently nested in these areas. During the fall, these hidden areas are used as staging areas for migrating waterfowl. Large numbers of geese and Wood Ducks, and smaller concentrations of mergansers utilize these sloughs.

This river ride culminates at Woods Pond, which is actually a mere swelling of the river caused by a dam from one of the long-forgotten nineteenth century mills that used to hug the banks of most of our streams. Great Blue Herons commonly are found fishing its banks. Early spring gatherings of Common Goldeneyes, Hooded Mergansers, and Ring-necked Ducks are often found in surprisingly large numbers for such a small body of water. Since this is, in essence, the river, it remains free of ice over much of its portion through most winters when other lakes and ponds are completely locked in. It is then that this spot may play host to some late wintering waterfowl and raptors.

At the south end of Woods Pond along its western bank are the old remains of a bridge that used to span the river just above the dam. It is here, on the western abutment, that most take out their canoes. It is a welcome thought that one had the foresight to bring a second car to this point to return to the Decker

Boat Launch site without having to paddle back. While the canoeing is never strenuous, the river seems to grow perceptibly at the end of a long morning or afternoon of intense birding, if you have to paddle the entire length again. Taking one's time to bird or explore other natural wonders along the way, one should anticipate a three to four hour canoe trip from Decker to Woods Pond.

To reach the disembarking location on Woods Pond from the launch site, return west on New Lenox Road to the first intersection (East Street), and turn left. Proceed approximately 2.8 miles south on East Street to Housatonic Street. Turn left onto Housatonic Street. After about 0.8 mile, the road veers sharply to the right, and the pond is visible straight ahead with the above-mentioned bridge abutment. Park judiciously, being careful not to block the private drive on the left.

Woodland Road

Proceeding east along New Lenox Road from the launch site about 0.3 mile, one will arrive at the intersection of East New Lenox Road and New Lenox Road. Evening Grosbeaks have been noted every summer at this intersection from 1980 to 1992, with the exception of 1985. Proof of nesting is merely awaiting an ambitious investigator. Take a right (called October Mountain Road on the south side of New Lenox Road), and drive one mile through some sparsely located housing, after which the road turns to dirt and is only seasonally passable, and then only by high-bodied vehicles. This road roughly parallels the east bank of the Housatonic River. At the town line between Lenox and Lee, the road changes its name to Woodland Road. The road continues along the banks of the river and offers many access points to observe the wildlife of the marshes and the eastern shore of Woods Pond. The road continues to a junction (at 3.5 miles south of New Lenox Road). Turn left past the campground at October Mountain State Forest to head into the town of Lee.

Habitat type here is distinctly different. The steep slopes of October Mountain abut the road, and bring with them the associated plant and bird species of a more boreal climate. Winter Wrens, Hermit Thrushes, Blackburnian Warblers, and Scarlet Tanagers claim possession of the canopy and understory vegetation. Ruffed Grouse range the deciduous woods, and it is here that Wild Turkeys are commonly noted. Sightings of black bear are not uncommon, and while perhaps equally as common, bobcats usually are more successful hiding in the talus slopes. In early spring wildflowers abound, and the sides of this road feature magnificent patches of Dutchman's breeches, spring beauty, trillium, and hepatica.

Brielman Section

Historically the richest of the areas in birdlife, the Brielman section is merely a shadow of its former greatness, but for a surprising reason. It was long associated with Pittsfield's sewage treatment facility, and prior to the early

1970s held open beds that attracted a surprising assortment of waterfowl, shorebirds, and waders. Older records mention Ruddy Turnstones, dowitchers, and Buff-breasted and Western sandpipers, all unusual Berkshire visitors. Modernization has since stripped the area of this attractant, but a natural pond and the backwaters of the nearby Housatonic River still host many of the management area's more intriguing marsh birds.

To reach the Brielman section, drive west from the launch site along New Lenox Road to the first intersection (East Street). Take a right and proceed approximately 0.8 mile to the intersection of Holmes Road. Turn right, proceed one hundred yards to Utility Drive on the right just before the Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church, and turn right. After passing through a railroad underpass, park along a graveled road on the left just before the buildings of the sewage treatment plant. Areas past this point are inaccessible to vehicles.

Despite its small size, the wetland on the left is the main attractant for most of the interesting bird species in this area. Until a recent shrinkage in overall Massachusetts range, Common Moorhens were commonly found nesting here. They were quite visible throughout the summer with their young squeezing through the cattails and hopping along sedge hummocks. Bitterns, Virginia Rails, Soras, Marsh Wrens, and Common Snipe actively breed in this wetland and are quite visible. The pumping call of the bittern and the aerial flight songs of the snipe are the signature sounds of the early morning. Historically, King Rails have bred here and should be watched for.

The gravel road forks almost immediately into a left branch and one that continues straight ahead. Walk along the left fork, which leads for approximately two miles along the western bank of the river. It does, at points, come into close proximity to private development, which can be distracting. By continuing straight ahead, one is led into a gravel band and the potential of viewing the marshes from the eastern side. Unfortunately, this particular section has been overridden by all-terrain-vehicles, and their presence on most weekends mars an otherwise enjoyable outing.

Rice Section

The most recently acquired parcel of the management area is a little-utilized portion in Pittsfield known as the Rice section. To get to this area, return west from the launch site along New Lenox Road to Route 20. Take a right onto Route 20 West, and continue for 2.7 miles. Adjacent to a gas station (still south of Pittsfield center) and on the right is Underhill Place, a deadend road about one hundred yards long. On the left side of Underhill Place is space for very limited parking. From here, a short grassy road continues, passing through a stand of very old and large-trunked white pine and oak. The trail leads into several fields that are periodically mown to maintain open space, and many unmarked trails veer off from the bordering woods allowing access to the river.

The mature nature of the surrounding woods sets this area apart from the rest of the management area. Species diversity in this section is somewhat low and bird-finding can often be very disappointing throughout most of the area. One notable exception, however, is a wetland immediately adjacent to the first field encountered. A short path to the north side of this field will lead one down a fairly steep slope to a cattail/phragmites association. This is a particularly productive area in the winter for lingering Song Sparrows, American Robins, and Cedar Waxwings. Another good, and perhaps more productive, area is a small section just off the management boundaries on the extreme east side. If you follow the main trail through the fields, a small trail to the southeast will lead to the railroad line. From this point, one can see Morewood Lake. Most of the lake is owned by the local country club, and their docks and swimming beaches are very evident on the far shore. On the northwestern side, however, is a little-studied marshland that has historically recorded species such as King Rail. Recent observations show this area to be a major staging point for migrating waterfowl.

Final Comments

In the autumn months the area is actively hunted for pheasants and waterfowl. Although it can be very disconcerting to have shotgun blasts nearby when one is attempting to enjoy a quiet afternoon in the country, it is nevertheless the sportsman's dollars that originally purchased this land.

A checklist of birds has been published for this area. It is currently out of print, although an updated version may be available in the near future. For more information, contact me at 413-637-2218.

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NORTH AMERICAN MIGRATION COUNT

The second annual North American Migration Count (NAMC) will be conducted on May 8, 1993. The main purpose of the count is to gather data on the shape of migration of songbirds. It is conducted on a single day, and each count area is an entire county in a particular state. For more information on the 1993 NAMC, contact Jim Stasz, NAMC Coordinator, P.O. Box 71, North Beach, MD 20714.

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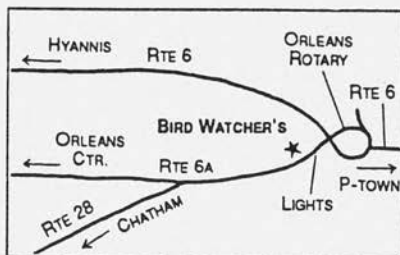
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