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**Daniel Webster
Wildlife Sanctuary**

BIRDING THE DANIEL WEBSTER WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

by David Clapp

Ted Dwyer did not spend a whole lot of money on his Marshfield farm. The cows were turned out into muddy lots, the fences were often made of sheet metal siding and barbed wire fragments, and the fields had thistle and burdock amid the fescue and orchard grass. The land was low, much of it four feet below mean sea level (MSL) (a storm tide will reach eleven feet above MSL), and the drainage ditches were often boggy. These ditches and the inability to get equipment onto the fields often spelled doom for the cows that got mired in the sloughs, ditches, and boggy spots. The farm, however, was great for birds.

Dwyer sold the farm to the Massachusetts Audubon Society (MAS) in the early 1980s. The residents of the region raised the more than \$500,000 needed to purchase and prepare the site, which became the Daniel Webster Wildlife Sanctuary (DWWS). To reach the DWWS from Boston, take Route 3 south to Exit 12 onto Route 139 east. Go 3.5 miles to Webster Street, which is on the right (Papa Gino's is at this intersection). Take Webster Street 1.5 miles (following signs for Daniel Webster's gravesite) to Winslow Cemetery Road on the left. Winslow Cemetery Road dead-ends in a few hundred yards at the sanctuary parking lot. Webster is buried in the cemetery on this road under a tamarack tree that has yet to produce any winter finches.

The open space here is more than just the 476 acres of the DWWS. About 258 acres of Marshfield Conservation Commission land, 28 acres of airport land, 69 acres of golf course land, and about 175 acres of privately owned wetlands are adjacent to the sanctuary. The Green Harbor River is a small river that starts in Duxbury and flows eastward to the dike under Dike Road (Route 139) in Green Harbor. (Marshfield has seven zip codes, and the various villages—Brant Rock, Green Harbor, Ocean Bluff, Marshfield Hills, North Marshfield, and Fieldstone—all have their own identity.) The water from the river flows into Green Harbor when the tide is low enough for the tide gates to swing open. The river exits its valley for about eight hours each day. The dike was built in the 1870s to "reclaim" tidal land for agricultural use. There is a two-square-mile polder inside the dike, and the DWWS is an integral portion of it. The history is rich and interesting—but let us get to the birds and birding.

The sanctuary is birded from mowed trails and boardwalks. Although access is somewhat limited, almost all of the sanctuary can be viewed from somewhere on the trail system. A spotting scope is very useful because many views are quite long-range. There are extensive fields of canary reed grass and other fields of mixed grasses. Patches of phragmites provide roosting spots for swallows, blackbirds, and European Starlings. Extensive red maple swamps are on the property, but surprisingly, no evidence exists that the property was ever a

salt marsh. The sanctuary bird list is about 220 species, and 175 of these species appear each year.

To bird the site, I recommend that you follow a loop that will take you from the parking lot to Fox Hill, to Secret Trail, to Four Acre Field Trail, to Webster Pond Trail, and back to the parking lot (see map). This loop is less than two miles. If good birds are around, it will take half a day; otherwise it is a good forty-minute exercise. As you walk out to Fox Hill, stop at the first observation blind. Shortly after the blind, the Piggery Loop trail goes off to the left. It is a small loop trail through a brushy patch that returns to the Fox Hill trail and can be very worthwhile. Once back onto the Fox Hill trail, you will continue through fields, along field edges, and you will have a view out to a river to the left of the trail. From Fox Hill the vistas are long and rewarding. You should look for raptors here.

The Secret Trail is a boardwalk path through a gray birch grove that is good at any time of year. The trail wanders out onto a small hummock with a grove of white oaks that can be productive in all seasons. The Four Acre Field Trail passes through a red maple swamp, along the Four Acre Field, and back onto the big fields for a few yards before it becomes the Webster Pond Loop. The Webster Pond Loop passes over a dike, along an overgrown field, past the second blind, near a cattail swamp, and back to the parking lot. The trails are simple.

Spring and Summer

Spring and summer are very exciting times at the DWWS. The migration is usually very good here. The low wet areas can have southern vagrants, and the birches and woodlands will have a nice mix of warblers, vireos, and thrushes. The grasslands will be vibrant with sparrows and field-nesting birds. The pond and river will have egrets and herons, and the birds of prey will be giving chase.

The cattail marsh along Webster Pond is noisy with Red-winged Blackbirds, Common Grackles, and Marsh Wrens. Other species that are found well into the nesting season include Gadwall, Green-winged Teal, Blue-winged Teal, Black Duck, Mallard, Mute Swan, and Canada Goose. Teal and Gadwall have never successfully nested, but pairs of birds remain into mid-May. The cattails have been used by Least Bitterns as a nesting spot for many years, although it seems that 1992 and 1993 were off years. American Bittern is sometimes seen, but it has not nested here yet.

About fifty pairs of Bobolinks and a few pairs of Eastern Meadowlarks nest each year at the DWWS. Both migrant and resident Bobolinks use the sanctuary. They arrive in early May, and when both migrants and residents are on site it is just frantic. They can be found in the shrubs near Piggery Loop, on top of the swallow boxes, on fence posts, and on grass stems—they will be everywhere in mid-May. The Bobolinks can be seen in all the fields right up to the parking lot.

The swallow boxes are the focal point of the fifty pairs of Tree Swallows that nest on the sanctuary. Occasional Eastern Bluebird pairs attempt to nest in the boxes as well, but so far the swallows have evicted all the bluebirds. Northern Harriers are often on the site at this time, but they are more common in all other seasons. They have attempted to nest in the past few years but have been unsuccessful due to nest predation. Predators of ground-nesting birds include crows, black racers, striped skunks, raccoons, mink, weasels, red foxes, and eastern coyotes. Harriers, Ring-necked Pheasants, and Northern Bobwhites probably suffer heavy losses each season. Most of the predators live on the abundant small mammals of the sanctuary, but they will take birds, especially in nesting season.

The two observation blinds, one at each end of the man-made panne just below the parking lot, offer a chance to watch the dabbling ducks, Tree Swallows, Song Sparrows, and nonbreeding herons, egrets, and ibis. These blinds have interpretive materials that depict most of the likely bird species of the wetlands to help the beginner. The blinds offer the experienced birder a comfortable place to observe behavior. Virginia Rail and Sora are usually in the panne, but they are not often seen. Glossy Ibises usually occur each spring. Great Blue and Green herons are common in the spring, and both Great and Snowy egrets are likely throughout the spring and summer. The water in the panne is deepest in the spring, but the bottom is terraced into five levels; thus, some mud is exposed at all times. These muddy patches can have shorebirds on them. In the spring likely shorebirds are Common Snipe, Spotted Sandpiper, American Woodcock, and Lesser and Greater yellowlegs. The spring is the best time for Wilson's Phalarope in the wet panne. The grasslands are regular stopping spots for Upland Sandpipers. These birds might be found in any short grass field during migration. There are a couple of old records from the mid-1970s of Upland Sandpipers nesting on the sanctuary.

The panne and the pond have a variety of ducks in the spring and summer. The pond will have nesting Mute Swan, Canada Goose, Mallard, and Black Duck. There will be Gadwall, Green- and Blue-winged teal, Bufflehead, occasional mergansers, and American Wigeon; none of these species nest. The panne will have Black Duck, Mallard, Canada Goose, both teal, and Gadwall. These birds can be studied quite easily from the observation blinds.

You should look and listen for Willow Flycatcher along Piggery Loop, White-eyed Vireo at the end of Secret Trail, and warblers in the birches and grassy area where Secret Trail and Four Acre Field Trail connect. Orchard Orioles are somewhere on the sanctuary each year, often near the parking lot or front fields. The thickets along the short path that connects the Four Acre Field and the big fields are also good places for birds. When you walk back on the Webster Pond Trail, stop along the raised path as you leave the big fields, and be alert as you proceed toward the cattail pond and the observation blind. This

short stretch is good for thrushes, sparrows, and warblers. It is in this wet area that you have the best chance for southern overshoots and *Oporonis* warblers (e.g., Hooded, Mourning, Kentucky). The coarse field that you enter from this raised path and the wooded edge to your left as you walk toward the pond are good for sparrows (e.g., Savannah, Song, Lincoln's, Fox), Eastern Bluebird, and Willow Flycatcher. The cattail pond is good for the water birds mentioned previously; it also serves as a feeding spot in the spring for Cliff, Barn, Tree, Bank, and Rough-winged swallows. There are usually Chimney Swifts in the mix. Some spring days are very busy with swifts and swallows hawking insects over the water's surface.

Fall Migration

The fall migration begins in early July at DWWS. By then the groundwater has dropped, and the panne is showing lots of mud. Pectoral, Semipalmated, Least, and Spotted sandpipers arrive at this time. Greater and Lesser yellowlegs, some dowitchers, and the occasional White-rumped and Western sandpipers also arrive. The panne can be very attractive to migrant waders during July and early August. The population will change during the day, and one visit often misrepresents what is happening.

Bobolinks tend to disappear as soon as the young fledge in early July. The mowing of the fields begins in early July, and American Kestrel (which used to nest at DWWS), Merlin, and the less common Peregrine Falcon slash across the fields looking for meadow voles, jumping mice, and white-footed mice. In September as many as thirty kestrels may be on the sanctuary. The record high for kestrels is about sixty-five birds on one September day in 1991. The kestrels eat small mammals and large insects. In the spring they favor June bugs, the shiny castings of which pile up under favorite kestrel perches. Harriers, buteos, and accipiters feed over the fields as they pause on their southward passage. Yellow Rail is occasionally seen by the tractor drivers in the late summer and early fall when the back fields are mowed. These small and hard-to-see rails are usually in the damp fields way out back (east of Fox Hill) and not seen unless they are forced during mowing to fly out over a previously mowed area. They are not heard in the spring and are unlikely to be seen by a visitor. The back fields and all wet areas also contain Sora and Virginia Rail in the fall.

Four Acre Field is planted with pumpkins, which are harvested on a "pick-your-own" basis to raise funds. Pumpkin fields have weeds that attract birds, and in September and October sparrows love this area. Spend some time around the edges of this field in all seasons, but be sure to work it well in the fall. The panic grasses and ragweed provide most of the seed crop.

The woodland trails often have Philadelphia, White-eyed, and Red-eyed vireos. Many migrant warblers are often in the oaks at the end of Secret Trail, although it is sometimes difficult to leave the warblers in the birch grove to go

to the end of the trail.

A couple of late-summer and early-fall phenomena are of interest to birders. The evening flight of egrets out to the roost site in Boston Harbor originates from south of the DWWS in the Duxbury marshes, up the South River, over the North River mouth, along the Scituate coast, and eventually to Hull and the safety of the rocky islands in the harbor. The sanctuary will often have a nice passage of egrets in the evening. You usually will see more Great Egrets than Snowy Egrets. An American Robin roost is in the red maple swamp between the sanctuary and the golf course. As many as 5000 robins roost here; from any vantage on the sanctuary some robin movement can be seen toward dusk on a summer night. The robin roost continues to be used all winter, but by significantly fewer birds.

Falcons often can be seen chasing flocks of European Starlings over the back meadows. These flocks number up to 20,000 birds and flow across the grasslands like clouds of smoke, often balling up in the presence of a predator. Also look for Double-crested Cormorants roosting on the electric lines well to the east of Fox Hill. At dusk usually 400-500 birds sit on the wires that span the Green Harbor River. You can see some cormorants in and over the Green Harbor River throughout the day. The use of the phragmites patches by migrant swallows for roosting in late summer is not well documented. However, hundreds of swallows use the area for both feeding and roosting in late summer.

Winter

Winter birding is a bone-chilling but rewarding venture. The species list will be shorter than in other seasons, but is likely to include Rough-legged Hawk, Short-eared Owl, Eastern Meadowlark, Northern Harrier, a whole slew of feeder birds, and the occasional surprise.

The MAS residence is on the right as you approach the parking lot. Feeders are located along the post and rail fence, and the birds zip from the thicket back and forth to the seed. This is a reasonable place for the January Red-winged Blackbird, Common Grackle, or (unfortunately) Brown-headed Cowbird. There will often be Hairy Woodpecker and an occasional Red-bellied Woodpecker feeding with the more common Downy Woodpecker. The MAS residence is a private home with no access to a telephone or toilets (no telephone is on the site, but a "port-o-john" is near the parking lot). After parking, scan the fields for Northern Harriers, Red-tailed Hawks, and flocks of meadowlarks. The parking lot is good for Eastern Bluebirds year-round, and the trees nearby are favored for roosting and resting.

Before starting down the trail, look in all directions, especially toward the high tension lines, for birds such as Blue Jay, House Sparrow, House Finch, Black-capped Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse, Northern Mockingbird, and Northern Cardinal, perched in the brush. The fruit trees on Piggery Loop attract

wintering birds such as American Robin, Cedar Waxwing, Northern Mockingbird, and finches. The main fields, on your right, are good for geese (usually Canada but occasionally Snow or White-fronted) and Eastern Meadowlark. Wintering Eastern Bluebirds may be on the row of swallow boxes that bisect the field.

At Fox Hill (you should be standing in a cold wind by now) scan in all directions for Rough-legged and Red-tailed hawks, Northern Harrier, and the less frequent Red-shouldered Hawk. It is also possible to watch American Crows, American Goldfinches, and other common birds as they move about in a rural setting. The Green Harbor River meanders through the property to the west, then north, and finally to the east. Look in the river-edge cherry trees for the various raptors or the Belted Kingfishers that stay until freeze-up.

Secret Trail goes through a grove of gray birches that often attract winter finches. The oaks at the end of the trail seem to be a good spot for the resident woodpeckers, owls, and raptors. As you enter Four Acre Field, you have a good chance to find sparrows and other ground feeders in the grasses along the field edge. Farther along, if the pond and the panne are not frozen yet, look for Swamp Sparrow, late Marsh Wren, Common Snipe, and the occasional Black-crowned Night-Heron around the edges. The cold water is a reasonable place to locate Hooded and Red-breasted mergansers, Ring-necked Duck, Bufflehead, Common Goldeneye, and an occasional Pied-billed Grebe.

Many uncommon birds show up each year at the DWWS. Wilson's Phalarope, Black or Caspian tern, Barn Owl, Short-eared Owl, Northern Shrike, and Western Kingbird are as likely here as almost anywhere in eastern Massachusetts. The real rarities (e.g., Fork-tailed Flycatcher, Mississippi Kite) are not at all predictable, but DWWS is a good place to hope for a miracle. Some birds, such as the Loggerhead Shrike, can be expected here in the fall despite their relatively rare statewide populations.

The Daniel Webster Wildlife Sanctuary is valuable for wildlife every day of the year. The residents, the breeders, and the migrants all need this site at some point during their year. Trail maps and brochures, a bird checklist, and other bits of information are in the entry building adjacent to the parking lot. The entry building also has an honor-system fee arrangement for nonmembers of MAS and a place to fill out registration cards. A list of bird sightings and bird activity is in the first observation blind and in the entry building. The sanctuary is open from sunrise to sunset every day of the year.

DAVID CLAPP is the sanctuary director. He wishes to thank David Ludlow, who keeps good records for the sanctuary, Frances Garretson, who studies the Tree Swallows and keeps the bird bulletin boards, Simon Perkins, who did the checklist, and all others who have supported the sanctuary, left lists and notes about what they have seen, or otherwise enabled this site to remain valuable to wildlife.

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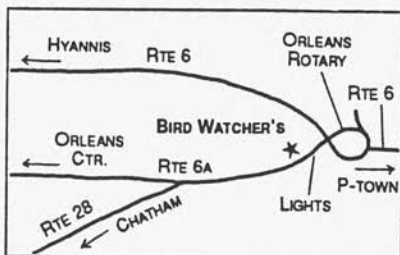
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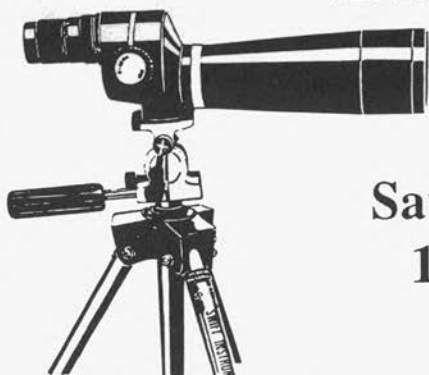
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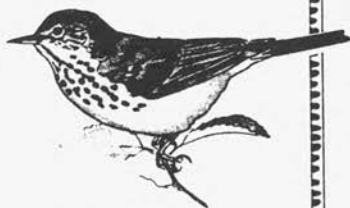
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