

BARTHOLOMEW'S COBBLE: BIRDING THE SOUTHWESTERN CORNER OF MASSACHUSETTS

by Don Reid

To naturalists and birders of Berkshire County, Bartholomew's Cobble is one of the premier birding spots in the Berkshires. I can assure you that although I am responsible for this property, I make this statement without any bias.

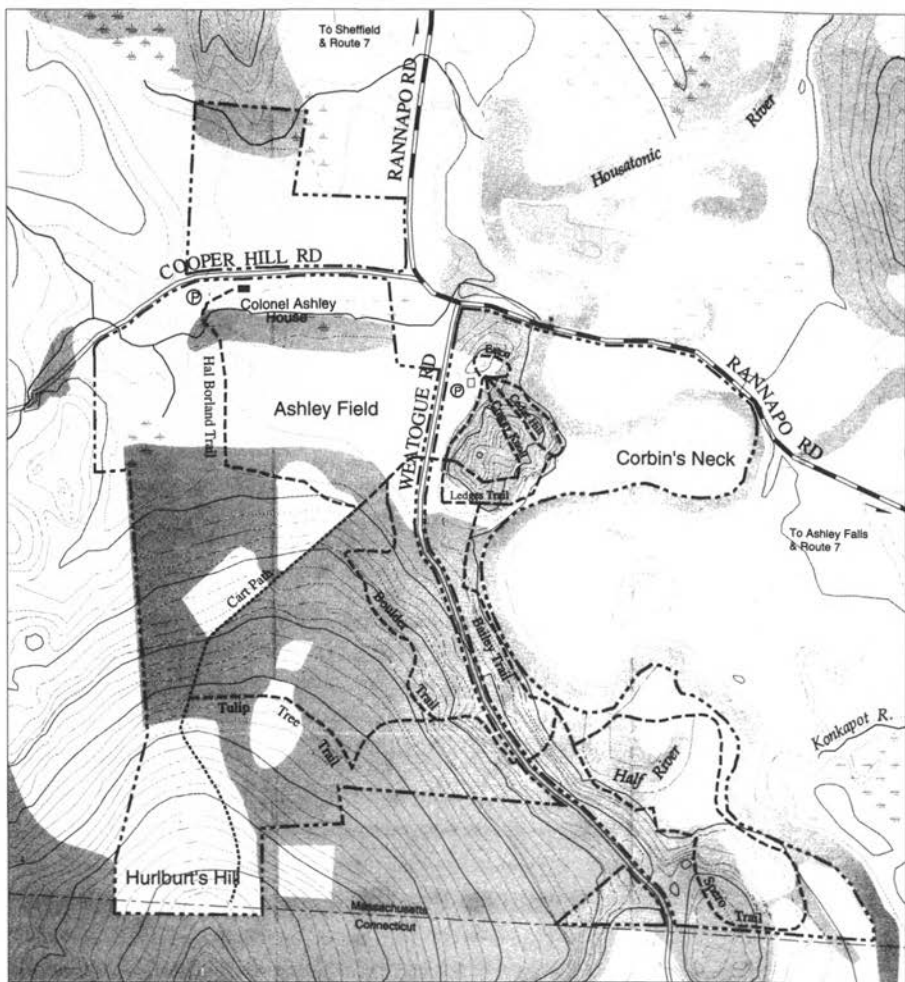
Bartholomew's Cobble Reservation is nestled at the foot of the Taconic Mountains in the Housatonic River Valley along the Housatonic River. Look on your map for the town of Ashley Falls (i.e., the southern part of the town of Sheffield) near the southwest corner of Massachusetts. When you find it, you have found the location of Bartholomew's Cobble. As the raven flies, it is a few feet from Connecticut (actually, a few acres of the Reservation are in Connecticut) and five miles from New York State.

To reach the Reservation from the north, take Route 7 south from Pittsfield, Lenox, or Stockbridge through Great Barrington to Sheffield. Go 1.6 miles past Sheffield center, and bear right on Route 7A. After one-half mile, go right on Rannapo Road at the railroad tracks. Go 1.5 miles on this road, past Cooper Hill Road, to Weatogue Road on the right. Take this right, and after 100 yards, turn left into the Reservation parking lot.

From Connecticut follow Route 7A north (bear left off Route 7 just before the Massachusetts state line in Canaan) to Ashley Falls. Turn left at the flashing light. Follow signs onto Rannapo Road. After crossing the Housatonic River, turn left onto Weatogue Road and into the parking lot as described above. No matter which way you come from, you will have no problem finding Bartholomew's Cobble. There are so many signs that it is embarrassing.

Bartholomew's Cobble is a 275-plus-acre wildlife reservation owned and managed by The Trustees of Reservations, a statewide Massachusetts land trust. The property acquired its name for two reasons: 1) a family named Bartholomew farmed the land in the mid-1800s, and 2) it has two unique geological formations, or outcrops, composed of limestone and marble. Outcrops like these in New England are referred to as cobbles. Hence, Bartholomew's Cobble. These unusual formations have ribs of much harder quartzite running through them, making them resistant to erosion despite the presence of the limestone. This is why they now dominate the local landscape. Also, the limestone and marble generate more alkaline (sweeter) soil than is typical in New England. Thus, the Reservation has a greater diversity of fern species than almost anywhere in North America.

Bartholomew's Cobble is here for your enjoyment (within reason) and for the protection of a great diversity of habitats and the natural life found within them. The Cobble brings together things birders recognize as crucial to a great



Bartholomew's Cobble

A Property of THE TRUSTEES OF RESERVATIONS

Ashley Falls, Massachusetts



LEGEND

- Non-forested Reservation Property
- Forested Reservation Property
- Non-forested Private Property
- Forested Private Property
- Cart Path
- Hiking Trails
- Parking
- Visitor's Center

SCALE 1:7 200
(1 inch = 600 feet)



CONTOUR INTERVAL 10 FEET

This map is a product of the Geographic Information System of The Trustees of Reservations.

Data compiled and digitized from 1:24 000 scale USGS topographic maps.

Approximate boundary and trail locations were obtained using Global Positioning System (GPS).

June 1994



The Trustees
of Reservations

*Conserving the
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Since 1891*

birding experience. Its diversity of ecosystems and habitats is impressive, with an abundance of field, edge, forest, and water. Its location along the Housatonic River puts it on a significant flyway for a great variety of bird species. Over 240 species have been recorded at Bartholomew's Cobble since its acquisition by The Trustees of Reservations in 1946.

Approximately half of the Reservation is managed specifically for grassland species through a combination of pasturing, controlled haying, and mowing. The Reservation's elevation begins at 600 feet along the river and ends in high fields and forest at 1150 feet above sea level.

Due to the Reservation's elevation and location, Bartholomew's Cobble is considered in a warm mesoclimate of the Berkshires. Winters are usually milder and shorter than in other areas of the county. Spring arrives sooner; summer and fall tend to linger. When you consider all these features, plus four miles of well-maintained trails to get you around, it is most certainly an enjoyable, productive, and rewarding place to observe birds and other wildlife.

There is a fee at peak seasons (April through October) if you are not a member of The Trustees of Reservations: \$3 for adults and \$1 for children six to twelve years old. At other times of year a donation is requested.

Birding the Cobble

Birding at Bartholomew's Cobble is good at any time of year. Spring, summer, and fall are certainly the best, but winter brings many surprises and is unfortunately a season often overlooked because birders stay close to the coast. Much of Bartholomew's Cobble Reservation is along the Housatonic River and can be wet in the early spring. Bring suitable footwear at this time of year.

Spring. When heading toward the Reservation along Rannapo Road you will have several opportunities to observe the Housatonic River. Stop at locations that offer you clear views, and look for migrating waders, waterfowl, gulls, and terns. The greatest diversity of species occurs in the spring when water may flood the fields along the river. Gull species to expect will be Herring, Great-Black-backed, and Ring-billed gulls. The first record of a Caspian Tern at Bartholomew's Cobble was made just east of the Rannapo Road bridge in the spring of 1993. There are two places on the east side of the bridge to park and observe the river.

Duck species can and will be variable along the river and the oxbows associated with it. Canada Goose, Black Duck, and Mallard are abundant. Wood Ducks are abundant, especially in and around oxbow areas later in the spring. Other species you may see are Blue-winged Teal, Green-winged Teal, Northern Pintail, Ring-necked Duck, Common Goldeneye, and Hooded and Common mergansers.

Early spring (March and April) is a good time to find Bald Eagles along the Housatonic River. Perhaps as more eagles are successfully fledged from the

Quabbin area, they will come along the river in search of proper habitat to feed and (dare I say it?) nest some day. For whatever reason, they are becoming a much commoner sight at any time of year. Osprey is also a common spring migrant. When along the river, keep alert for the occasional Double-crested Cormorant. After checking out the river from the road, enter the Reservation, park your car, and begin to explore the Cobble on foot.

The entrance to Bartholomew's Cobble will put you on Eaton Trail or Ledges Trail (see map). Eaton Trail will bring you to the top of the north cobble through old field growth such as cedar and young pines. This is not an especially productive birding trail, but House Wrens, occasional Cedar Waxwings, and a beautiful view of the Housatonic River await your enjoyment at the top.

Ledges Trail is a self-interpretive trail that will guide you around the base of the south cobble. Cedar Hill and Craggy Knoll trails bring you over the top of the south cobble and allow you to explore the pine-hemlock forest making up this area. Birds to be expected are Brown Creeper, White and Red-breasted nuthatches, Tufted Titmouse, Hairy and Downy woodpeckers, and Solitary and Red-eyed vireos. The elongated feeding holes of the Pileated Woodpecker begin to make their appearance along this trail. With some luck, you may get a glimpse of a Sharp-shinned or Cooper's hawk. These accipiters use the cobbles as their feeding stations. Feathers along the trails attest to their presence even if you do not get a look. Both of these threatened species have nested at Bartholomew's Cobble and probably still do; juvenile Sharpshins have been seen somewhat regularly.

You may run across what seem to be crazed Black-capped Chickadees pestering you along many of the Cobble's trails. For time immemorial visitors have fed these birds, which will not hesitate to make you aware of that fact.

Off Ledges Trail you will find Corbin's Neck (a fifteen-acre pastured peninsula), Bailey Trail, and Spero Loop. All will bring you along the river. Bailey Trail and Spero Loop are without question the best trails for warblers in mid-May and perhaps for birding in general. Where Bailey Trail and Spero Loop meet, you will find an interesting mixture of habitat. To the east, near the river, is shrub swamp, and on the other side of the trail to the west is mixed deciduous and pine-hemlock forest. Here you will find Yellow Warblers, Common Yellowthroats, and Red-winged Blackbirds within a few yards of Black-throated Green and Black-throated Blue warblers, and Solitary and Red-eyed vireos. This is a good spot for Cape May and Blackburnian warblers.

The warbler migration through Bartholomew's Cobble can be intense, prolonged, and somewhat earlier compared with more northern areas in the Berkshires. Alas, we all know how fickle these little feathered flashes of color and song can be. Bartholomew's Cobble is well known in the area for its diversity and numbers of warbler species. I will not dwell on warblers except to

say that on the right day, at the right place, under the right weather conditions, in the right light . . . well, you know how it goes.

Summer. Bartholomew's Cobble has two of the largest Turkey Vulture roosting sites in the Berkshires. Kettles with over fifty birds are not uncommon. From the parking lot at 9:00 AM (you can nearly set your watch to it), they will begin to show themselves. Keep your eyes open for a Black Vulture mixed in with them. The first confirmed sighting of a Black Vulture in southern Berkshire County was made in 1993, with second and third sightings in 1994.

Summer brings with it a great diversity of nesting species to be enjoyed at the Cobble. If you take a walk on Corbin's Neck, you will get close-up views of the hundreds of Bank Swallows that nest in cavities along the steep mud banks on this section of the river. Look them over closely; you can also find Tree Swallows, Barn Swallows, and occasionally Northern Rough-winged and Cliff swallows mixed in with the feeding flocks of Bank Swallows.

An often overlooked way to bird Bartholomew's Cobble is by canoe. A good place to put in can be found at the northwest side of the Rannapo Road bridge. It is a short walk down to the river on a very well-used path. During the late summer, a surprising number of shorebirds feed on the mud flats, especially during low water conditions, when the mud flats become much more accessible. You should look for Least, Solitary, and the very common Spotted sandpiper. Both yellowlegs species are possible as are Semipalmated Sandpiper, Pectoral Sandpiper, and Black-bellied Plover. Also look for Great Egret, Snowy Egret, Green Heron, and an occasional Black-crowned Night-Heron or Little Blue Heron in late summer or early fall. Get that canoe in the water! The Housatonic River around Bartholomew's Cobble is flat water and provides some of the most enjoyable canoeing in all of Berkshire County.

Because approximately half the Reservation is managed for grassland species, you will have no problem finding Bobolinks and occasionally Eastern Meadowlarks on Corbin's Neck and Hurlburt's Hill (on the west side of Weatogue Road). Hurlburt's Hill is the Reservation's highest point.

Along Bailey Trail in the summer you can expect to hear if not see Black-billed Cuckoo. But this bird is becoming increasingly rare in the area, and any sighting reports would be very much appreciated. Bailey Trail will also offer you a great diversity of species in the summer: vireos, grosbeaks, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, flycatchers, warblers (including Louisiana and Northern waterthrushes), and occasionally Red-bellied Woodpecker. The latter is not uncommon around Bartholomew's Cobble, and a nest search has begun in earnest. Also look for this species around the Colonel Ashley House along Cooper Hill Road (part of Bartholomew's Cobble Management Unit) and around residences abutting the Reservation.

The Colonel Ashley House can be reached on Hal Borland Trail, which takes you through both forest and field. Along the way look for the now

common Wild Turkey, which can be found nearly anywhere on the Reservation. Also expect Ruffed Grouse, Northern Mockingbird, Brown Thrasher, Common Yellowthroat, Gray Catbird, and Rufous-sided Towhee along this trail.

Taking the Bailey Trail south along the river will bring you onto Spero Loop. This trail will lead you by ponds, floodplain forest, and river edge with cottonwood, black willow, and silver maple. Look for Warbling Vireo, Yellow-throated Vireo, Least Flycatcher, Willow Flycatcher, Alder Flycatcher, and Pileated Woodpecker. The loop will lead you back to Bailey Trail, from which you can then pick up Tulip Tree Trail, which begins on the west side of Weatogue Road. This trail brings you through dense forest and ultimately to Hurlburt's Hill. Along Tulip Tree Trail you should encounter Hermit Thrush, Veery, American Redstart, and Ovenbird. The Tulip Tree Trail is named after yellow poplar (tulip) trees that grow about half-way up the three-quarter-mile trail. These trees are a rare sight this far north.

When you reach Hurlburt's Hill, you can expect some of the most spectacular views of the Housatonic River Valley found anywhere in southern Berkshire County. You can also expect large numbers of nesting Bobolinks, Eastern Bluebirds, Tree Swallows, and perhaps a few pairs of Eastern Meadowlarks. At the very top of Hurlburt's Hill is a bench on the Connecticut state line from which to enjoy this pastoral setting. Hurlburt's Hill is highly recommended! After a much-deserved rest you can head down the Cart Path Trail with its variety of field and edge habitat. This will take you back to the road and the parking lot, with chances to veer back onto other trails already mentioned.

Fall. Bartholomew's Cobble is an exciting place for raptor migration. Many raptors migrate along the Taconic Ridge and Housatonic River Valley, often putting down to rest or feed at or near Bartholomew's Cobble. When temperatures rise in early to mid-morning, these birds use the many thermals generated from fields and pastures located on the Reservation. They are observed most often over Hurlburt's Hill, from Ashley Field across from the entrance to Bartholomew's Cobble, and from the parking lot itself. Respectable kettles of Broad-winged Hawks (a nesting species on the Reservation) can be found around mid-September. Seen with some frequency are Red-shouldered Hawk (another nesting species), Bald Eagle, Osprey, American Kestrel, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Cooper's Hawk, Red-tailed Hawk, and the less common Northern Goshawk, Merlin, and Peregrine Falcon.

The Housatonic River Valley is also a significant flyway for the Common Nighthawk, and a nighthawk watch to collect data on these birds is held each year from August 21 through September 5, from 6-8 PM. Anybody who wants to volunteer in this count is greatly appreciated.

Winter. Birding Bartholomew's Cobble in winter can also be rewarding. Red-tailed Hawks can always be expected along with a large population of

wintering Eastern Bluebirds. Either of these species viewed against a freshly fallen snow makes a visit worthwhile.

The Southern Berkshire Christmas Bird Count is based out of Bartholomew's Cobble at the Colonel Ashley House. It appears that this area produces the greatest number and diversity of wintering birds in the Berkshires.

Bartholomew's Cobble is also well known for rarities in winter, from Northern Shrike and Rough-legged Hawk to an occasional white-winged gull species if the river remains open. Ravens are not uncommon in the area during late fall and winter. This is the season to expect the unexpected.

Beyond Birds

Bartholomew's Cobble is very well known by botanists. Over 800 species of vascular plants and a diversity of fern species that is perhaps unequaled in North America can be big draws for the look-at-the-ground crowd. The Reservation is perhaps best known to local naturalists for the incredible bloom of spring woodland wildflowers in late April and early May.

If you are a person who enjoys a leisurely exploration of the natural world, you should plan on spending the day in this remarkable place. A Natural History/Visitors' Center onsite contains natural-history exhibits, a fifty-seat lecture hall, and the Regional Ecologist's office.

DON REID is Western Regional Ecologist for The Trustees of Reservations. His primary responsibility is the management of Bartholomew's Cobble Reservation and the interpretation of its unique natural history. Before joining The Trustees of Reservation, Don was a teacher and naturalist at the Massachusetts Audubon Society's Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary on Cape Cod. In that position Don led over 100 trips a year to the Monomoy Islands National Wildlife Refuge, interpreting barrier-island ecology, with an emphasis on shorebird identification and their life histories. Prior to that, he was a naturalist with the Nature Conservancy's Arizona Chapter at Ramsey Canyon Preserve and several other sites in the state. Don leads natural-history tours across North America on a freelance basis. His area of specialty is the southwest, and he freely admits to being a "desert rat at heart." For questions or any assistance, call him at 413-229-8600, or write Bartholomew's Cobble Reservation, P.O. Box 128, Ashley Falls, Massachusetts 01222.

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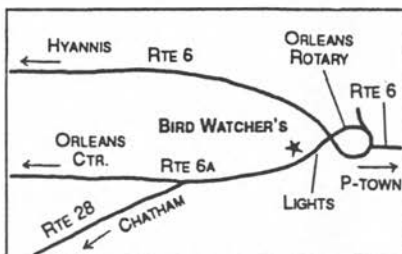
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