



BIRDING THE LOWER BLACKSTONE RIVER VALLEY, RHODE ISLAND

by Rick Enser

The Blackstone River originates beneath the streets of Worcester, Massachusetts, at the junction of two waterways, the Middle River and Mill Brook. From this concrete origin the Blackstone flows southeast forty-six miles to Pawtucket, Rhode Island, where it surges over the twenty-three-foot-high Pawtucket Falls into the Seekonk River, a tidal stretch that continues south to Narragansett Bay. In the early days of European settlement in the region, the Blackstone River provided a logical geographic pathway into central New England for transportation and commerce. It later provided a stage for the birthplace of the American Industrial Revolution, when Samuel Slater established the first water-powered cotton mill on the banks of the Blackstone at Pawtucket in 1793. Soon a series of mill villages arose at points along the river's length, where dams could be constructed to provide a source of power.

A consequence of the growth of these industrial centers was a rise in the amounts of sewage and industrial effluent discharged into the river, and by 1880 the Blackstone was considered "the hardest working river" in the region and one of the most thoroughly exploited and polluted rivers in America. In recent decades a considerable effort has been expended to restore some of the Blackstone's original water quality. Construction of wastewater treatment plants, legal restrictions on pollutant discharges, and wetlands protection laws have combined to significantly improve the integrity of this river. Based on my personal experience of growing up during the 1960s within a short walk of this river that was my playground, the primary evidence that fish actually inhabited the Blackstone were periodic die-offs of carp, a fish renowned for its ability to inhabit oxygen-depleted waters. More encouraging are surveys conducted in 1994 by the Rhode Island Division of Fish and Wildlife that uncovered fifteen species of fish, including white perch, fallfish, and tessellated darter. Moreover, the Division has been studying the potential for restoring an anadromous fishery to the Blackstone that would initially focus on the blueback herring and later other species including salmon.

The original mill villages grew into major urban centers, and industrial development expanded onto the best available land, the floodplain of the Blackstone. Marshes and other lowlands that normally absorbed the swollen waters of periodic floods were filled and converted to impervious surfaces. Until the passage of wetlands protection legislation in Rhode Island in the 1970s, uses included several municipal dumps, a regional landfill, shopping malls, warehouses, factories, and a drive-in theater. Despite this loss of wetland habitat, a string of riverine marshes has survived along the river's length that

continues to provide valuable wildlife habitat within the highly urbanized backdrop of the Blackstone River Valley. These wetlands occur primarily on the upstream side of dams where the calmer impounded waters support the growth of cattails and other emergent plants within shallow coves and along the fringe of the river.

The size of most of these marshes is dictated by the width of the floodplain, which along most of the river's length is relatively narrow. In Rhode Island the floodplain gradually widens to more than a half-mile. Then suddenly at the village of Valley Falls in the town of Cumberland the river is constricted within a narrow channel of resistant bedrock. A dam has been situated at this site since the early 1800s, and behind it formed the fifty-acre Valley Falls Pond and an associated 200 acres of cattail marshes, shrub swamps, and grassy floodplain meadows. On the margins of the river in this location are stands of willow, maple, and green ash that often reach twenty-four inches or more in diameter, and the cavities formed in these trees when large branches break off provide nesting and roosting sites for Eastern Screech Owl and Wood Duck.

The **Valley Falls Marshes** are an accessible area to seek out such typical marsh-nesting birds as Green Heron, Least Bittern, Virginia Rail, Sora, Willow Flycatcher, and Marsh Wren. The American Bittern nested here until the early 1970s, but in recent years this species has seriously declined in the region and is currently believed to nest in the state only on Block Island.

To reach the Valley Falls Marshes, take exit 10 off Route 295 onto Route 122. Approximately 3.3 miles from this exit, Route 122 intersects with Route 123. Continue on Route 122 south another 0.3 mile, where the road dips into a valley, at the bottom of which is a left turn onto a dirt road leading to a little league ball field. During warmer months when the field is being used, a gate on the main road remains open. However, during the off-season the gate is closed to prevent illegal dumping, and it is necessary to park on the shoulder of the main road where there is room for three or four vehicles.

This area is also known as the Lonsdale Marshes, or simply Lonsdale, which is the name of the village in the town of Lincoln where the dirt road entrance is located. (Although the area is still referred to as "Lonsdale" in the monthly "Field Notes of Rhode Island Birds" published by the Audubon Society of Rhode Island, the recent rise of tourism in the Blackstone River Valley has resulted in "Valley Falls Marshes" being used more often, primarily because a tour boat docks at this village.) During the 1930s this area was intensively birded by Alfred E. Eynon, who later moved to New Jersey where he served a brief term as President of the Uner Ornithological Society. Mr. Eynon documented several of his observations at Lonsdale in the *Auk*, including the first twentieth century record of Ring-necked Duck in Rhode Island (1933), the first breeding record of Rough-winged Swallow in northern Rhode Island (1935), and an unusual record of Iceland Gull during the winter of 1934.

At the parking area a wide panorama of the Blackstone River floodplain is visible from the road. Cattail marshes and open pools of water can be viewed from the east side of the road, and the grassy floodplain beyond can be scanned to the edge of the river, about 200 yards from this point. In spring and summer these marshes abound with Swamp Sparrows, Red-winged Blackbirds, and Common Yellowthroats, and with patience both Virginia Rail and Sora will be heard calling. The road is lined with a variety of tall deciduous trees, where Warbling Vireo, Yellow Warbler, and Northern Oriole nest. Orchard Oriole has been occasionally observed but has not been found nesting.

The open water of Valley Falls Pond is reached by walking the dirt road leading south from the ball field. This raised roadbed was constructed in the early 1900s as part of the ill-fated Grand Trunk Railroad, a line which was envisioned to connect Providence with central Massachusetts at the town of Palmer, and then proceed farther north to Montreal. Because the major financial backer for this rail line perished on the *Titanic*, the project was never completed, and the bed laid across the Valley Falls Marshes was never used for its intended purpose. However, because the roadway had been constructed at an elevation above most floods, it provided access onto the marshes allowing local communities to use the area for municipal dumping. This practice continued until the 1950s, when waste disposal was transferred to larger regional landfills. Today the road is only rarely used by official vehicles and is open for walking onto land owned by the town and state.

Currently there are few indications of this public ownership. The town maintains an emergency well site adjacent to the ball field, and occasionally they use open areas near the entrance to store mulch and other organic debris. The Rhode Island Division of Fish and Wildlife does not actively manage its portion of the area. An Osprey nesting pole erected during the winter of 1996 was accomplished by a local utility company. Although the Osprey is often seen here during migration periods, it was never known to nest in this part of the state historically.

On early spring mornings the trees along the roadway may be filled with passerines that use the Blackstone River Valley as a migratory pathway. Regularly seen in the spring are Northern Parula, Palm Warbler, Northern Waterthrush, and Wilson's Warbler, but most other warbler species have also been seen here. In the fall Orange-crowned Warbler and White-crowned Sparrow are occasional.

Less than half a mile from the ball field is the shore of Valley Falls Pond and the best opportunity for viewing waterfowl. In spring and fall the most common species include Pied-billed Grebe, Canada Goose, Mallard, American Black Duck, Green-winged and Blue-winged teal, Wood Duck, American Wigeon, Gadwall (records of fifty to sixty birds in recent years), Ring-necked Duck, Hooded Merganser, Common Merganser, and American Coot. Northern

Pintail and Ruddy Duck are occasional. Other species certain to be present near open water throughout most of the year are Great Blue Heron, Ring-billed Gull, and Belted Kingfisher. During summer the pond attracts aerial feeders including Northern Rough-winged Swallow (a species that nests in burrows excavated in the riverbanks), Bank Swallow, and Common Nighthawk, which nests on the rooftops of buildings in nearby urban areas.

There are no designated trails leading off the roadway onto the marsh, but those equipped with appropriate foot gear and clothing may venture out to areas not visible from the road. In these secluded spots are pools vegetated with dense stands of emergent plants that provide additional habitat for migrants and nesters. During migration, shorebirds typically found here include Killdeer, Greater Yellowlegs, Solitary Sandpiper (spring only), Spotted Sandpiper (nesting), Least Sandpiper (spring only), Pectoral Sandpiper, and Common Snipe. American Woodcocks nest in shrubby thickets and perform courtship flights from the drier grassy floodplains.

Urbanization surrounds the Valley Falls Marshes, and a cacophony of automobile traffic, sirens, and even the garbled voices of an outdoor intercom are commonplace. Hence early morning is the best time to visit. But even within this context the Valley Falls Marshes serve as a true wildlife refuge. The area has been most intensively birded during the past two decades, and within this period the list of species observed has included Tricolored Heron, Snowy Egret, Great Egret, Glossy Ibis, Brant, Snow Goose, Rough-legged Hawk, Peregrine Falcon, Common Tern, Short-eared Owl, Long-eared Owl, Barred Owl, Red-headed Woodpecker, Pileated Woodpecker, Western Kingbird, Northern Shrike, Sharp-tailed Sparrow, and Lincoln's Sparrow. It is not unusual to tally more than fifty species of birds during a morning in the spring or fall when many migrants are present.

The Valley Falls Marshes are an area that can also be birded by canoe. At present the best access is located along Route 123 (known as John Street in this section), where this road crosses the Blackstone, about 100 yards east of the Route 122/123 intersection. Parking is available at the blocked entrance to the now-abandoned Lonsdale Drive-in Theater, and the river can be reached by walking down the slope under the bridge. A more user-friendly canoe launch for this location is planned to be open within a few years.

Canoeing the Valley Falls Marshes allows one to approach the nest sites of several species, such as the burrowing Northern Rough-winged Swallows and Belted Kingfishers, and it is common to observe muskrats and large snapping turtles (with shell diameters of two-plus feet) cruising in the river. However, also evident in this urban location are the many exotic species of plants and animals that are starting to overwhelm the area. Purple loosestrife is beginning to usurp the native vegetation in shallow marshes and bays, and the Mute Swan, which has invaded the area only within the past decade, now numbers five or six

nesting pairs. Alas, the carp remains the ruling fish in the shallow turbid waters of Valley Falls Pond, attaining lengths of two to three feet. It can be disconcerting for the canoeist when one of these large fish swirls away with a loud splash just ahead of the boat.

The entire Blackstone River Valley is currently undergoing development as a National Heritage Corridor, a program administered by a consortium of public and private groups overseen by the National Park Service. Major elements planned for the Valley include a bikeway, canoe launches and portages, and other tourist amenities. Additional information on current and planned facilities and programs can be obtained by contacting the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Commission, One Depot Square, Woonsocket, Rhode Island 02985 (401-762-0250). Ask for the National Park Service-produced map and guide to the entire Blackstone Valley in Massachusetts and Rhode Island, and also the *Canoe Guide for the Blackstone River*. The latter describes put-in locations and canoeing highlights for each segment of the river from Worcester all the way to Pawtucket. You can also get information at visitors' centers located at Slater Mill in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, or at River Bend Farm in Uxbridge, Massachusetts.

Within a few miles of the Valley Falls Marshes are several other easily accessed birding locations. **Lincoln Woods** is the largest state park in northeastern Rhode Island and is managed by the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management. This park is reached by following Route 123 approximately 1.1 mile west of the intersection with Route 122. A modest fee is collected during summer months, but in other seasons entrance to the park is free. The primarily deciduous forest at Lincoln Woods is habitat for such typical nesters as Broad-winged Hawk, Great-crested Flycatcher, Eastern Wood-pewee, Yellow-throated Vireo, Worm-eating Warbler (rare), Ovenbird, Scarlet Tanager, and Rose-breasted Grosbeak. During the 1980s this park was noted as one of the first locations in northern Rhode Island for finding the Red-bellied Woodpecker, and today this bird is a common resident found throughout the park where it appears to outnumber all other species of woodpeckers. Also within the park is the 133-acre **Olney Pond** which attracts migrating waterfowl. The most common species are Mallard, Ring-necked Duck, and Common Merganser, but many others have been found here, including Wood Duck, American Wigeon, and Redhead.

Another 0.4 mile west of the entrance to Lincoln Woods on Route 123 is the **Chase Farm**, over 150 acres of town-owned farmland protected as public open space in the late 1980s. A parking lot (no fee required) for this area is located at the restored Hannaway Blacksmith Shop, where a trail leads out across extensive hayfields intersected by shrubby hedgerows. Typical grassland nesting birds found here include Bobolink, Eastern Meadowlark, and Savannah Sparrow. Willow Flycatcher and Warbling Vireo are also nesting species at this

site, in case you have missed them at the Valley Falls Marshes.

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