

WEST ROXBURY: BIRDING ON THE EDGE IN BOSTON

by Thomas Aversa

West Roxbury, the southwestern corner of Boston, contains a large tract of open space along the city's western edge. The area is roughly delineated by the VFW Parkway to the east, the Charles River to the south, the Newton border to the west, and Baker Street to the north. The region includes the Gethsemene, Mount Lebanon, and Saint Joseph's cemeteries; the old city landfill and its surrounding upland and wooded wetland; and extensive marshlands adjacent to the Charles River. This habitat abuts acreage that includes Cutler Park across the river in Needham and Dedham and red maple wetlands extending into Newton. The combined area provides over 2000 acres of habitat for birds and wildlife. This article furnishes information on birding the diverse and productive areas in West Roxbury.

West Roxbury provides good year-round birding. However, late fall and winter are probably the most productive times to explore the area. The Charles River and Sawmill Brook act as corridors that are used by both migrant and resident species. Open water allows many half-hardy species to linger after their normal departure dates and in some cases survive the winter. Habitat variety is a definite factor influencing the numbers of birds found here. The capped Boston landfill provides open scrub grassland that meets red maple swamp across Sawmill Brook. Marshland extends all along the river. Unfortunately, phragmites and purple loosestrife have encroached upon the cattails, making most of the marsh too dry to support a diversity of wetland species. Cattails still lay claim to the wetter portions of the marsh, however, and these provide the best habitat.

Birding at seasons other than fall and winter can also be good, if not occasionally spectacular. Migrants, particularly in fall, can often be found in great numbers when the right meteorological conditions occur. In addition, several uncommon breeding species, along with various postbreeding dispersers, make summer birding here a worthwhile venture.

Brook Farm Historic Site

This 179-acre site, acquired by the Massachusetts District Commission (MDC) in 1988, completely encompasses Gethsemene Cemetery. It includes some of the best habitat in the area, and is readily accessible from Baker Street, located off the VFW Parkway. Note that the gate is usually opened around 7:30 AM and closed shortly before dark.

Brook Farm has a long and varied history. It is known primarily for the utopian transcendental community that was founded here in 1841. George and Sophia Ripley initially bought the dairy farm which was to become the

community made famous by its connection to renowned nineteenth century intellectuals such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and Nathaniel Hawthorne. In its heyday the cooperative farm comprised 120 members. Several buildings were added before a devastating fire burned a large central residence, then under construction, to the ground. This 1847 financial disaster resulted in the disbanding of the community. The property has also been used as a Civil War training camp, an orphans' home, and a Lutheran school. The cemetery, founded in 1873, now includes the building known as the Print Shop, which was built around 1890. It currently stands just inside the cemetery entrance and will soon be taken over and restored by the MDC. The last reminder of the utopia, the Margaret Fuller Cottage, was regrettably torched by vandals in 1984.

Gethsemene Cemetery has long been a popular spot with local birders. A feeding station has been maintained there for thirty-five years by local bird enthusiast Paul Brenner. You will see his bird seed on a large rock at the southeast corner of the cemetery, where a windbreak is formed by mixed coniferous trees, at the edge of the marsh. All the usual feeder birds can be found here, including marauding Sharp-shinned and Cooper's hawks. Less common feeder visitors include Ring-necked Pheasant, Northern Bobwhite, and Field and Fox sparrows. Rusty Blackbirds have wintered almost every year since 1987, when a flock of at least twenty-five were present. The sixty-foot conifers at this edge have harbored roosting Long-eared and Barn owls, and other conifers around the cemetery have held Northern Saw-whet, Great Horned, and Barred owls. An Eastern Screech-Owl can often be seen roosting in the hole of an apple tree on the south side of the cemetery entrance road, across from the old brick bunker.

The cemetery area can be checked fairly quickly by a drive through. Strategic brief hikes may also be undertaken. Upon entering the cemetery from Baker Street, check the sluggish Sawmill Brook on the left side of the road for ducks or wading birds, although the brook may be obscured by thick stands of knotweed during the summer months. The more adventurous birder can park at the cemetery office and walk into the marsh. Boots are recommended, but treading carefully is still advised in order to avoid ending up in waist-deep water. This is a prime spot to find wintering waterbirds. Waterfowl, Virginia Rail, and Common Snipe regularly take advantage of the perennially open water. Wintering numbers of Green-winged Teal have occasionally exceeded forty at this spot. Half-hardy passerines such as Winter Wren, Gray Catbird, and Swamp and Fox sparrows also frequent this area in winter.

In addition to the feeding station previously mentioned, the entire cemetery edge can provide good birding. Among the more notable visitors have been a wintering Lark Sparrow in 1992 and a singing Yellow-breasted Chat in June 1995. There is an MDC gate at the southwest corner of the cemetery and a path leading west into a red maple swamp. Several options are available if you

choose to walk this area. Turning right parallels the cemetery and takes one past a marshy pond (good for Wood Ducks) and then to upland areas between Gethsemene and Mount Lebanon cemeteries. Turning left will bring you deeper into the red maple swamp and the river floodplain. These woods can be good for migrating warblers in spring and fall, American Woodcock in early spring, and rarely a Ruffed Grouse. Another fork will eventually be reached. Turning right at this point will soon bring one to the Newton line and additional wooded swamp. The other fork terminates at Sawmill Brook beside the old landfill. From here one may choose to walk the landfill or return to the cemetery on the same trail.

Saint Joseph's Cemetery Annex

After birding Gethsemene Cemetery, drive south on Baker Street toward the VFW Parkway. Just before the parkway, on the right, is the entrance to the Saint Joseph's Cemetery annex. This unimpressive looking piece of land can be surprisingly productive. The open grass and dirt areas regularly hold Killdeer and sparrows. Various raptors, Virginia Rails, and Rusty Blackbirds frequent the marsh edges. The abundant supply of fruiting crab apple trees attracts American Robins, Cedar Waxwings, and occasionally Eastern Bluebirds. The south edge of this cemetery borders West Roxbury High School and an open marsh along the parkway where waterbirds may sometimes be found. Beside the high school a path leading right eventually ends at the landfill. Be aware that the cemetery gate is only open during working hours.

Old City Landfill

The capped landfill and surrounding habitat provide some of the finest birding in West Roxbury. The best way to access the landfill is to return to Baker Street and turn right on the VFW Parkway. Travel three-quarters of a mile, and take a right at the light before the skating rink. Proceeding straight will bring you to the landfill entrance. Park on either side of the road to ensure that public works trucks using the dump road will have easy access to the road, which is not open to public vehicles.

It is unclear how the future plans of the city of Boston will affect things at this locality. An environmental consulting firm has been hired to assess the value of the landfill as a city park, and there has even been talk of baseball diamonds and a greater overall public works presence. Whether enhancing the area's value for wildlife is a priority remains to be seen. In any case, change is undoubtedly on the horizon.

Finding birds in the dump area generally requires some walking. Fortunately, there is a profusion of roads around and across the landfill. A hike around the entire area cannot be done in much less than one hour. If one chooses to go all the way to the top of the hill, the time needed will be longer. The most

BIRD LIST FOR WEST ROXBURY

KEY: A = Abundant (greater than 20 per trip); C = Common (greater than 1 per trip); F = Fairly common (most trips); U = Uncommon (most years); R = Rare (less than three times)

List based on 134 trips since 1986. Abundance reflects the number of birds observed in the expected season.

Pied-billed Grebe	R	Spotted Sandpiper	F
Double-crested Cormorant	F	Upland Sandpiper	U
Great Blue Heron	F	Semipalmated Sandpiper	U
Snowy Egret	R	Least Sandpiper	U
Green Heron	F	White-rumped Sandpiper	R
Black-crowned Night-Heron	U	Common Snipe	F
Canada Goose	C	American Woodcock	C
Wood Duck	C	Ring-billed Gull	C
Green-winged Teal	C	Herring Gull	C
American Black Duck	C	Great Black-backed Gull	F
Mallard	C	Rock Dove	C
American Wigeon	R	Mourning Dove	C
Ring-necked Duck	U	Black-billed Cuckoo	U
Common Goldeneye	U	Yellow-billed Cuckoo	R
Bufflehead	U	Common Barn-Owl	R
Hooded Merganser	F	Eastern Screech-Owl	F
Common Merganser	F	Great Horned Owl	U
Red-breasted Merganser	U	Barred Owl	R
Turkey Vulture	R	Long-eared Owl	U
Osprey	U	Northern Saw-whet Owl	R
Northern Harrier	F	Common Nighthawk	F
Sharp-shinned Hawk	F	Chimney Swift	F
Cooper's Hawk	F	Belted Kingfisher	F
Red-shouldered Hawk	F	Red-bellied Woodpecker	R
Broad-winged Hawk	R	Downy Woodpecker	C
Red-tailed Hawk	C	Hairy Woodpecker	F
American Kestrel	C	Northern Flicker	C
Merlin	U	Eastern Wood-Pewee	U
Ring-necked Pheasant	C	Alder Flycatcher	R
Ruffed Grouse	R	Willow Flycatcher	F
Northern Bobwhite	C	Least Flycatcher	R
Virginia Rail	F	Eastern Phoebe	F
Sora	R	Great-crested Flycatcher	U
Common Moorhen	R	Eastern Kingbird	F
Semipalmated Plover	R	Horned Lark	U
Killdeer	C	Tree Swallow	F
Greater Yellowlegs	R	No. Rough-winged Swallow	F

Bank Swallow	R	Palm Warbler	F
Barn Swallow	F	Blackpoll Warbler	F
Blue Jay	C	Black and White Warbler	F
American Crow	A	American Redstart	F
Fish Crow	F	Worm-eating Warbler	R
Black-capped Chickadee	C	Ovenbird	R
Tufted Titmouse	C	Northern Waterthrush	F
White-breasted Nuthatch	C	Mourning Warbler	R
Brown Creeper	U	Common Yellowthroat	A
Carolina Wren	U	Wilson's Warbler	U
House Wren	F	Canada Warbler	U
Winter Wren	U	Yellow-breasted Chat	U
Golden-crowned Kinglet	U	Scarlet Tanager	U
Ruby-crowned Kinglet	U	Northern Cardinal	C
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher	R	Rose-breasted Grosbeak	F
Eastern Bluebird	U	Indigo Bunting	C
Veery	R	Dickcissel	U
Swainson's Thrush	R	Eastern Towhee	U
Hermit Thrush	R	American Tree Sparrow	A
Wood Thrush	U	Chipping Sparrow	F
American Robin	A	Vesper Sparrow	U
Gray Catbird	A	Lark Sparrow	R
Northern Mockingbird	C	Savannah Sparrow	C
Brown Thrasher	C	Fox Sparrow	F
American Pipit	U	Song Sparrow	A
Cedar Waxwing	C	Lincoln's Sparrow	U
Northern Shrike	U	Swamp Sparrow	C
European Starling	A	White-throated Sparrow	C
Solitary Vireo	U	White-crowned Sparrow	U
Warbling Vireo	C	Dark-eyed Junco	C
Philadelphia Vireo	R	Snow Bunting	F
Red-eyed Vireo	U	Bobolink	U
Blue-winged Warbler	R	Red-winged Blackbird	A
Orange-crowned Warbler	U	Eastern Meadowlark	F
Nashville Warbler	F	Rusty Blackbird	C
Northern Parula	U	Common Grackle	A
Yellow Warbler	A	Brown-headed Cowbird	C
Chestnut-sided Warbler	R	Orchard Oriole	U
Magnolia Warbler	U	Northern Oriole	C
Black-throated Blue Warbler	U	Purple Finch	F
Yellow-rumped Warbler	C	House Finch	C
Black-throated Green Warbler	F	Common Redpoll	R
Blackburnian Warbler	R	American Goldfinch	A
Pine Warbler	U	House Sparrow	C
Prairie Warbler	R		

productive areas are reached by proceeding hard right along the fence that separates the landfill from the high school athletic fields. Field and Savannah sparrows are year-round residents in this area. Eventually the road turns west along Sawmill Brook. During migration this waterway is the best bet for passerine activity. Both cuckoo species frequent this area, and the Black-billed Cuckoo nests. The wetlands across the brook have held a wintering Red-shouldered Hawk for several years.

Farther along is a gravel bed in the stream, and from here to the Charles River the brook seldom, if ever, freezes. Wintering Hooded Merganser and Green-winged Teal occur here sporadically. Flickers, hundreds of American Robins, Cedar Waxwings, Purple Finches, and American Goldfinches use the munificence of crab apple and bittersweet as a winter food source. Other interesting finds along the brook have included American Bittern, Sora, Common Moorhen, Common Snipe, and Orange-crowned Warbler, all during fall migration. During the breeding season in spring and summer, Wood Duck and Green Heron are common sights.

Just before the river, the road ends at a T. Turning right crosses the brook and ends at the river, which is about 200 yards away. The scrubby habitat on the left and the marsh on the right make this short diversion worthwhile. Northern Harriers are often found hunting the marsh, the most notable sighting being in July 1992. Ubiquitous Red-tailed Hawks feed on the profusion of cottontails that are found throughout the area. Merlins, Cooper's and Sharp-shinned hawks, and Northern Shrikes are also found here regularly at the appropriate seasons. Most remarkable have been spring records of Yellow-breasted Chat in 1991 and 1994. In 1994 a chat was observed in courtship flight.

Retracing your steps, and before reaching the T, take a side road to the right that goes along the brook to where it enters the Charles River. Walk south along the river toward the railroad tracks. A weedy area here can be very productive for songbirds, as well as providing a wonderful view of the Charles River. Orange-crowned and Nashville warblers have lingered here into November. During winter the river remains open at the railroad bridge, and as a result waterfowl can often be found. In drought years mudflats here may attract a variety of shorebirds, and rarely a Snowy Egret.

At this point, you can decide whether to return directly to your vehicle by taking the road that parallels the railroad tracks or to spend more time birding the top of the landfill. By climbing to the top of a century's worth of Boston's refuse, the hardy explorer is presented with a panoramic view of the city. The scrubby grassland atop the landfill is being taken over by phragmites and cottonwood, but it still provides habitat for several notable species. Upland Sandpipers occur almost annually from mid-July to August, and there is at least one spring record. Other grassland birds such as Dickcissel, Vesper and Savannah sparrows, Bobolink, and Eastern Meadowlark have also been found,

primarily as fall migrants. Several times the meadowlarks and Savannah Sparrows have been year-round residents. American Kestrels nest every year in the light towers behind the high school, feeding primarily on the abundant supply of grasshoppers in the adjacent fields. The sparse areas on the west end of the landfill are most productive for grassland birds including American Pipit, Horned Lark, and Snow Bunting. This can also be a fine spot to watch American Woodcocks in the spring or migrating Common Nighthawks in the fall.

The birds are certainly not the only attraction in the West Roxbury area. The region's many paths also provide an array of hiking and cross-country skiing possibilities. Many mammals are also regularly found here. As the white-tailed deer population has exploded in recent years, coyotes have become more frequent. As these large canids have increased, their smaller cousins, the red foxes, have seemingly become less numerous. Rumors about the presence of fishers have circulated but so far remain unconfirmed. Beginning in spring, herps in the area also provide a treat for the inquisitive naturalist. Yellow and blue-spotted salamanders breed in the many vernal pools along the river's floodplain, and red efts, the land stage of the red-spotted newt, and spotted turtles have also been found. Both of these latter species are uncommon in eastern Massachusetts. No doubt an enterprising herpetologist could turn up additional surprises.

Although this article highlights some of the best birding spots in West Roxbury, it is likely that intensive exploration would turn up additional bird species around other cemetery edges or anywhere along the Charles River and its wetlands.

THOMAS AVERSA, born and bred in West Roxbury, has recently relocated to Seattle, Washington, to take a position at the Woodland Park Zoo after twelve years of working at Franklin Park. One of the things he will miss most in Boston is birding West Roxbury. He hopes that this article might stimulate some local birders to further explore the area. Tom would like to thank Cheryl Frederick and Wayne Petersen for reviewing an earlier version of this article.

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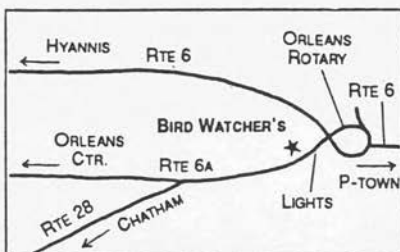
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