

## MIDDLESEX FELLS RESERVATION REVISITED

by Paul Donahue

I grew up in Winchester, Massachusetts. Fortunately for me, my family lived only a block or two from the west boundary of the Middlesex Fells Reservation, and it was there, in the 1960s, where I first began birding. Throughout my early birding years, up through high school and for several years afterward, I spent thousands of hours walking the reservation's many miles of trails in search of birds. During spring and fall migration, I would be in the Fells birding before school, after school, and on weekends and holidays. I came to know the woods, ponds, swamps, streams, and trails of the Middlesex Fells better than I have known any area since. Steve Everett was my close birding companion during my high school years and lived along the southwest boundary of the reservation near the "army camp," the best spot in the Fells for finding migrant landbirds. The Fells was like our own private birding reserve. I can still vividly recall our first discoveries there of "great rarities" such as Little Blue Heron, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Boreal Chickadee, and Cerulean Warbler. As, I suppose, is normal, since moving away from the area I have spent much time reminiscing about my early birding experiences in the Fells.

This past May, after a hiatus of twenty years or so, I returned to the Middlesex Fells to see how the area had changed in my absence. It is always dangerous to return to places of one's youth, with changes for the worse being almost inevitable. However, I figured I would be safe in visiting the Fells. It was still a state reservation, and I knew it would not have been converted into a housing development or shopping plaza, the fate of so many of my past birding haunts. I parked by the army camp, in a new paved parking area along South Border Road, and headed on foot down the gravel road to the west.

The army camp had been an area of young second growth, a low hilltop covered with thickets of staghorn sumac, grassy openings, and lots of young gray birch. I had imagined that it would have changed considerably in twenty years, with the open, grassy areas filling in and the rest of the area growing up to young woodland. However, while it had grown up a little, the change was not nearly as dramatic as I had anticipated. The thickets of the army camp were a bit more extensive than I remembered, but the trees were still not very tall, and plenty of more or less open grassy areas remained. Perhaps the army camp had been the victim of several fires or perhaps I have just spent too much time in the Amazon, where a grassy field can evolve into a forty-foot-high young forest in only ten years.

I then continued west down the woods road. The area to the west of the army camp used to be covered with some of the tallest and richest woods in the reservation, an area where we had encountered Pileated Woodpeckers and

Kentucky Warblers. I remembered the woods here as looking very good twenty years ago, with many large trees, and was looking forward to seeing how much better they looked after twenty years more of undisturbed growth. But as I walked down the road, I was struck by the large number of dead and dying trees. The area did not look better than it did twenty years ago—it looked worse, much worse. Everywhere I looked were completely dead trees, trees with dead limbs sticking out of the crown, or trees with sparse and scraggly vegetation on their uppermost branches. All around were openings where trees had apparently fallen. Most of the dead and dying trees were green ash, which are known to be having problems throughout the region. When I reached up for a small leafy branch of a young ash for a closer look, it broke off easily in my hand, as brittle as an icicle. Many of the large black oaks looked less than healthy as well, and some of the large white pines in that area had broken off two-thirds of the way up their trunks. The scene reminded me of recent photographs I have seen of the once great forests of eastern Europe.

If green ash was the only species of tree suffering a decline in eastern North America, maybe it would be acceptable to simply blame the cause on some pathogen and dismiss the problem as unfortunate but unavoidable. But green ash is not the only species at risk. As I sit here writing in Machias, Maine, I can look out over the tops of numerous dying sugar maples, their crowns enveloped at the moment in acid fog. Throughout the Machias area, every sugar maple shows signs of slowly dying from the top down, and the species is doing poorly in the northeast region as a whole. White pines in the Machias area seem to have lost some of their strength. Every time a strong wind blows around here now, several more large trees snap off.

Other examples of tree death and disease are easy to find. At higher elevations in the mountains across northern New England, red spruce has been particularly hard hit by acid rain, and lower down on the same slopes the mountain and striped maples are suffering. Moving south and west, eastern and Carolina hemlocks in southern New England and the central Appalachians have been badly damaged by the hemlock woolly adelgid. Flowering dogwood is suffering as the result of anthracose fungus and butternut as the result of a canker. American beech in the Adirondacks is being heavily attacked by a scale insect. Fraser fir in the Great Smoky Mountains of North Carolina are suffering heavy mortality due to the balsam woolly adelgid. Red and white oaks, black locust, and hickories in West Virginia are dying of unknown causes. These are only some of the examples.

We can choose to view all these examples of dying trees as isolated cases, each caused by a specific insect or fungus or bacteria or virus or whatever. Or, more accurately, we can look on these pathogens as representing only the proximate causes of death, and consider forest decline and tree death across eastern North America for the pandemic that it is. Our industrial society with its

attendant air pollution is slowly killing our forests, as it has the forests of eastern Europe. We have all read about the effects of acid rain and ozone and other pollutants on our forests. But it is important to remember that these problems are no longer limited to the peaks of the Green Mountains in Vermont or of the Great Smoky Mountains in North Carolina. Pollutants have weakened and stressed trees throughout the eastern half of the continent, making them more susceptible to attack by pathogens.

So how long are we going to accept this transformation of our forests before we make changes in our own lifestyles and speak up to demand that the necessary changes be made in our society? We, as people interested in birds, have more at stake than many people in our society. Canadian biologists have discovered that the defoliation of the crowns of sugar maples has decreased the abundance of birds that rely on the canopy for food and shelter. In the Great Smoky Mountains the dying of the fraser fir is having a considerable effect on bird populations. Bicknell's Thrush habitat on mountain tops across northern New England is suffering severe diebacks. Are these the trends we want for our future, or is it time to rise up en masse to let our legislators know what we want? If nothing is done and business as usual is allowed to continue, what is a young naturalist growing up near the Middlesex Fells Reservation today going to find when he or she returns to the area for a visit another twenty years from now?

**PAUL DONAHUE** is a regular contributor of cover art to *Bird Observer*.

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