



A MIDDLESEX COUNTY DUCK HUNT

by Matthew L. Pelikan

Most New England birders are familiar with such Middlesex County hot spots as Fresh Pond, Mount Auburn Cemetery, and the Concord unit of Great Meadows National Wildlife Refuge. But the varied geography and fertile mix of habitats found in southeastern Middlesex County also translate into superlative "local birding" at countless less famed locations. As the passerine migration peters out in October and November, it is worth seeking out the many waterfowl that are attracted to the lakes and ponds of this interesting and historic region.

Southeastern Middlesex County is served by major highways: Interstates 93 and 95 pass through the area, and Route 2 cuts east/west through Cambridge, Lexington, Lincoln, and Concord. A hilly terrain and a glacial past account for the numerous bodies of water — large and small, deep and shallow, sandy and weedy — that dot this accessible portion of Massachusetts, and the combination of roads and habitats produces convenient duck-watching. Living in Arlington for ten years, I spent a good portion of each fall checking out the local ponds; in particular, a personal tradition of birding on Thanksgiving morning gradually evolved into a marathon waterfowl count that I took to calling "The Annual Turkey-Day Duck Hunt" (Table 1). This article describes one way to visit a few of my more reliable Duck-Hunt locations.

You need not wait for Thanksgiving, of course, to check out these spots: indeed, that holiday is a little late in the season for optimal inland duck-watching, and in cold years southeastern Middlesex County, which offers only fresh water, can be pretty well iced over by late November. But these locations begin attracting waterfowl (and some hold shorebirds, as well) in late August or early September, and many species linger until the ponds freeze. Moreover, a few of the spots I will describe feature moving water that stays open (and often contains ducks) throughout the winter. Most of these locations merit a check during spring migration, too, and since the presence of water enhances passerine diversity, birders visiting these spots should keep an eye on the trees and bushes as well as on the water.

Birders who know the area (or who have a detailed road map) will be able to find many ponds, most of them worth a stop, besides the ones I mention, and people passing through the area may find it convenient to make a quick visit to a single location from the list. But for the sake of convenience, I will assemble a few selected ponds into a single route starting at the northernmost point of my Duck Hunt itinerary.

Horn Pond, in Woburn near the Winchester town line, has a social history that is nearly as interesting as its natural history. Though now hemmed in on three sides by densely populated neighborhoods, Horn Pond featured a posh resort

in the mid-19th century, when it was adjacent to the route of the Middlesex Canal. The pond has also served as a public water supply, while glacial deposits on the northwest side have been mined for sand and gravel. It is a popular site for fishing, jogging, and dog-walking, but the pond and the adjoining conservation land offer surprising opportunities for nature study. To get to Horn Pond, exit Interstate 95 (aka 128) North or South onto Route 3 South at exit 33A in Woburn (the exit is marked "Winchester."). Follow Route 3 for 3.0 miles, and turn left onto Pond Street, marked by a Gibbs gas station. (If you pass Mahoney's Garden Center, you have gone too far.) Drive down Pond Street for 0.7 mile, passing the municipal water works on your left, crossing Winchester/Woburn town line (Pond Street turns into Lake Avenue when you enter Woburn), and then turning into a parking area on your left at the bottom of a hill.

TABLE 1: Annual Turkey-Day Duck Hunt: 11/23/95 and 11/28/96

Location Key:

1 = Horn Pond, Woburn

2 = Mystic Lakes, Winchester/Medford

3 = Spy Pond, Arlington

4 = Arlington Res., Arlington

5 = Hardy Pond, Waltham

6 = Cambridge Res., Lexington

7 = Sandy Pond, Lincoln

	Year	#1	#2	#3	#4	#5	#6	#7	Total
Red-throated Loon	1995							1	1
	1996								0
Pied-billed Grebe	1995					1			1
	1996			1					1
Mute Swan	1995		2	5		2			9
	1996	2		6					8
Canada Goose	1995		60		44				104
	1996	40	3	30	42				115
White Domestic	1995		4						4
	1996								0
Domestic Greylag	1995		4						4
	1996								0
Green-winged Teal	1995				18				18
	1996								0
American Black Duck	1995				2			2	4
	1996				5				5
Mallard	1995		30	14	28	7	17		96
	1996	140	32	430	30			11	253
Mallard x Black Duck	1995	1							1
	1996			1					1
Mallard x Domestic	1995			2					2
	1996			4					4

	Year	#1	#2	#3	#4	#5	#6	#7	Total
Domestic Duck (var?)	1995			1					1
	1996								0
Northern Shoveler	1995				3				3
	1996								0
Northern Pintail	1995								0
	1996				1				1
American Wigeon	1995				5	9	9		23
	1996			2					2
Ring-necked Duck	1995		3		109				112
	1996	3	2						5
Oldsquaw	1995								0
	1996							3	3
Greater Scaup	1995					5			5
	1996								0
Lesser Scaup	1995					1			1
	1996								0
Common Goldeneye	1995							6	6
	1996							5	5
Bufflehead	1995							15	15
	1996					1		14	14
Hooded Merganser	1995		27	4	9			1	41
	1996	4	5	40					49
Common Merganser	1995							83	83
	1996			9				19	28
Ruddy Duck	1995		9		1	4		5	19
	1996		19					39	58
Common Moorhen	1995					1			1
	1996								0
American Coot	1995		3	43	2	27			75
	1996	8	1	50		10			69

Horn Pond is popular with both human and avian “fishermen,” so scan the pond for mergansers (all three species are possible here), cormorants, or grebes. A cove visible to the left often holds a heron or egret. Osprey occur regularly during fall migration. The bare-topped hill to your left, with a power line running over its flank, is known (somewhat hyperbolically) as Horn Pond Mountain; accessible from the trail system that circles the pond, it offers good birding and butterfly-watching.

Return to Pond Street/Lake Avenue, and turn left. In a hundred yards or so, turn left again onto Arlington Street at an intersection with a traffic island.

Arlington Street parallels the edge of the pond for about a half-mile; shortly after it pulls away from the shoreline, 0.6 mile from Pond Street, turn left onto Sturgis Street. Go down the hill and park in a small lot on the left. This offers another vantage point on the pond, and there is usually a huge flock of Mallards (sometimes with other ducks mixed in) and gulls hoping for handouts. Walk along the pond to the right, following a trail through a small, wooded area to a dike. The bushes and wet woods here are good for migrants, and snipe can sometimes be found in the swampy area beside the pond. Follow the dike across the pond, checking both sides for coots, Gadwall, and Hooded Mergansers. If you have time, following the trail that loops around the "lagoon" (on your right) can be worthwhile. In dry summers, mudflats exposed in the lagoon attract shorebirds: Stilt, Western, and White-rumped sandpipers have occurred among the more common species found here, so check them all.

When you return to your car, go back up Sturgis, turn right on Arlington Street again, and right on Lake Avenue. Drive 0.4 miles, and turn left on Woodside. Go straight through the first stop sign onto Wildwood, and at the next stop sign (0.7 miles) turn right on Fletcher (unmarked). Drive 0.7 miles, and turn right onto Mystic Valley Parkway, immediately before the railroad overpass.

The next couple of miles follow the shoreline of the **Mystic Lakes**; a number of parking areas and turnouts give good looks at the nice mix of birds these impoundments attract. Water moves slowly through the lakes, and the near shoreline is exposed to the sun and sheltered from north winds. So these lakes often hold ducks when cold weather has emptied most of the other ponds in the area. Start by parking in the large paved lot a few hundred yards down the road. Check the upstream end of Upper Mystic Lake for Pied-billed Grebe (regular here in season), Hooded Mergansers, and Ruddy Ducks. The wooded area to your left often attracts migrant warblers, kinglets, and creepers.

Continue down the Parkway, stopping at any or all of the pullouts that occur every fifth of a mile or so. This section of Upper Mystic Lake may hold scaup and goldeneye, in addition to the waterbirds mentioned above. Often, any ducks that are present are over against the far shore, which is lined by private property and hence cannot be birded. However, with a scope (or even binoculars held by steady hands) everything will be in range from the Parkway side.

The best spot on the Mystic Lakes is reached by a driveway, marked "Medford Boat Club," one mile after you turn onto the parkway. A parking area, about a hundred yards in and adjacent to the private boat club, overlooks both lakes and gives a good view of the spillway below the dam that separates the lakes. The spillway stays open all winter, and nearly anything can turn up here, but mergansers (mainly Common and Red-breasted) are the specialty. In winter this spot is reliable for Great Cormorant, and a flock of gulls is usually present on the ice; since Iceland Gulls turn up here fairly regularly among the Herring and Ring-billed gulls, and Glaucous and Lesser Black-backed are certainly

possible, it is worth giving them a look. A cove on the lower lake, along the driveway in, is a good spot for wigeon, Ring-necked Duck, and coot.

Return to the parkway, and continue to the bottom of the lakes. A wide shoulder along this stretch of the parkway facilitates birding from the car, though you should not walk away from your vehicle. You will turn right at the first opportunity (at a tiny rotary), crossing a bridge and heading toward Arlington. But before crossing the bridge, park on the other side of the rotary and bird the river around the bridge. The start of the Mystic River, this area stays open in all but the most severe winters, and an astonishing blend of waterfowl sometimes concentrates on the stream. Northern Pintail, shoveler, Wood Duck, and Redhead have been found here. American Coot, Mute Swan, and Ring-necked Duck are regular (indeed, virtually inescapable), and an immature Snow Goose spent the winter of 1996-1997 mainly at this spot, hanging out with a motley crew of feral domestic and Canada geese.

When you have finished here, take Route 60 across the bridge (incidentally following the route of Paul Revere's Ride, though predawn darkness presumably kept that illustrious horseman from noticing what was probably a nice mix of birds here on the nineteenth of April in '75). Go halfway around the rotary on the other side of the bridge, continuing on Route 60 toward Arlington. The road passes through a flashing light in about a half-mile, veers downhill to the right, and then turns left at a stoplight at 0.6 mile. (After this point, you will be briefly on Routes 2A East, 3 South, and 60 West all at once. But if Revere didn't get confused, why should you?) Shortly, you pass through another stoplight at Massachusetts Avenue. Follow Route 60 toward Belmont for another 0.2 mile, and then turn left onto Wellington Street (marked by a small sign for the Boys and Girls Club). Descend a steep hill and park near the athletic fields. You are overlooking **Spy Pond**, which is good for coot, wigeon, mergansers, Mute Swan, and scaup. The cove to your right, along the west shore of the pond, may contain literally hundreds of waterfowl. For a couple of weeks in February, 1997, the local Eurasian Wigeon-in-Residence was often parked on the playing field. Continue around the Boys and Girls Club to another parking area near a playground, which offers a better view of the main portion of the pond.

Exit this second parking area at the opposite end from where you entered it, passing under a bridge that carries the Minuteman Bikeway. In a short distance you will intersect with Massachusetts Avenue; turn left, and proceed 1.7 miles and bear right onto Lowell Street, which angles off Massachusetts Avenue just past a yellow flashing light. Drive 0.2 miles, and cross a six-way intersection, staying on Lowell Street (second road from the left). In a bit under a half-mile, you will see the **Arlington Reservoir** on your left. Drive to the far end, and park in one of the dirt pullouts beside the woods on the left. A dirt path runs between the woods and the adjacent agricultural fields.

Mainly in Arlington, this artificial pond extends into Lexington at its western end. There is little point in visiting during the summer, when a small municipal beach attracts people rather than birds. But during the rest of the year, the "Res" attracts some pretty fine birds despite its modest size and inauspicious suburban setting (table 2, compiled mainly from personal records, 1992-1997). Its shallow west end turns into mudflats starting about the first of September, when the water level is drawn down by the Town of Arlington, and the first migrant shorebirds and dabbling ducks sometimes arrive within hours of the first emergence of mud. The deeper eastern end attracts diving ducks until the surface ices over.

TABLE 2: Waterfowl And Shorebirds Of Arlington Reservoir

Species	Comments
Pied-billed Grebe	Regular but sparse; April and September through late November.
Mute Swan	Occasional visitor, generally late winter or early spring.
Canada Goose	Abundant. Members of migratory races are rare here.
Wood Duck	Uncommon spring and fall visitor.
Green-winged Teal	Common fall and spring migrant. Lingers into December when water remains open. Two dozen or more may be present.
American Black Duck	Uncommon resident, generally associating with Mallards.
Mallard	Abundant resident; peak counts surpass 100 individuals.
Northern Pintail	Uncommon but regular fall and spring migrant. Two or three birds appear most years, often lingering for several weeks.
Blue-winged Teal	Irregular fall migrant, generally w/ flocks of Green-winged Teal.
Northern Shoveler	Uncommon but nearly annual migrant, mainly late March/early April and mid-September through November. Max. 3, 11/23/95.
Gadwall	Fairly common fall and spring migrant.
Eurasian Wigeon	Rare visitor: one record, a male on March 26, 1996.
American Wigeon	Common fall and spring migrant. Several dozen may be present.
Canvasback	Rare visitor. Small numbers March/April 1996 and 1997, and in November, 1996, might suggest a pattern of increasing frequency.
Ring-necked Duck	Abundant fall and spring migrant. Counts may approach 150.
Greater Scaup	Occasional visitor.
Lesser Scaup	Occasional visitor.
Common Goldeneye	Rare visitor; one record, a male on April 9, 1994.
Bufflehead	Regular in small numbers late March/early April. No fall records.
Hooded Merganser	Common to abundant fall migrant, with peak counts near 40. Regular but less numerous in spring.
Common Merganser	Uncommon migrant, generally in spring. The Mystic Lakes and Spy Pond, both nearby, are much better for this species.

Ruddy Duck	Common to abundant in fall, with up to 50 birds. Uncommon but regular in spring, often present from late March into early May.
American Coot	Regular but sparse migrant, mainly in fall.
American Golden-Plover	Rare migrant. One record: three juveniles, late September 1994.
Semipalmated Plover	Uncommon but regular fall and irregular spring migrant.
Killdeer	Common to abundant migrant, especially in fall; has attempted to breed here, and probably breeds locally.
Greater Yellowlegs	Regular but sparse fall and spring migrant.
Lesser Yellowlegs	Uncommon fall and spring migrant.
Solitary Sandpiper	Uncommon to, occasionally, common fall and spring migrant.
Spotted Sandpiper	Uncommon to common fall and spring migrant.
Semipalmated Sandpiper	Uncommon fall migrant. No spring records.
Western Sandpiper	Rare migrant; one record (fide Marj Rines).
Least Sandpiper	Common but variable migrant, fall and spring. High counts include thirty-eight on May 19, 1997.
Pectoral Sandpiper	Uncommon to common fall migrant; juveniles appear regularly in September and October. Max. 22 10/5/97. Uncommon in spring.
Dunlin	Rare migrant; one record (fide Marj Rines).
Common Snipe	Uncommon to fairly common migrant, mainly April and October.
American Woodcock	Occasional visitor in the adjoining woodlands during migration

The Arlington Reservoir catches nutrients from the farm and residential neighborhoods along the stream that feeds it; decaying aquatic vegetation and the droppings of the many visiting birds filter into the mix. But though the aroma of the exposed mud can be interesting, the fertility of its water allows the Res to support hundreds of migrant waterfowl, year in and year out. Over twenty species of waterfowl have occurred here, and as many as fourteen have been present at one time. Shorebirds can be plentiful, too, when water levels are low, and other waterbirds, such as gulls, herons, and kingfishers, are often present. Many passerines breed near the pond or visit the area during migration: American Pipit, Mourning Warbler, Blue Grosbeak, Clay-colored Sparrow, and Dickcissel have all been recorded here; Lincoln's, White-crowned, and Fox sparrows, and Winter Wren are of annual occurrence.

Fairly small and ringed by a trail, the Res is easy to bird and offers good views of whatever ducks are present. Try walking around it counterclockwise from where you have parked. The wooded area at the west end of the pond can be fruitful at any season. In late fall and winter, when no crops are in the fields, the margin of the adjacent agricultural land can be excellent for sparrows. (The farm is privately owned, but in addition to being conscientious farmers, the owners are birder-friendly. Help keep them this way by staying on the edges of the fields and staying entirely off the land during the growing season or when

work is in progress.) Though I never found one, someday a lucky birder is going to dig up a Virginia Rail in the cattail beds that are gradually expanding at this end of the pond.

Along the south side of the pond, check the bushes and the low-lying wet area you eventually reach on the right for sparrows, waterthrushes, and the occasional Rusty Blackbird. A small spur trail to the right provides additional access to this productive habitat, which, being well sheltered, often hosts straggling migrants into very late autumn. At the pond's east end, you will have good views of "ringers" and "ruddies" in season; a small island exposed in the northeast corner when the water is low is a favorite spot of visiting Pectoral Sandpipers. On the north side of the pond, pass through the gate in the chain-link fence, and walk along the berm enclosing the public swimming beach. This berm provides a good look at any shorebirds that are present, and the bushes here often attract migrants. Pass through the gate at the other end of the beach area, and follow the trail through the woods back to your starting point.

When you've finished at the Res, continue on Lowell Street. In 0.1 mile you will pass the Busa Farm store on your left. It's a great spot for vegetables and flowers, and picking up dinner or a snack here will let you give a boost to a gracious landowner. Continue down Lowell Street 0.9 mile and turn left at the traffic light onto Route 2A. In another 1.0 mile turn right on Massachusetts Avenue, then bear left almost immediately (follow the signs for Route 2A). Drive 1.2 miles to a traffic light, and turn left on Waltham Street. After 1.0 miles, Waltham Street goes under Route 2, and you continue another 1.4 miles toward Waltham 1.4 miles toward Waltham. Turn right onto Lake Street (immediately after a bowling alley), then right again onto Princeton Street at 0.4 mile, just before a baseball field. Pull into a small gravel lot on the left in about 50 yards, and check out Hardy Pond, visible to your right. Like the Arlington Reservoir, this pond is not much to look at, but also like the Res, it does not get birded much and it attracts better birds than you expect it will. Muddy-bottomed and ringed by cattails, it is the sort of habitat favored by Common Moorhens (a species that spiced up my 1995 Turkey-Day visit to this location). Also, Hardy Pond has been good for scaup, teal, wigeon, pintail, and Pied-billed Grebe over the years. Most of the pond is visible from this parking area, but additional viewpoints from Shore and Lakeview, just a bit further along Lake Street on the other side of the baseball field, are worth visiting both for their views of the pond and for the passerines that can be found in the bushes along them.

After birding this area, return to Lake Street and go right for about 0.7 mile to a "T" intersection with Wyman Road. Turn right here, then left onto Trapelo Road in 0.2 mile. Almost immediately, go right onto Interstate 95/Route 128 North, but stay to the right because you will be getting off shortly at Exit 29 B onto Route 2 West ("Acton, Fitchburg"). Immediately after crossing through the interchange, you will see a large dirt pullout on the right. You can park here and

walk through a small wooded area to get a look at one end of the Hobbes Brook Basin of the Cambridge Reservoir. If the water is low, this spot is good for herons and egrets; if it is high, it's good for ducks (including, often, Blue-winged Teal). Resume your travel on Route 2, but watch for a small road on the right in another half-mile — Lexington Road North, which enters Route 2 just after a farmstand. Turn in here, and drive down the road a few hundred yards, bearing right at the fork and stopping where the road overlooks the other end of the Hobbes Brook Basin. Here, too, what you see depends largely on how high the water is. (If it is frozen, you probably will not see anything.) When the basin is full, a mix of puddle ducks is usually present. In August and September, when the water is low, I have found White-rumped and Stilt sandpipers here (Western and Baird's sandpipers have been reported by other observers). One early November visit produced a flock of Snow Buntings feeding on the mud. Herons are common here (Little Blue Herons have occurred), and a Forster's Tern showed up a few Septembers ago. The traffic along this little road is light enough to permit you to walk along it, checking the trees for migrant passerines. (This spot is also notable in summer for the variety and number of dragonflies that can be found here.)

When reentering Route 2 from either of these locations, you will want to wait for a good gap in the traffic and then engage full after-burners. This is a notoriously dangerous stretch of road. Neither of these locations is accessible from the eastbound lanes.

Continue west along Route 2 for 1.4 miles to the intersection (actually a tiny cloverleaf controlled by a traffic light) with Bedford Road. Turn off onto the second exit, effectively making a left-hand turn toward Lincoln. Drive 1.5 miles over a big hill, then turn right onto Sandy Pond Road at a five-way intersection in Lincoln's picturesque center. You will pass the driveway to DeCordova Museum at 0.4 mile (if you are not in a hurry, a detour through the grounds, which feature an outdoor sculpture collection, can be both culturally and ornithologically rewarding). Keep to the right at an intersection in another 0.2 mile, pass a waterworks building, and park in one of the small pullouts on either side of the road, about 0.8 mile from Lincoln Center, where the road closely skirts a cove. Sandy Pond is visible to your right. The best vantage point is from the waterworks parking lot, which unfortunately bears a scowling "No Trespassing" sign; but by scanning the pond from the roadside, or from a trail that follows the shoreline from a pullout on the right, you can view almost all of this body of water.

Sandy Pond is a sort of sibling of nearby Walden Pond. Like its more illustrious neighbor, Sandy Pond is a deep, sandy-bottomed pond of glacial origin, fed mainly by seepage from the surrounding gravelly hills. Its size and depth seem to attract species that are uncommon on the less majestic ponds of Middlesex County. Common and Red-throated loons, Red-necked and Horned grebes, and sea ducks such as scoter (generally but not infallibly White-winged)

are not infrequently present in the fall (the highlight of my 1996 Duck Hunt was a trio of Oldsquaw yodeling to each other in the cove by which you have parked). Ruddy Ducks and Common Mergansers are reliable here, often present in considerable numbers; Buffleheads, Common Goldeneyes, and Hooded Mergansers are usually present in modest numbers; and at least a few dabbling ducks are generally to be found on the pond's margins. A scope is helpful here, since many of the birds (and most of the unusual ones) are likely to be far out on the water, and the large size of the pond means that patience is required to be certain that you have found all the diving birds that are present.

Sandy Pond is the last body of water on this abbreviated Duck-Hunt route, but before you leave, you might want to check out the woods and fields, accessible from a network of trails, near where you've parked. As you continue down Sandy Pond Road, the woods often reward ad hoc birding in likely-looking spots. Another pullout in 0.7 miles offers more access to bird-rich, moist mixed forest. You will enter onto Route 2 East 1.3 miles from Sandy Pond. There is no access to the westbound lanes here, but a left turn at an intersection in 0.2 miles will let you reverse directions (or head to Concord to visit Great Meadows National Wildlife Refuge). If you continue east on Route 2, toward Boston, you will reach Interstate 95/Route 128 in 3.5 miles.

Matthew L. Pelikan is editor in chief of *Bird Observer*; he also edits *A Bird's-Eye View*, a bimonthly newsletter for teenaged birders that is published by the American Birding Association. He will be doing his 1997 Turkey-Day Duck Hunt on Martha's Vineyard, where he recently moved with his wife, Lori Shaller.

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