



BIRDING THE CONNECTICUT RIVER VALLEY IN HADLEY, MASSACHUSETTS

(Editor's note: This month's where-to-go article is an excerpt from a new birding guide called Birding Western Massachusetts: The Central Connecticut River Valley — The Kestrel Trust Area. The Kestrel Trust, the area's conservation land trust, joined with the Hampshire Bird Club to publish this guide. Since its founding in 1970, Kestrel has taken a lead role in protecting the bird and wildlife habitat of this rich area. The Hampshire Bird Club was established in 1984 and is now one of the largest and most active bird groups in western Massachusetts.

Chapters from some fifteen contributors, among the most experienced birders in the region, cover more than fifty of the best birding sites in the Kestrel Trust area, which comprises nine towns in north-central Massachusetts between the Connecticut River on the west and Quabbin Reservoir on the east. Their descriptions include the best seasons to visit, birding high points, past records, rarities, and directions. The guide is aimed at both local birders and visitors to the region, offering a wide range of possible stops, drives, or walks. Also included are a seasonal checklist for the area, chapters on owls and other specialties, and a history of the area's Christmas Bird Count.

To order the guide, send \$13 to the Kestrel Trust at P.O. Box 1016, Amherst, Mass. 01004. For more information on the Trust, call chairman Jim Scott at 413-256-6233 or write to him at the same address.)

The Honey Pot and Adjacent Connecticut River

Habitat: Corn and vegetable fields, tree and shrub nurseries, river and river's edge, shrubby edges, river dike, very small airport, and town transfer station (formerly landfill).

Birds of Special Interest: Great and Snowy egrets, Common Merganser, Northern Harrier, Vesper Sparrow, Horned Lark, Snow Bunting, Common Goldeneye, Bufflehead, Ring-necked Duck, White-crowned Sparrow, Clay-colored Sparrow, Short-eared Owl, Common Redpoll, many others.

Directions: From Route 9 immediately east of the Coolidge Bridge over the Connecticut River, take Cross Path Road north into the Honey Pot farmland area. Note: left turns onto Cross Path are now prohibited for eastbound traffic; for those coming across the bridge from Northampton, proceed on past Cross Path to West Street and turn left there and left again onto Cemetery Road, which meets Cross Path at a T-intersection (see map).

Historically, the Honey Pot has been one of the best areas along the Connecticut River in Hadley for encountering birds of the open country. In

recent years the flavor of the landscape has changed a bit and may not be quite so good as in years past — instead of corn and asparagus, a large portion of the area has been converted to ornamental shrubbery requiring more thorough removal of weeds. This change may have benefited Vesper Sparrows, but the areas best for hawks, owls, and sparrows have shrunk. However, it is still a highly worthwhile stop.

Once you turn onto Cross Path Road from Route 9 (from the east only), you'll immediately cross the Norwottuck Rail Trail, the paved bike path running from South Amherst across Hadley to Northampton. The rail trail is used heavily, especially in the summer and fall, so if you decide to bird anywhere along the bike path, do it in the early morning to avoid traffic. The thickets along the path leading either west to the bridge or east toward the center of Hadley produce species like Downy and Hairy woodpecker, Northern Mockingbird, Northern Cardinal, Tree Sparrow (winter), Song Sparrow, and White-throated Sparrow.

A walk out to the bridge in the early morning to scan up and down the river may produce Great and Snowy egrets (summer), Canada Goose, Hooded and Common merganser, Bald Eagle and, if the river is low enough sometime from late July through early September, an occasional shorebird on Elwell Island north of the bridge.

Once you've returned to Cross Path Road, continue north to a T-intersection. Take a left (west) here onto Cemetery Road (not marked) and park a short way down the road.

From late fall through early spring the Honey Pot can be fairly good for hawks. Scan the trees for Bald Eagle, Red-tailed Hawk (fairly common), and maybe even a Rough-legged Hawk. Your tree-top viewing may also produce a Northern Shrike. Years ago in April Loggerhead Shrikes would turn up from time to time, but that hasn't happened recently. Scan the fields and you may come across a Northern Harrier, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Cooper's Hawk, Merlin, or even a Peregrine Falcon. In spring, this is an area in which to listen for Vesper and Savannah sparrows. Continue west toward the river and take your first and only right, following this road until it bears left and straightens out again. Park here. In winter, check the harvested corn fields for flocks of Horned Larks, scan through the flock for possible Lapland Longspurs (rare) and the more frequent Snow Buntings. During spring, Snow Bunting numbers have approached 500. The corn fields can also produce hundreds of Mourning Doves.

Just a short way down the road look for a small airstrip on the right-hand side. This runway is used by a local hobby club for remote-control aircraft. The road that leads down to the main area has sumac on the left-hand side, sometimes producing wintering Eastern Bluebirds. Also check for Downy Woodpeckers and Northern Flickers along with Song Sparrows and Tree Sparrows that have been seen in the area.

If you're feeling adventurous, continue down the road and bird the tree line down by the Connecticut River. In winter, you'll probably encounter more woodpeckers: Downy and Hairy are the most likely, but Red-bellied and Pileated cannot be ruled out. Black-capped Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse, White-breasted Nuthatch, and maybe a Brown Creeper should be here. Depending on the severity of the winter, you may scare out a Belted Kingfisher or two. Even though this area along the river can be quiet, one observer found a Black-backed Woodpecker just a few years ago, so there's always hope for a surprise or two.

Back on the main road, keep heading west until you come to a wide turnaround. The road does continue, but it's private from here on. At the turnaround you'll have a fairly clear view of the river. In winter check for Common Goldeneye and Common Merganser. If the river is low, look for gulls on the exposed banks — Ring-billed, Herring, and Great Black-backed will be your best bets. During the spring, you may come across Wood Duck, American Black Duck, Mallard, Ring-necked Duck, and Bufflehead.

Follow the road back to the intersection with Cross Path. Continue straight ahead (east) and go up and over the dike. Proceed down Cemetery Road and look for the remains of an old tobacco barn on your right that once produced a Barn Owl. Scan the fields on both sides of the road. Here during spring or fall you may find American Pipits; in winter a Snowy Owl has been known to appear. As a rule, this area is not as productive for sparrows as the land west of the dike, although Vesper Sparrows have nested in the ornamental nursery.

A little farther down the road you'll see a road on your left that leads to the Hadley Transfer Station. Take this road and park near where the road bears left. The transfer station is not like most landfills in the region — it does not attract hordes of gulls, but its brushy edges are good for sparrows. Work your way to the dike and head west, birding around the backside of the area. In the fall you are likely to encounter Chipping, Song, Lincoln's, Swamp, White-throated, and White-crowned sparrows. Scan the river for more waterfowl and the trees across the way on the Hatfield side for Red-tailed Hawk, Bald Eagle, and who knows what. A Gyrfalcon once glimmered on top of those trees years back, and a Long-eared Owl appeared in the red pine grove near the river northeast of the transfer station.

Some of the most important spots to bird while in the Honey Pot vicinity are the weedy fields. As mentioned earlier, recent farming trends in the Honey Pot area have reduced the number of these weedy fields, but those that remain should still be birded. There can be a great number of sparrows — Field, Savannah, Song, Swamp, White-throated, and White-crowned. Less likely but also possible are Clay-colored, Lark, Vesper, and Fox sparrows. While walking the fields you may flush a Short-eared Owl, which has happened on more than one occasion. If it happens to be a "finch winter," Common Redpolls may occur by the hundreds.

The Honey Pot is not birded much for vireos or warblers, mainly because it has few wooded areas. If you venture in between April and mid-September, remember to keep off the farm fields.

There are also several nice birding spots along the Connecticut River as you head north on Route 47 from Route 9 (intersecting at the center of Hadley about a mile east of Cross Path Road). I will focus on only a few, but there are others to discover.

After birding the Honey Pot, continue east on Cemetery Road and at the stop sign take a left onto West Street. When West Street starts to bend to the right, just in front of you is a pulloff. This spot gives you a good opportunity to view the river. Look here for waterfowl during migration and in the winter. From here, continue around the bend, where West Street becomes North Lane. Follow North Lane to the stop sign at Route 47 and take a left (north).

Head up Route 47 for 1.2 miles to a right turn onto Huntington Road. Park immediately on your right. Back across Route 47, opposite Huntington Road, you'll see a farm road heading down toward the river. The area along this farm road is best primarily from late summer through the beginning of October. At the corner of Huntington Road a Great Gray Owl hung out for more than three weeks in February 1984.

The area has two parts to it, the upper and lower areas. As you head down the road (upper area), bird the tree line and thickets that separate you from the cornfield on the right-hand side. There are thickets on the left where a Mourning Warbler has turned up on a couple of occasions, but most of the action has traditionally been on the right.

As mentioned above, the best time here is from mid-August through early October. During this period, look for flycatchers — Olive-sided (rare), Alder, Willow (good luck), Least, Eastern Phoebe, and Eastern Kingbird. Along with Warbling, Philadelphia (rare) and Red-eyed Vireos there are often numerous warblers — Tennessee, Nashville, Northern Parula, Chestnut-sided, Yellow-rumped, Black-throated Green, Blackburnian, Bay-breasted, Blackpoll, Black-and-white, American Redstart, Connecticut (rare), Mourning (rare), Wilson's, and Canada. Also keep an eye peeled toward the sky for migrating geese and hawks. Check the power lines for Red-tailed Hawks; the power poles have also produced Red-headed Woodpecker.

Continuing down the road, you'll notice that the road descends sharply into phase two of this little walk. The area here is a little more enclosed, with thickets and nice patches of jewelweed on the left side. Check this site for more flycatchers, vireos, and warblers. This is also pretty good for a variety of sparrows — Chipping, Song, Lincoln's, Swamp, White-throated, and White-crowned. Also look for Scarlet Tanager, Northern Cardinal, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, and Indigo Bunting. A Blue Grosbeak was even discovered here once in recent years.

Follow the road through a dense area of trees out to the Connecticut River. In July and August, if the river is low, look for shorebirds on exposed flats. The most common shorebirds will be Killdeer and Spotted Sandpipers. However, Greater and Lesser yellowlegs and Semipalmated and Least sandpipers have been reported on a number of occasions. Scan the river and you may see Double-crested Cormorants, Osprey fishing, and hundreds of Tree and Bank swallows around the high tension lines from late July through most of August. Bird your way back to the car and continue.

Back in your car, head north up Route 47 for 1.2 miles and enter a driveway on your left just after you go through an S curve. Quickly bear off to the left from the main driveway and walk down toward the river. (A few years ago the property owner placed a barrier about three-quarters of the way down the road to prevent late night activities.)

This area along the Mill River has not been birded as much in the spring and fall as in winter months. You will find that the forest on the left side is good for spring and fall migrants, although better views can be had elsewhere. This area also has less of the thick weedy vegetation found at Huntington Road and consequently fewer species that prefer that habitat type.

In the winter months, look and listen for Belted Kingfisher along the stream down to the Connecticut River. Great Blue Herons have also been recorded during mild winters. In recent years, a Red-bellied Woodpecker has staked a claim to this area, and Pileated Woodpeckers can appear at any time. In the brushy spots, look for Carolina Wren, Tree and White-throated sparrows, and the Eastern Bluebirds that sometimes feed in the sumac along the edge of the fields.

Park your car at the road block and walk down to the main river. In winter look for Common Goldeneye and Common Mergansers. In spring and fall, Double-crested Cormorant, Wood Duck, American Black Duck, Mallard, and Ring-necked Ducks are possibilities. In summer, look to the south for a large sandbar where at times a large flock of mostly American Black Ducks and Mallards will mass. Scoping through them, you may pick out something different like Northern Pintail or American Wigeon. The sandbar has produced more than fifteen species of shorebirds over the years, but unfortunately, you will have difficulty picking out much from this distance. Access to the sandbar can be had back toward Huntington Road, but is on private property!

Return to Route 47, proceed north 0.4 miles, and take a left onto Meadow Street. Head down Meadow Street while checking nearby feeders in winter. Dickcissel and White-crowned Sparrow have turned up here in past years. At the end of Meadow Street you'll notice that the road starts to slope down. Park your car off to the left, making sure you don't block the entrance to the barn or other roads. Again, this area is birded more in the winter than at other times, although it shows great promise for spring and fall migrations.

Head down the road and check the marshy area on the right for Swamp Sparrow in mild winters, and then continue around to the left and bird along the edge of the woods as you head toward the river. Along the way look for Downy Woodpecker, Northern Flicker and other typical New England species — Black-capped Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse, White-breasted Nuthatch, Northern Cardinal, American Tree Sparrow, Song Sparrow, and Dark-eyed Junco. Keep a watchful eye out for Sharp-shinned and Cooper's hawks.

As you get closer to the river, approach quietly; at times waterfowl will be close to the bank. Past visits during the winter months have produced a couple of thousand Canada Geese, Wood Duck, American Black Duck, Mallard, American Wigeon, Common Goldeneye, and Hooded and Common mergansers. Scan the trees along the river for Bald Eagle and Red-tailed Hawk. Continue along the edge of the field heading north. Here you may find Northern Cardinal or in the sumac Eastern Bluebird. Scan the trees for blackbirds — Common Grackle, Brown-headed Cowbird, and less commonly during the winter, both Red-winged and Rusty Blackbirds.

Continue on and you'll see where a stream comes up to the edge of the field. Check the brushy areas along the stream for more American Tree, Song, and White-throated sparrows, and Dark-eyed Juncos. Across the stream you should see a weedy field; check here for more sparrows. To get to the field, continue along the stream until you come to a road that crosses it. After birding the field, make your way back to your car. On the way back you'll see a nice cattail marsh on the left, which is worth checking even in winter. A little farther down the road the marsh fades into a brushy swamp. During finch winters, Common Redpolls have been found feeding on the seed pods of these trees.

As I mentioned earlier, this last spot has seen limited birding, and practically none during spring and fall migrations. With its diverse habitat, this area has great potential. If you do venture here in the spring or fall, remember that this is active farmland and stay out of the fields. Enjoy your trip!

Aqua Vitae Road

This small area of farmland wedged between the Connecticut River, Route 47, and Route 9 has been a favorite for local birders for many years. The area is best in spring, fall, and winter. In summer, during the growing season, access is fairly restricted by the crops.

As mentioned above, one may enter Aqua Vitae Road from either Route 47 or Route 9. In the spring, especially from late March through mid-April, the entrance to Aqua Vitae road off Route 47 (Bay Road) may be closed by flooding. If so, you should enter from Route 9 (Russell Street) and follow Aqua Vitae Road until you see water.

The waterfowl to be found here in March and April will largely be the same ones you can see at Hadley Cove. However, Aqua Vitae Road gives you a different angle from which to scan and perhaps get even better looks. You should walk straight in to the west off Aqua Vitae. Other birds to look for around the water's edge or in any small pools created by floods or spring downpours are herons, most likely Great Blue and Green, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Solitary Sandpiper, Spotted Sandpiper, and Common Snipe.

During late March and April check the fields for Horned Larks, American Pipit, Vesper Sparrow (rare), Red-winged Blackbird, and Common Grackle. Occasionally you may run into a lingering Tree Sparrow, Lapland Longspur (rare) or Snow Bunting. Other April migrants to watch for in the open fields or overhead include a variety of raptors, Turkey Vulture, Osprey, Northern Harrier, Sharp-shinned, Cooper's, Broad-winged, and Red-tailed hawks, American Kestrel, Merlin, Peregrine Falcon, and Chimney Swift along with Tree, Bank, Cliff, and Barn swallows.

During the height of spring and fall migration, the forests and thickets around the fields can be productive. However, the woodlands that run along the east side of the Connecticut River have in recent years been posted with "no trespassing" signs. If you bird this area, you will have to stay at the edge of the field. The woods and thickets on the south and east sides have no signs, but your exploration will be limited by thickets and marshy areas.

In these areas look for Red-bellied (uncommon), Downy and Hairy woodpeckers. Red-headed Woodpecker (rare) has also been recorded here. Flycatchers, wrens (Carolina, House, and Winter), kinglets, vireos (Solitary, Warbling, and Red-eyed), more than twenty species of warblers, sparrows (Tree, Field, Vesper, Savannah, Fox, Song, Lincoln's, Swamp, White-throated, and White-crowned), Dark-eyed Junco, blackbirds (Red-winged and Rusty), Grackle, Brown-headed Cowbird, and finches may also be found.

Note that summer birding on Aqua Vitae Road tends to be on the quiet side and is usually better along the river where at times, depending on the water level, a fairly large sandbar will develop. Access to the sandbar is somewhat difficult — it is situated about 100 yards south of the last house on the road as you come from Route 9. Look for Double-crested Cormorant, Great Blue Heron, Great and Snowy (rare) egrets, Little Blue Heron (rare), and Green Heron. You can also scope this sand bar from the Northampton side of the river.

Shorebirding begins around the middle of July and some twenty species of shorebirds have been recorded, including Black-bellied, American Golden, and Semipalmated plovers, Killdeer, Greater and Lesser yellowlegs, Sanderling, and sandpipers (Semipalmated, Least, White-rumped and Pectoral). Many gulls congregate on the sandbar during the summer; the most common will be Ring-billed, Herring, and Great Black-backed, but there will occasionally be

terrific weedy field you birded in the fall and winter might not be in the same place next year.

In winter, check the thickets as you enter from Route 9 for typical winter residents like Blue Jay, Black-capped Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse, White-breasted Nuthatch, Northern Cardinal, American Tree, Song, and White-throated sparrows, Dark-eyed Junco, and House Finch. In among these winter regulars, birders have found lingering Carolina Wrens, Ruby-crowned Kinglets, and Common Yellowthroats. As you continue out into the fields, scan the trees for Bald Eagle. All three accipiters are possible, and the ever-present Red-tailed Hawk is a good bet.

Every once in a while a Rough-legged Hawk will put in an appearance, as will Merlin and Peregrine Falcon. Northern Shrike is never to be ruled out. In the fields, look for Horned Larks and scan the flock for a few Snow Buntings. Walk the weed patches for large numbers of Tree Sparrows; this area is also probably one of the best around for wintering Savannah Sparrows. During invasion years of northern finches, I've had well over 150 Common Redpolls. If you are very lucky, you may scare up a Short-eared Owl. Birders have also recorded Eastern Screech-owl and Great Horned Owl during the day as well as the night.

The thickets at the south end of Aqua Vitae Road or the Route 47 (Bay Road) side should not be skipped, although they will probably produce about the same variety as the northern thickets (Route 9 side). Because this area has some marshy sections, birders have found Winter Wren, Swamp Sparrow, and on one Christmas Bird Count a lingering Wilson's Warbler. Some other highlights over the years have been Northern Gannet, Glossy Ibis, White-fronted Goose, Swainson's Hawk, Northern Saw-whet Owl, and Sedge Wren.

--Scott Sumner

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