

## BIRDING LAKE UMBAGOG

By Tudor Richards and Bob Quinn

In far northeastern New Hampshire lies the richest wildlife area in all of the Granite State — Lake Umbagog. William Brewster (1851-1919), the paragon of 19th-century field ornithologists and one of the founders of the Nuttall Club and the American Ornithologists' Union, felt that the area, “. . .like many a precious stone, has beauty and charm due to the effectiveness of its perfect setting amid the majestic mountains and virgin forests that surround it closely on every hand.”

While there is little old-growth forest remaining at Umbagog, it remains one of the wildest areas in northern New England. Thanks to Brewster and another acclaimed Massachusetts ornithologist, Ludlow Griscom, we have the monumental *Birds of the Lake Umbagog Region of Maine* (Brewster was based on the Maine side of the lake but probably did most of his birding in New Hampshire), published in four parts by Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology between 1924 and 1938, but long out of print. This study is based on Brewster's field work from 1871 to 1909 at Umbagog. Griscom edited the third part and wrote the fourth part based on the records of Brewster, whom he described as “one of the greatest and naturally gifted field ornithologists America has ever produced.”

In this article we will describe a canoe trip for exploring this marvelous area, still a wild place with an abundance of wildlife, touching briefly on some of its more modern charms but focusing mainly on a canoe trip down the Magalloway River, through the wetlands, and out the Androscoggin River. This trip can be an easy day trip, or you can camp at the lake and spend several days thoroughly exploring all the nooks and crannies of the coves, bays, and wetlands. It is all flat water with no strong currents. (A word of caution: the wind can come up quickly and make the lake, especially, a dangerous place to be in an open boat. Keep your eyes on the weather as well as the birds. Be prepared for thunderstorms, and biting insects, too.) For the purposes of the bird life, we will assume you will follow this route during the breeding season. For notes on the birds of other seasons, see the end of the article.

The best route for canoeing depends upon how much time you have and whether you have one or two vehicles. If you are limited to one car, you can still make a nice trip by starting and ending at either point mentioned in the loop trip. If you really want to get the full Umbagog experience, I strongly recommend you stay in the area at least one night.

Assuming you have two vehicles, drive north from Errol and drop one on the right side of Route 16 1.6 miles north of the junction of Routes 16 and 26 at Errol village. There is a small gravel boat launch on the right and parking for a number of cars a couple hundred feet farther north. Next, drive 3.0 miles farther north on Route 16, over a modest ridge, to where you see water again (on the

right). This is the Magalloway River, which flows into Umbagog. The put-in is 100 yards or so beyond your first view of the river. At birding speed it is about six to eight hours from here down the Magalloway to the lake, and out the Androscoggin to the take-out spot. Obviously, the earlier in the day you start the better the birding will be, and also the more time you will have before the wind comes up (an almost daily event).

Paddle to the right to go downstream; the current is not usually noticeable. The Magalloway immediately leaves the road and the minor traffic noise behind. Calm descends as you gently float along, surrounded by bird song (at the proper season). Birding can be good anywhere, but the best spots are the frequent backwaters (called "logans" by the locals) on either side of the river.

If you have time, every one of these backwaters is worth exploring, all the way to the far reaches of them (and some are quite long). As you paddle into them, they narrow, and the habitat becomes quite marshy. Most of the waterbirds will be back in these marshy areas though some, like loons and a few ducks, will be in more open water. The surrounding woods can be good, especially for warblers; boreal residents like Gray Jay and Black-backed Woodpecker are always a possibility. Be alert for crossbills flying over.

As you head downstream, the first backwater is almost immediately on your left, after the first bend in the river, but the entrance to it is about a quarter-mile farther downstream near a large boulder. The next backwater is on the right and is very long (if you explore the full length of all these backwaters you will almost double your total paddling distance!). The third one is different in that it is what I call the "Doughnut." It is circular with a small island in the middle and is an obvious example of the old Magalloway River channel that was flooded when the dam on the Androscoggin River was built.

Just downstream from the "Doughnut" you might become aware of a large wetland just through the thin fringe of trees along the left-hand shore. This wetland, called Leonard Pond, is accessible farther down the river, and you will explore that later, but your next stop should be the last backwater on the right. As you approach this backwater, note a channel cutting through the woods on the left side of the river. I call this the "Hole in the Wall," and it is the access to the Leonard Pond wetland. But for now continue into the last backwater on the right, and take your time exploring its nooks and crannies.

Backtrack to the river and the "Hole in the Wall." Proceed as slowly and quietly as possible into the Leonard Pond area. This complex of wetlands (not a separate pond) at the edge of the lake is the site of the Bald Eagle nest tree; the birds are around anytime there is open water. The story of the eagles is fascinating. In 1949 a pair of Bald Eagles nested in a large white pine — the last known nest in the area for forty years. Then in 1989, a pair of Bald Eagles returned to the same tree, and they have been there almost every year since. Bald Eagles are an endangered species, so please be very careful and respect the signs

and buoys that might be at the nest site. Keeping your distance from any nesting species (such as loons and Ospreys) is especially important at Umbagog.

Leonard Pond is one of the better places for a variety of waterbirds, especially ducks and shorebirds (best at lower water levels). Likely species during the warmer months (or weeks in some years in this northern clime!) include Common Loon, Great Blue Heron, American Bittern, Common Snipe, Canada Goose, Ring-necked Duck, Black Duck, Mallard, either teal, Wood Duck, Common Goldeneye, Common and Hooded mergansers, Osprey, Northern Harrier, Spotted Sandpiper, and Ring-billed Gull. During migration almost anything is possible (Brewster had Eskimo Curlew and Ruff), with likely species including Killdeer, Greater and Lesser yellowlegs, Solitary Sandpiper, Least Sandpiper, Pectoral Sandpiper (fall only), and all the regular grebes and ducks. Rare, but probably regular, are Semipalmated Plover, Black-bellied Plover, Short-billed Dowitcher, Semipalmated Sandpiper, Sanderling, Red and Red-necked phalarope, Bonaparte's Gull, Common Tern, and Black Tern. A sample of the rarities and large numbers seen in recent years includes such finds as a Yellow-headed Blackbird, a Wilson's Phalarope, 400 Short-billed Dowitchers, and up to 2,000 Common Mergansers just before the lake froze in 1997.

From Leonard Pond, paddle north a mile or so along a huge boggy wetland known as Leonard Marsh (a.k.a. Moose Point). If you are camping at the lake, you might want to set up your site before exploring. Either way, this large wetland is an excellent place for American Bittern, ducks, rails, snipe, and moose. During migration it can swarm with swallows. If it is calm and you have plenty of time, check out the lake itself for loons, grebes, scoters, gulls, terns, and other open-water birds.

Eventually you will head back to the Magalloway River area. The river actually empties into the Androscoggin River (rather than the lake) just downstream from where the Androscoggin leaves Umbagog. When the water is high, there is another smaller but intriguing wetland on the far (right) side of the Magalloway just before the Androscoggin. It is worth exploring if the water is high enough to get your boat in.

If you are short on time, it is only about an hour down the Androscoggin River to your car at Route 16. But with foresight and luck, you will have planned for plenty of time and the weather will be good, because some of the best and birdiest wetlands are still to be found as you descend the Androscoggin. The river itself usually has ducks, and the boreal woods along the edge can hold a lot, even Spruce Grouse. Approximately one mile down the Androscoggin (just past a towering white pine known as the "Landmark Pine"), a small channel on the right leads into Harper's Meadow (this channel is not on the U.S. Geological Survey topographic maps). If you use this channel, make sure you note its location after you have entered the meadow, since it can be hard to find the way out, especially when the marsh grass is high.

Here is another large wetland complex to explore. It is more open marsh than Leonard Pond and includes the Floating Island Bog. Floating Island is approximately 100 acres of sphagnum moss, tamaracks, and black spruce that is home to Lincoln's Sparrows and is one of the few sites for nesting Palm Warblers in New Hampshire. Access to the bog is problematic and depends on the water level, but for the intrepid naturalist is a marvelous north-country experience. One approach is to come from the open water in the meadow and work your way as far into the edge of the floating bog mat as possible and then hop out and walk in. You are almost guaranteed to get your feet wet this way, and if you are not experienced at bog-trotting, you might feel more comfortable carrying your canoe paddle with you as a support.

As you stagger around this wet and unstable landscape, watch and listen for the gurgling warble of the Lincoln's Sparrow and the weak junco-like trill of the Palm Warbler. Many other species are likely, such as Savannah Sparrow and Nashville Warbler. Other boreal birds are possible, such as Gray Jay, Spruce Grouse (in the more thickly wooded sections), Merlin, Osprey, and crossbills. Floating Island is mostly unchanged since Brewster's day and includes fascinating bog plants such as orchids, andromeda, and pitcher plants; it also has a healthy moose population.

If you prefer the relative stability and dryness of the canoe, there is still much to explore along the marshy edges of Harper's Meadow. Teal, rails, bitterns, snipe, Marsh Wrens, and Northern Harriers are especially likely. As with all the other sites, the woods are usually full of birds, and the unexpected should always be anticipated. For example, Jim Berry hooted up two Barred Owls here on a still June day in 1997, and Sedge Wrens have been recorded here too.

To exit Harper's Meadow, you can retrace your route to the small channel out to the Androscoggin River, or stay in the meadow but parallel the direction of flow of the river. The water is usually high enough so that you can make it through into another meadow/pond area known as Mile Long Pond (but not labeled with any name on the USGS topo map). This spot has more open water and usually fewer birds, but loons and Ospreys are common. Ultimately you want to enter the Androscoggin River again and watch for an entrance to another large meadow on the other (left) side of the river. This is Sweat Meadow, and as with Harper's Meadow you can easily spend an hour or two poking around in it.

From the entrance to Sweat Meadow it is only a few minutes down the river to your car and the small (and somewhat obscure) take-out on the right. If you notice the road next to the river, you have gone too far.

This covers the prime birding areas by canoe, but if you have time and are camping on the lake itself, by all means explore as much of its shoreline as possible. One of the thrills of Umbagog is to paddle out into the middle of the lake on a calm evening and to be serenaded by up to a dozen Common Loons. (Try counting them!) The star show is great, too.

## Other Sites

The woods surrounding Umbagog have miles of trails and roads that can be explored. Keep in mind that most of this land is privately owned and some areas may be posted. Please obey and respect the wishes of the landowners. On the way up to Errol along Route 16, you can bird at several interesting sites. The most prominent of these are Pontook Reservoir and Thirteen Mile Woods. Pontook is a reservoir and associated wetlands along Route 16 about fifteen miles south of Errol. Most of the open water and the large marsh can be birded from the road (Route 16), but it is better to canoe it. Common birds are Common Loon, Osprey, Great Blue Heron, Ring-necked Duck, Wood Duck, Black Duck, Virginia Rail, and Marsh Wren. Anything can turn up, such as Common Moorhen and King Rail (very rare). When the water level is low, it can be good for shorebirds.

Thirteen Mile Woods is a stretch of boreal woodland along Route 16 and the Androscoggin River between Pontook and Errol. During the summer it is identified by large wooden state-park-type signs at either end. This stretch of woodland is protected from cutting and therefore has a lot of spruce-fir-tamarack habitat and its associated birds. During most summers there is at least one Black-backed Woodpecker nest right along this stretch of road. For most of the length of this woodland, the Androscoggin River is right next to the road and adds the possibility of loons, Ospreys, ducks, and other waterbirds.

Route 26 to Dixville Notch, northwest of Errol, passes through a mixture of farmland and boreal woodlands. Birding is good along this road and can include Lincoln's Sparrows and Wilson's Warblers in the shrubby wetlands, and any of the boreal species in appropriate habitat. At Dixville Notch (about nine miles from Errol), Route 26 climbs steeply between jagged cliffs and tops out at an elevation of about 2,000 feet. Bicknell's Thrush formerly could be heard during the summer from the height of land in Dixville Notch and should be listened for, but not expected. During migration the Notch can have a good variety of land birds, and there are even some waterbird records of note, though Peregrine Falcons and Swainson's Thrushes are more typical of this mountain cleft.

Upton, Maine: The main attraction here is a good view of the lake. Take Route 26 south from Errol about 7.5 miles. At the southern end of the lake there is a boat ramp from which you can scan that part of the lake. From here, continue on Route 26 past Umbagog Lake Campground and up the hill into Upton. You get your best view of the lake from the village.

## Other Seasons

Lake Umbagog can be exciting any time of the year, especially from ice-out (late April to mid-May) through freeze-up (November). Spring can be a long time coming in this cold northern land, with snow in May being fairly common,



but the rush of waterbird migrants as the lake opens up, and land bird migrants as the insects finally emerge, can provide great birding. Sample spring records from 1991 and 1995 included 14 Horned Grebes, 8 Red-necked Grebes, 22 Wood Ducks, 30 Green-winged Teals, 3 Northern Pintails, 7 American Wigeons, 80 Ring-necked Ducks, 1 Northern Shoveler, 2 Gadwalls, 5 Oldsquaws, 15 Black Scoters, 18 Surf Scoters, 85 White-winged Scoters, 32 Common Goldeneyes, a Barrow's Goldeneye, 2 Red-breasted Mergansers, a Common Moorhen, a Black-bellied Plover, 40 Semipalmated Plovers, a Red Knot, 25 Semipalmated Sandpipers, 10 Least Sandpipers, 5 Dunlins, 400 Short-billed Dowitchers, a Wilson's Phalarope, and a Black Tern.

After Labor Day Umbagog is mostly a deserted lake except during duck-hunting season, and yet you can sometimes find a host of birds such as Brewster recorded. A small sample from September 29, 1990, includes 20 or more Common Loons, several Double-crested Cormorants, several Ruddy Ducks, Osprey, Bald Eagle, Greater Yellowlegs, Solitary Sandpiper, a dozen Pectoral Sandpipers, and numerous Common Snipe.

Since few birders get to Umbagog, we would appreciate any sightings you might record. Please send them to Robert A. Quinn, 53 Baptist Hill Road, Canterbury, NH 03224.

### Logistics

There are several camping options, one motel, two restaurants, and a couple of small stores in the Errol area. A pleasant campground operated by the State of New Hampshire is located beside Route 16, and along the Androscoggin River, several miles south of Errol. It is known as the Mollidgewock Campground and has a large brown sign on the right side of the road as you drive north. The other nearby camping option is at Umbagog Lake Camps (cottages available too) at the south end of the lake on Route 26, 7.5 miles south from the center of Errol. This is also where you have to register to use the lakeside campsites that are reachable only by boat. Camping on the lake itself is the best option of all.

For more information, contact: State of New Hampshire, Parks Department, 172 Pembroke Road, Concord, NH 03301 (603) 271-3556. Umbagog Lake Camps, P.O. Box 181, Errol, NH 03579, (603) 482-7795.

The only motel in Errol is the Errol Motel on Main Street, (603) 482-3256. Since it has only about twenty rooms, you should make reservations in advance.

The two restaurants in town are directly across the street from each other and serve plain fare at reasonable prices with plenty of local flavor. The pies at the Errol Restaurant are especially noteworthy. The small convenience stores in town can also provide sandwiches.

## THE BIRDS OF LAKE UMBAGOG

by Tudor Richards and Bob Quinn (and William Brewster)

Umbagog is the most southerly of the Rangeley Lakes (of Maine), with about 60 percent of its area actually in New Hampshire. It is roughly twelve miles long, north to south, by one mile wide, but with many indentations, peninsulas, and coves. Lying in the Androscoggin Valley at an elevation of around 1,250 feet, it is the source of the Androscoggin River. The river is the outlet for the lake and leaves it about two-thirds of the way up its west side. A dam, originally built in 1852 several miles down the Androscoggin near Errol, raised Umbagog's level nearly ten feet, increasing its size considerably. This dam also flooded several "meadows" along the Androscoggin as well as several oxbow ponds of the Magalloway River, which joins the former very near its start. This complex of wetlands is the heart of the birding at Umbagog.

The land around Umbagog is mostly hilly to mountainous and covered with second- and third-growth forests interspersed with recently cutover patches. White pine, eastern hemlock, red spruce, white spruce, balsam fir, maples, birches, and American beech are the predominant trees, with tamarack and black spruce in bogs and northern white cedar in some swamps. Some open areas and farmlands exist near the small villages of Errol, New Hampshire, and Upton, Maine. Moose (please drive carefully at night), deer, black bears, coyotes, beavers, many smaller mammals, and an unusual variety of birds abound.

About 4,000 acres along the western (New Hampshire) shore of Umbagog, along with most of the wetlands of the Androscoggin and Magalloway Rivers, have recently been set aside as the Lake Umbagog National Wildlife Refuge. Additionally, New Hampshire has protected more than 3,500 acres in the southern part of the lake as the Lake Umbagog State Park. For more information about both sites, contact the refuge at PO Box 280, Errol, NH 03579 or call them at (603) 482-3415. Or stop by the office on Route 16 in Wentworth's Location, 5.6 miles north of the junction with Route 26 in Errol. At this time only limited lands on the Maine side have been protected.

### Changing Bird Life

William Brewster studied the bird life of the region intensively during a long period — 1871 to 1909 — so we have a wonderful picture of the changes that occurred during *his* years there, as well as the changes that have been recorded by other observers since his time. Brewster loosely included outlying areas such as Dixville Notch (New Hampshire), Grafton Notch (Maine), and possibly Pontook Reservoir (Dummer, New Hampshire) in the Umbagog Region. Brewster noted many subtle changes in the region's land birds, and obtained the first Umbagog breeding record for Pine Grosbeak.



Other changes witnessed by Brewster were larger in scale. On one of his earliest visits, Brewster learned that the Passenger Pigeon had been abundant at Umbagog until around 1850. He found them still common summer residents through 1874, but they disappeared for good shortly afterward. During the late 1800s there was a horrific period of market hunting, with a lack of game laws resulting in the wholesale slaughter of many species. Brewster saw dramatic declines in species that were once common to abundant, such as Common Loon, Great Blue Heron, American Bittern, Wood Duck, Black Duck, Blue-winged Teal (fall migrant), Hooded Merganser, and (American) Golden-Plover (fall migrant).

Shorebirds did not escape the gunners' aim, but the water level of the lake was frequently lower in Brewster's day than today, so that shorebirds were more evident, as this entry of his shows:

"I have known days in autumn when there must have been nearly, if not quite, one thousand scoters swimming in the Lake at once, or when the mud-flats and marshes at its outlet (the Androscoggin) were so thronged with Golden, Black-breasted, and Semipalmated Plover, Greater and Lesser Yellow-legs, Pectoral Sandpipers, Dunlin, and Least and Semipalmated Sandpipers, that they rose in clouds like swarming flies whenever a gun was fired. Indeed I have had better luck in shooting limicolines, the so called shore-birds, in these marshes than anywhere on Cape Cod."

Between Brewster's last visit to Umbagog in 1909 and an increase in coverage in the second half of the century, we have only a few records of its bird life. George L. Perry made a few visits in the summer and fall from 1930 to 1936, adding Double-crested Cormorant, European Starling, and Sedge Wren to the all-time list and, perhaps more importantly, established the Ruby-crowned Kinglet as a summer resident. In 1935 Richards and a stalwart partner made a canoe trip from the south end of the lake to the north end and back. They saw an empty Bald Eagle nest at Leonard Pond and several Common Goldeneye families on the Magalloway River. A year or so later another observer reported seeing a Black Tern in late June. Then came another hiatus of eleven years during which no one seems to have visited the lake for birds.

Since 1947 we have had a half-century of more or less continuous records from many observers. Some of the most significant changes in status among breeding species are listed in the following table; we include some of the changes *during* Brewster's time as well as more recent ones. The recovery of most of the waterbirds from the lows of the market hunting days has been dramatic and is most gratifying. In many cases this recovery continues with the work of the Endangered Species Program, jointly sponsored by the Audubon Society of New Hampshire and the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department.

Species	1871-1909 Status	20th C. Status
Common Loon	dramatic decline	nice recovery
Pied-billed Grebe	migrant	breeding
Great Blue Heron	dramatic decline	nice recovery
American Bittern	dramatic decline	nice recovery
Canada Goose	almost nonexistent	spectacular recovery
Wood Duck	dramatic decline	nice recovery
Black Duck	dramatic decline	nice recovery
Blue-winged Teal	dramatic decline	nice recovery
Green-winged Teal	migrant	rare breeder
Ring-necked Duck	rare fall migrant	common breeder
Common Goldeneye	common breeder	rare breeder
Common Merganser	dramatic decline	common breeder
Hooded Merganser	dramatic decline	nice recovery
Golden Eagle	rare breeder	rare migrant
Bald Eagle	visitor	rare breeder
Osprey	decline	nice recovery
Merlin	Migrant	now nesting (1st nest in 1992)
(American) Golden-Plover	common fall migrant	rare
Killdeer	only one record!	fairly common
Common Snipe	migrant only	common breeder
Ring-billed Gull	possibly one record	regular in small numbers
Mourning Dove	one record	common
Common Nighthawk	abundant breeder; Brewster saw in decline	absent
Purple Martin	common breeder	absent
Marsh Wren	rare or unknown	uncommon breeder
Wood Thrush	rare or unknown	fairly common breeder
Ruby-crowned Kinglet	migrant	common breeder
Palm Warbler	migrant	uncommon breeder (bogs)
Pine Grosbeak	breeding	winter visitor
Evening Grosbeak	unknown	fairly common breeder

**Tudor Richards** was President and Executive Director of the Audubon Society of New Hampshire for over thirty-five years, during which time he was directly responsible for many conservation advances. Tudor Richards provides a living link with the William Brewster era in that Ludlow Griscom was his education advisor at Harvard University. When not in the field, Tudor lives with his wife in Hopkinton, New Hampshire.

**Bob Quinn** is a native of New Hampshire with a degree in Zoology from the University of New Hampshire. He was the first staff ornithologist for the Audubon Society of New Hampshire, and continues as an active volunteer for Audubon. He edits nesting season records for *New Hampshire Bird Records*, serves as a member of the New Hampshire Rare Bird Committee, and has a keen interest in the breeding status of birds in New Hampshire. He is proprietor of a natural history services business, Merlin Enterprises.

# Bird Watcher's General Store

Featuring: The Amazing **AVIARIUM** In-House Window Birdfeeder. One-way mirrored plexiglass allows you to watch the birds for hours but they can't see you!

Come see this exceptional birdfeeder in action.



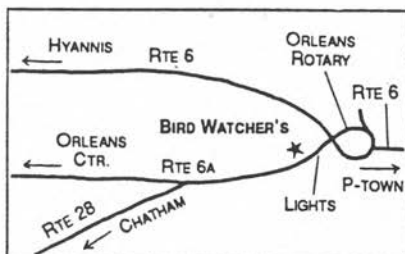
## OTHER BIRD-LOVER ITEMS INCLUDE:

- Bird Mugs
- Bird Note Cards
- Bird Carvings
- Bird Field Guides
- Bird Books
- Bird Key Chains
- Bird Jewelry
- Bird Door Knockers
- Bird Telephone
- Bird Houses
- Bird Baths
- Bird Gift Wrap
- Bird T-Shirts
- Bird Photos
- Bird Prints
- Bird Calls
- Bird Recordings
- Bird Potholders
- Bird Towels
- Bird Carving Kits
- Bird Welcome Mats
- Bird Thermometers
- Bird Sun Catchers
- Bird Calendars
- Bird Pillows
- Bird Place Mats
- Bird Mobiles
- Bird Fountains
- Bird Bath Heaters
- Bird Switch Plates
- Bird Puzzles
- Bird Bookmarks

- A complete line of Binoculars, Spotting Scopes and Tripods
- A children's section with birdhouse kits, beginner books, and other fun and educational items

PLUS over 100 different types of bird feeders including Bluejay and Squirrel-proof feeders that work, **GUARANTEED**, plus ten different types of Bird Seed

**GIFT CERTIFICATES & U.P.S. SHIPPING • OPEN YEAR ROUND**



## Bird Watcher's General Store

36 Route 6A • Orleans, MA 02653

**(508) 255-6974**

or

**1-800-562-1512**