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SANDWICHES AND SPARROWS: Lunch-Hour Birding in Lexington

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As the eastern Massachusetts high-tech community has grown, businesses have moved farther away from the Boston business center. Route 128 appears to have been developed as far as it can be: yet within just minutes' drive of most of these office parks, you can find plenty of habitat suitable for birding. For two years I worked on Hartwell Avenue, on the western edge of Lexington and just outside of Route 128; I spent many hours before work and on lunch hours exploring the areas nearby looking for birds. Most of the places described here are within two miles of Hartwell Avenue, and are easily explored in the constraints of a lunch hour.

Access to this area is easy. Take Route 128 (Route 95) to Exit 31B (Route 4 north and Route 225 west). This puts you on Bedford Street (also called Routes 4 and 225) heading toward Bedford. Stay in the right lane, and drive 0.4 mile to a sign for Hartwell Avenue and Hanscom Field. Bear right onto a "jug-handle" to make the left turn on to Hartwell. The Minuteman Bike Path crosses Hartwell Avenue at a traffic light 0.5 mile down the road, and this light is the starting point directions to the locations mentioned in this article.

Tophet Swamp is bordered on its four sides by Route 128, Bedford Street, Hartwell Avenue, and the Minuteman Bike Path. Probable breeding birds in the marsh include Wood Duck, Spotted Sandpiper, Virginia Rail, Sora, Willow Flycatcher, Warbling Vireo, Yellow Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, and Swamp Sparrow. As you walk east from Hartwell Avenue along the bike path, the songbirds are obvious, but rails can normally only be heard if you are willing to bushwhack down the bank. Another strategy to view the marsh is simply to pull into the back of the parking lots along Hartwell Avenue. Most have "No Parking" signs, but if you just cruise through the back and don't leave your car, no one seems to mind. This is the easiest way to see Willow Flycatchers and sometimes rails. To view the marsh from the Bedford Street side, drive down Hartwell Avenue toward Bedford Street, turn right, and then turn right into the Denny's/Holiday Inn parking lot. Drive to the very back where the parking lot borders the marsh. I have often seen Virginia Rails here, and Soras can be seen occasionally, as well.

In the fall, Tophet Swamp hosts a wonderful blackbird and starling roost. In October, try visiting the Hartwell Avenue parking lots just before sunset to watch these birds flying in. Good numbers of Rusty Blackbirds are included in these flocks, and they seem to congregate near the Hartwell parking lots. They are extremely vocal: so if you know their song, it is easy to locate them.

Across the bike path from Tophet Swamp is the **Lexington Landfill**, which is a fine place to look for sparrows in the fall. This is where people bring their

leaves and yard waste, which are put out in huge piles to compost into dirt. By fall, weeds that have grown up on these piles are like a magnet to seedeaters. The character of the landfill changes constantly; one year's leaf pile is next year's dirt, and they have just recently paved a road leading to a toxic waste disposal site for town residents; so a detailed description of how to bird this area would be outdated almost immediately. Some guidelines, however, are useful. First of all, the hours of operation somewhat irregular. There is a pull-off near the entrance on Hartwell Avenue where I park when the gate is closed. You can walk around the fence to gain access (I have spoken with the workers there who have said this was OK). If the gate is open, check the sign at the gate to be sure the landfill is "officially" open. If it is not, you may be able to drive in anyway, but check with a worker to be sure you don't get locked in. When you enter the gate, drive past a small, wet area, then pull over and park on the right before you get into the working part of the landfill. Trucks barrel through here all the time, so be sure your car is *well* out of the way. The workers here have been consistently birder-friendly, but it doesn't hurt to check with one to be sure it is all right with them to park here. As you walk the main road through the landfill, you will see some "No trespassing" signs on the right. These refer only to the police shooting range, which is self-evident, and not to other areas of the landfill.

Birds seen in the landfill during the fall include large flocks of Yellow-rumped and Palm warblers; Blue Grosbeak, Indigo Bunting, and Dickcissel; and Field, Vesper, Lark, Savannah, Fox, Lincoln's, and White-crowned sparrows. Look for these in the weedy dirt piles and along the edges of the landfill. In the spring I've seen Solitary and Spotted sandpipers (and, once, a Vesper Sparrow) in puddles in the flat areas toward the back of the landfill. In the winter I've seen flocks of Snow Buntings working the back of the landfill.

Several grassland species breed at **Hanscom Field**, including Upland Sandpiper, Savannah and Grasshopper sparrows, Eastern Meadowlark, and possibly Bobolink. Wild Turkeys frequent the runway edges on the west side, and in the early morning you can sometimes see an airport employee trying to flush them off the runways into the adjacent woods. There is no public access to the airfield, but there are several locations where you can look through the fence. April is the ideal time of year to try these locations because birds are more likely to be moving around before setting up territories. This is also a good time of year to see American Kestrels, which often congregate here in large numbers during migration, and on a memorable April 21, 1998, I saw a Gyrfalcon fly down the runway, scattering kestrels like gnats. A very early morning visit can catch the Upland Sandpipers displaying and giving their "wolf whistle" call.

From the bike path traffic light, head west on Hartwell Avenue, and take your first right on Maguire Road opposite the landfill (less than 0.1 mile). Drive

0.6 mile to the "yield" sign at the intersection of South Road and stay left on the dead-end section of South Road. At the end of the road (0.5 mile) you come to the entrance of Hanscom AFB's "Fam Camp." The "welcome" sign is a fine thing in a world of too many "no trespassing" signs. Through the fence, you get a good view of the west end of the airfield from here. The pine woods opposite the airfield look ideal for owls (I suspect the airfield provides wonderful hunting for an owl), but I have not found any here yet. These woods are part of the Bedford town forest, so feel free to explore the paths that lead through them.

If you are willing to break the "two-mile" limit for lunch-hour birding, you can explore other views of the airport. Drive back down South Road, and turn left at the stop sign onto the continuation of South Road where it meets Maguire. Drive 0.8 mile, and turn left on Hartwell Road. Drive 1.0 mile till you see the sign reading "Gate 6" on the left at the Raytheon plant, then turn onto the road immediately after (Independence Court). Jog left again quickly onto a dirt road that leads up to the fence of the airfield. Check the edges of the runways here, especially off to the right, for Upland Sandpiper. Meadowlarks often sing in the fields right beside the dirt road.

Return to Hartwell Road, turn left, and continue to the intersection with Route 62 (0.9 mile), and turn left. Drive 2.0 mile, bear left onto Bedford Road, and then take a hard left onto Virginia Road in 0.3 mile. A nice view of Hanscom is available 2.5 mile down the road on the left, and the woods and wetlands anywhere this stretch of Virginia Road are worth looking over.

OK, you're more than two miles away from work, but you're there, so you might as well do a little more exploration. Drive a little farther down Virginia Road, until you see a dirt turnoff on the right, just past the cleared approach to the runway (less than 0.25 mile, but it really depends on where you pulled over to look at the airport). Pull in and park right away, then walk up the dirt road and check out the thickets on the left for cuckoos, migrant flycatchers, and "winged" and Prairie warblers. Wood Thrushes breed nearby and can often be heard singing; Eastern Meadowlarks often sing from the grassy field to your right, and in late October of 1997 I counted over 200 American Pipits feeding and flying through this field.

A short distance along the dirt road, you will go through a short wooded area (listen for Black-and-white Warblers), and then out onto a ball field. Check out the edges for wrens, warblers, grosbeaks, and whatever else you might find. In 1998, a pair of Least Flycatchers lingered in this area well into July, an unusual species to be presumed breeding in this far east in Massachusetts.

In the spring, when migrant warblers are on your mind, head to **Shawsheen Cemetery**. From the bike path, take Hartwell back to Bedford Street and turn left. The well-marked entrance to the cemetery is a bit over a half-mile down the road on the right, immediately before a traffic light. Drive through to the back, and then turn left at the end and left again, which leads you to the spot where the

cemetery dumps waste brush and grass clippings. There is a steep bank here with a depression below it. This makes an excellent vantage point from which to look for birds in the tops of the trees, which are at eye level. When it is windy, try going down into this depression, where birds often seek shelter. Another good spot for migrants is a pond hidden in the pine woods to the right of the brush dump. Walk straight into the woods and follow the path down the hill to the pond. There are paths that go beyond the pond, and further exploration can be rewarding. In addition to migrants, the breeding birds at Shawsheen are delightful. Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Fish Crow, Pine Warbler, Ovenbird, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, and Indigo Bunting are just a few of the species I have enjoyed here during breeding season.

A favorite location of mine, with a good variety of breeding species, is the **power line** that runs from Bedford Street northwest toward Route 3. Along most areas of this power line you can expect to see or hear Blue-winged, Yellow, and Prairie warblers, Common Yellowthroats, Scarlet Tanagers, Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, Indigo Buntings, and Field Sparrows. From the bike path, take Hartwell to Bedford Street, and turn right. Jockey yourself into the left lane, and turn left immediately into the Lexington Club parking lot (immediately after the turnoff for Hartwell Avenue from the other direction). Drive to the back of the parking lot on the right-hand side and park. The path under the power lines is a Lexington town conservation area. Willow Flycatchers breed in the marshy area a short distance along, as well as a single pair of Alder Flycatchers. I had suspected breeding on the Alders for several years, and in 1998 I found an adult (singing) and two young birds calling. I inferred the age from the fresh plumage and yellow coloring on the young birds.

The path continues through to the Grove Street intersection of the power lines, and is well worth the walk, or you can drive to Grove Street and walk in from that end. When you exit the Lexington Club parking lot, you have to turn right, so take the Hartwell Avenue turn, and then turn left at the traffic light so that you are heading back toward Route 128. Turn left on Eldred Road (0.3 mile), and then left on Grove Street (0.4 mile). The power lines are 0.2 mile down the road, where you can get out for further exploration. On the right side of the road, the path under the power lines detours through the woods around a marshy area, but I have not found it productive enough to offset the mosquitoes. It's better to drive to the next intersection with the power lines on Turning Mill Road.

Continue down Grove Street 0.2 mile and turn right onto Gould Road; then in 0.3 mile, turn right on Turning Mill (listen for the resident Carolina Wren singing at the corner). The power lines are 0.3 mile down Turning Mill Road. A pair of Broad-winged Hawks probably nests somewhere nearby, as evidenced by frequent sightings, including an adult carrying a dead chipmunk into the woods. On the left side of the road is Grimes Road, which parallels the power lines. In

the spring, try walking to the end and listening for Winter Wren, which I suspect breeds in the woods here, and keep your eyes open for Pileated Woodpecker, which I have seen fly across the road. On the right side of the road, Wild Turkeys can occasionally be seen, and in 1996 a female Golden-winged Warbler was breeding with a Blue-wing. In 1998 a Louisiana Waterthrush was noted singing in the woods at the bottom of the hill on May 15, a date by which any respectable Louisiana Waterthrush should be on territory. However, additional visits to the area were unsuccessful in relocating the bird.

Perhaps the most tantalizing bird here was a Yellow-breasted Chat on June 13, 1996. It responded to my spishing by popping up in a bush with a large green worm in its bill, and then sang and called intermittently. A June record of this species, carrying food, created visions of sugarplums and breeding birds, but despite many more visits, I could never relocate this bird.

In the fall, I would occasionally take a detour home from work via the **Cambridge Reservoir**, which, although it falls well outside the 2-mile lunch-hour limit, is an easy stop for any commuter traveling the Route 128 perimeter. The water level in the reservoir varies tremendously, and can affect its productivity, but it is well worth a try any time from mid-July through the end of October. The standard inland ducks and sandpipers are relatively common here, but the fun part is looking for an oddball sandpiper or heron. Both Great and Snowy egret often stop here in August and September, and once there was an immature Little Blue Heron. Killdeer, Semipalmated Plovers, and Solitary, Spotted, Semipalmated, Least, and Pectoral sandpipers are regular. Much less common species include Stilt, Western, White-rumped, and Baird's Sandpiper, and once an unidentified dowitcher was seen here. American Pipits are often seen feeding on the mudflats, and the wide open sky makes it easy to spot the occasional raptor.

From the bike path, take Hartwell Avenue back to Bedford Street, turn right at the traffic light, and then take the first entrance to Route 128 (south). Take the exit for Route 2 west (approximately 5 miles), slow down on the exit ramp, take a deep breath, and pull over onto the shoulder immediately after you merge onto Route 2 (watch out for a low curb). There is plenty of room to pull well off the road; so pull right up to the trees and park. You will see a wide path leading into the woods, which opens up almost immediately into a great view of the reservoir. Once you have checked this out, get back on Route 2, and take your first right turn onto Mill Street. Bear right at the fork in the road (Lincoln Street), and pull over to the side when the reservoir appears on your right. Be sure to check the small stream on your left, as well. I have seen as many as eight Solitary Sandpipers feeding here when the conditions are right.

There is nothing unique about the birding places near Hartwell Avenue. I suspect that anyone who works outside Route 128 would find similar treasures within a couple of miles of their own office. Life is too short to spend your

lunch hour eating a sandwich at your desk, so go out and find your own lunch-hour places.

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ABA COMMENDATION FOR LOCAL BIRDER

Words never do justice to a good bird, and when it made it into the pages of *Bird Observer* (26:156), the story of one of last winter's best birds seemed pretty simple: "A male **Bullock's Oriole** was well fed at a feeder in Wakefield until the homeowner had to leave town for a week. A week later, undoubtedly the same individual found its way to a similarly hospitable feeder in Reading, only five miles away."

Hospitable indeed. The bird remained for several weeks, providing one of the high points of an exciting winter for scores of area birders. Donna Schromm, the owner of the feeder, welcomed the visiting birders, guided them to better looks, and sometimes even provided coffee to stave off the winter chill!

Ms. Schromm recently received a Commendation from the American Birding Association, "in recognition and appreciation of her gracious hospitality and service to the birdwatching community." *Bird Observer* congratulates Ms. Schromm for receiving this award, and we add our thanks for her kindness. Massachusetts birders were fortunate to have this rare visitor to enjoy, and fortunate, also, to have so fine an example of the of the generosity and cooperative spirit that is the soul of birding. The episode of the Bullock's Oriole reminded us of what it's all about.

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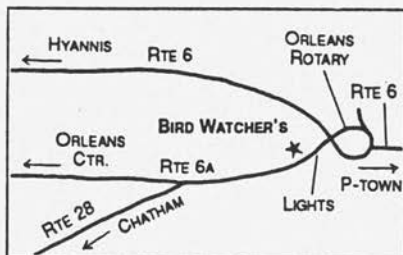
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