



BIRDING AROUND ENFIELD, NEW HAMPSHIRE

by Pam Hunt

Nestled near the Connecticut River, in the part of New Hampshire and Vermont known as the Upper Valley, lies the quiet town of Enfield, New Hampshire. Perhaps best known as a bedroom community of Lebanon and as the location of Mascoma Lake (the largest lake in the region), Enfield and adjacent parts of Lebanon and Springfield have some of the best birding in the state. Though perhaps best known for waterfowl migration and the northern component to its breeding avifauna, the area holds something for the visiting birder at almost any time of year. The route described below covers less than 20 miles, yet passes through habitats ranging from freshwater marsh and open lake through grassland and spruce/fir forest.

We will start this tour at the southern end of the route, McDaniel's Marsh in the town of Springfield. To reach this area, take Interstate 89 to Exit 13 and go south on Route 10 for 0.8 mile to the village of Grantham. Turn left (east) here on Route 114 (Springfield Road), and follow it for 4.9 miles to West Springfield, where George Hill Road enters on the left. If you reach a small store, you have gone too far. Turn left onto George Hill Road and follow it for 2.2 miles. At this point you will see a large wetland on the right, along with a sign and parking area. This is McDaniel's Marsh, an extensive wetland owned and managed by the NH Fish and Game Department. From the dam and boat launch you can see less than half of the wetland, but it is nonetheless well worth examining in some detail.

The part of the marsh that is visible from here is actually deeper and more open than the rest, and as such is generally a better area for waterfowl during migration. From April to September, Wood Ducks are quite common, although they can be hard to see during the summer months except very early in the morning. In September, McDaniel's Marsh has had some of the highest fall Wood Duck counts for the state (often over 70). Other ducks that are regular here include American Black Duck, Mallard, Ring-necked Duck, Bufflehead, and Common and Hooded mergansers. Canada Geese, scoters, and Common Loon have also been recorded, and there are even a couple of local rarities like American Wigeon on the list. Bald Eagle and Osprey sometimes stop by as well to look for a fish or two.

However, the waterfowl species that helped put McDaniel's Marsh on the map is the Pied-billed Grebe. Currently a rare nester in the state, pied-bills nested here as recently as 1995 and presumably did so previously, at least on an irregular basis. Unfortunately, surveys in the summer of 1998 failed to detect this species, so its current status here is uncertain. It does, however, remain a fairly common visitor during fall migration. Unfortunately for many birders,

looking for grebes in the breeding season is very difficult without a boat, since their preferred habitat is not the open water you can see from the dam, but the winding channels and emergent vegetation of the other two thirds of McDaniel's Marsh. If you have a boat, however, a trip around the corner is well worth the effort. Canoes and kayaks are probably best, since they are not only best for birding and they don't tangle their propellers in the abundant water lilies! Be prepared for the occasional stiff headwind, however.

Once you reach the prominent peninsula with several large pines (a former Great Blue Heron nesting site), you will turn the corner into a different world. For the next 1.3 miles, the main channel winds among alders, cattails, and dead trees, and is a rich wildlife area if you get there early in the morning. My experience in this part of the marsh is limited to the breeding season, so you're on your own if you want to try it in spring or fall (the whole thing is frozen in winter, and not really worth visiting). Regular species here include American Bittern, Virginia Rail, Common Snipe, Olive-sided and both Alder and Willow flycatchers, Marsh Wren, and Northern Parula, along with a host of other common forest passerines. If you're lucky, maybe there will even be a Pied-billed Grebe.

Without a boat, this part of the marsh is essentially unreachable without some serious bushwhacking, but this is not to say that there are no other things to do during your visit. On the other (south) side of the dam, an old logging road follows the south shore of the marsh for half a mile before veering away to the right. A walk along here in early spring can produce a good variety of migrants, and in summer there are the expected breeders, including Canada Warbler and Northern Waterthrush.

McDaniel's Marsh marks the southern terminus of one of the best birding areas in this part of New Hampshire, the increasingly famous Bog Road. Over the past three years, roughly 150 species have been recorded along the 4.6 miles between the marsh and Bog Road's northern terminus. The area is best between mid-April and August and is best known for its breeding species.

From the McDaniel's Marsh parking area, Bog Road takes off directly across George Hill Road. For the first 1.5 miles the road goes through unremarkable mixed forest, and even passes a small pond that always looks inviting but almost never has any birds. After 1.5 miles, however, you will come to the beginning of an extensive complex of sand and gravel pits. The first access point to these pits is actually a driveway, so continue on another 0.1 mile to an opening on the right where you can see an old excavator.

These gravel pits are home to one of the few remaining populations of Whip-poor-wills in the region, and birds can be heard almost anywhere in the next mile, usually between mid-May and mid-July. At night they can sometimes be seen in your headlights as they sit in the middle of the road. During the day, look and listen for Bank Swallows, a colony of which nests a little farther down

the gravel pit. In spring, several small temporary ponds form in sandy depressions and attract a few migrant shorebirds. Killdeer and Spotted and Solitary sandpipers are the most regular, but both Least Sandpiper and Greater Yellowlegs have also been recorded here.

Continuing north, you come to Bear Road, 0.2 mile after the abandoned excavator (1.8 miles from George Hill Road). This road leads to Eastman Pond and the planned community of Eastman that surrounds it. The pond itself can be good for migrant waterfowl in the fall, and hosts nesting loons in the summer, but access to the water is difficult, and the maze of roads can be confusing. If you have time and patience, however, you may be interested in the side trip. Eastman can also be reached more directly from the Interstate by going north on Route 10 and watching for signs.

Bear Road marks the southern edge of another extensive parcel of preserved land, again owned by the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department. This is the Enfield Wildlife Management Area, and it includes most of the wetland area on the west side of the road. This combination of wetland and a variety of forest types (hardwoods, white pine, and spruce/fir) is what attracts such a diversity of breeding birds to Bog Road.

It is worth parking at the junction with Bear Road and walking along the edge of both roads here, paying special attention to the narrow strip of alder swamp and its associated stream. In the summer of 1997, a pair of Rusty Blackbirds was present here between late April and early July, strongly suggesting that they were nesting. This is noteworthy because the main breeding population of Rusty Blackbirds in the state occurs at least 50 miles to the northeast, and is apparently declining. Other species with northern affinities that can be found along Bog Road include Olive-sided Flycatcher, Golden-crowned Kinglet, and Northern Parula. Both species of crossbills have been recorded during the summer, although neither should be expected.

This productive mix of wetland and forest continues for the next 2.5 miles, and the best approach is to simply drive slowly (or walk) and stop at interesting patches of habitat. I'll simply mention a couple of the more noteworthy areas. 0.65 mile beyond Bear Road, you will come to a wide area on the left, marked with a large brown Fish and Game sign. This sign marks the trailhead for Cole Pond, located roughly a mile up the gradually sloping trail. Birding along this trail is similar to that elsewhere along Bog Road, but without the wetland species, so the main draw is the abundant highbush blueberry crop around the pond itself. Throughout the month of August, you can pick blueberries for hours here without making an appreciable dent in their abundance. Also of note to frugivores is the northern end of the gravel pit complex, located 0.1 mile beyond the Cole Pond trailhead. Here there are equally amazing quantities of blackberries, also in August, and a bit of berry picking can make for a fine end to a morning of late-summer birding!

After Cole Pond, the road passes through forest for the next 0.7 mile and then opens out into a large clearing with the alder-lined stream separating the road from a prominent ridgeline to the west. The southern end of this opening is probably the most reliable spot for Olive-sided Flycatcher along Bog Road, and the east side of the road for the next half-mile is very good for Northern Waterthrush. About halfway down the ridge is a small area of exposed cliff, where ravens are known to nest.

If you've started birding Bog Road while it is still dark (to try for those elusive Whip-poor-wills!), a stop at this clearing is a must. Barred Owls are almost guaranteed along the ridgeline, woodcock line the road at dusk and dawn, and Northern Saw-whet Owls are occasionally heard tooting here in April (and also at scattered other areas along the road, especially near Bear Road and Cole Pond). This is also the place to be for the dawn chorus, which is supplemented by gobbling turkeys in early spring. Among the common forest birds are Brown Creeper, Winter Wren, Hermit Thrush, Veery, and White-throated Sparrow, with Alder Flycatcher and Swamp Sparrow dominating the wetlands.

After leaving this clearing, you re-enter the woods for another quarter-mile, only to re-emerge in an extensive alder wetland to the east (now 4.1 miles from McDaniel's Marsh). This is the south end of George Pond, and the vegetation you are seeing is what gives Bog Road its name. While not technically a bog, the area has numerous tamaracks, and if you venture forth by boat you will find other bog specialists like pitcher plants and cotton grass. Lincoln's Sparrows nested here in 1996, a species that, like the Rusty Blackbird, normally resides 50 miles or so to the northeast. Other noteworthy nesting records date from the early 1980s, when workers for New Hampshire's breeding bird atlas confirmed breeding for Ring-necked Duck and listed Northern Harrier as "probable." At dawn and dusk, this is an excellent spot for American Bittern and Common Snipe. A quarter mile farther north is the George Pond boat launch, another good spot for snipe and bittern, as well as Virginia Rail. While George Pond is small, and mostly visible from the road, a boat does allow one to explore the more distant corners, and who knows what you might turn up!

During waterfowl migration, George Pond attracts fewer ducks than McDaniel's Marsh, but it is certainly worth checking for them. Good vantage points include the height of land just south of the boat launch, the boat launch itself, and a quarter-mile down the road where Bog Road ends at Route 4A. You can scan the pond from its outlet, or turn right on Route 4A and look down the pond from the north. The species here are similar to those at McDaniel's Marsh.

If you are interested in waterfowl, there are two other areas in Enfield that are even more productive, both of which can be reached by turning left on to Route 4A. The road passes through the village of Enfield Center, then in 1.4 miles (from Bog Road) brings you to Shaker Hill Road. Turn right here, continue straight on Crystal Lake Road when Shaker Hill Road veers off to the

left, and watch for Algonquin Road on your right in another half mile. Take Algonquin Road to the boat launch (0.75 mile), and scan the end of the lake. A large flock of Mallards hangs out here in fall, and is sometimes accompanied by an oddball like a coot or pintail, and Ring-necked Ducks can number in the dozens. The most notable sighting here, however, was a flock of 14 Cattle Egrets in October 1995.

The main part of Crystal Lake can be observed by returning to Crystal Lake Road and turning right. The road hugs the lakeshore here and has very little traffic, making it easy to drive slowly and watch for ducks. Regular species here include Common Loon, Common Goldeneye, and a smattering of sea ducks. The same day that the Cattle Egrets were at the boat launch, there were roughly 200 Black Scoters on the lake, along with smaller numbers of White-winged and Surf scoters, Red-breasted Mergansers, and Oldsquaws! When Crystal Lake Road ends, the best plan is to turn around and return to Route 4A, but if you're here in summer you might want to listen for Pine Warblers near the intersection before heading back.

Once back to Route 4A, turn right and continue northwest 0.8 mile, at which point you will see the south end of Mascoma Lake on your right. There is a pull-off here from which you can scan for waterfowl. Unfortunately, most of the southern part of Mascoma Lake is bordered by private dwellings, making access essentially impossible, but viewing is substantially better in another two miles. Along the way you will encounter a large hayfield on the left (there is parking 1.5 miles from the end of the lake — watch for a stone building and another Fish and Game sign). This field is a new addition to the Enfield Wildlife Management Area and is home to numerous Bobolinks and Savannah Sparrows, as well as a very occasional meadowlark. It is also the site of the local Audubon chapter's bluebird trail, and a trail network through the nearby woods can provide good general birding.

But back to the lake. Just after passing the developed areas on both sides of the road, you will see a wide gravel pull-off on the right. This is another good spot to scan the lake. Pay close attention to the cluster of rocks almost straight out from you. This used to be the site of a large gull roost (including Lesser Black-backed Gull and Black-legged Kittiwake in November 1996), but gull hazing at the nearby landfill seems to have reduced the local gull population substantially. Even if few gulls are present, the rocks are still worth checking, as they have been home to the occasional Great Cormorant over the years, usually in April or October.

Half a mile beyond the pull-off is the Shaker Bridge. You can park at the boat launch here and scan south along the lake, or cross over and scan from the Shaker Bridge Motel. One of the most diverse areas for its size is just beyond the motel, reached by continuing along Main Street, going under the old railroad, and parking across from the Lutheran church in a quarter-mile. In doing

so you will have passed a marshy pond on the right, known to local birders as Main Street Pond. Over the last nine years, over 160 species have been recorded around this pond or on the adjacent lake — not bad for an area a quarter-mile long and a tenth of a mile wide!

The reason Main Street Pond is so productive is that it contains a diversity of habitats. There is the open water of the lake, shallow marshy areas of the pond, brushy areas, young forest, and the residential area along Main Street. Among the more noteworthy birds recorded here over the years are Black-crowned Night-Heron, Sora, Little Gull, Northern Saw-whet Owl, Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, and a December Common Yellowthroat. In some winters, the crab apple trees in the horse pasture along Main Street can be very good for Bohemian Waxwings and Pine Grosbeaks. To bird the pond, climb the bank from the parking lot to an abandoned railroad bed and turn right. This takes you between the pond and the lake, after which you can return via Main Street.

To wrap up your tour of Mascoma Lake, cross back over the Shaker Bridge and turn right on Route 4A. The woods here have the usual assortment of breeding songbirds, and the lakeshore can actually concentrate flocks of migrants in the fall, but the only way to cover this area is on foot (parking back at the boat launch). When traffic is light, you may be able to drive slowly and watch the lake here, but there are relatively few places to pull off. The best is The Baited Hook, a restaurant 1.6 miles from the bridge. In particular, scan the far shore to the right of the last house. This is the deepest part of this end of the lake and can contain grebes and sea ducks.

From the restaurant, go another 0.4 mile to the end of the lake and turn right onto Payne Road. After crossing the Mascoma River, you can pull off and walk out to the dam. When most of the lake is frozen, this area remains open and can concentrate waterfowl. Also be sure to check the area downstream. Noteworthy records from the dam include Ring-necked Duck in January, Wood Duck in February, and, most remarkably, Red-necked Phalarope in October 1990.

If you have time and want to do some landbirding, a final productive area is the abandoned railroad bed along the north shore of the lake near the dam. You can reach it in two ways. From the dam, you can walk up Payne Road to a bridge over the old railroad bed and go down the bank on the right just before the bridge. Or you can drive up Payne Road, turn right on Route 4, and right again on Ice House Road just beyond the gas station. Ice House Road takes you to a wide area where you can park next to the rail bed.

Between Ice House Road and Payne Road is a stretch of rail bed (being converted to a recreational trail by a local group) that passes another marshy pond. Good birds in this general area have included some of the most noteworthy rarities for the Mascoma Lake area, including Cerulean and Yellow-throated warblers, and Boreal Chickadee and Carolina Wren on the same day!

The shallow pond is good for the occasional shorebird or Green Heron, and the brushy edges can contain migrant sparrows.

This concludes our tour of birding hot spots around Enfield, New Hampshire. The Mascoma Lake area is blessed by a diversity of habitats, and while it doesn't have as long a birding history as many other parts of the state, it ranks as one of the most productive. Over the last nine years, I have single-handedly recorded 211 species around Mascoma Lake alone, with a few others added by other birders or in the Bog Road area. It merely goes to show what can be accomplished with a little dedication to a local patch.

For those wishing to visit only Mascoma Lake or do this route in the opposite direction, it is easier to take Exit 17 off Interstate 89 and turn east on Route 4 toward Enfield. After 1.4 miles you will come to a flashing light at the intersection with Route 4A. Turn right here, and in half a mile you will come to Payne Road and the Mascoma Lake dam. From the east, take Route 4 through Enfield, and you will eventually come upon the lake on your left. Whichever way you come, you will find the area well worth the visit, even in the middle of winter (at least if there are finches or waxwings around!).

Birders interested in staying overnight in the Enfield area will find a profusion of hotels in nearby Lebanon and Hanover, in addition to the previously mentioned Shaker Bridge Motel. There is also a campground on Route 4A in Lebanon, which caters largely to semi-permanent motor homes.

Pam Hunt received a Ph.D. in biology from Dartmouth College in 1995, and hasn't been able to tear herself away from the region since. She is active in the Audubon Society of New Hampshire, including editing spring bird sightings for New Hampshire Bird Records. She also serves on the NH Rare Birds Committee and is the winter editor for New England for *Field Notes*. In her spare time, she is adjunct faculty at several colleges in western New Hampshire, writes for the local newspaper, and does ornithological research in Puerto Rico, among other places.