



Based on a trail map published by Bolton Conservation Trust (1991)

BIRDING THE DELANEY WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA

Simon and Lisa Hennin

The 580-acre Delaney Multipurpose Flood Control and Wildlife Management Area lies in the towns of Bolton, Harvard, and Stow. It is managed as part of the SUASCO (Sudbury, Assabet, Concord rivers) Watershed Project by the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife. The area contains a variety of habitat — Delaney Pond, formed by a dam at its south-east corner; open grassland as part of the flood control area; small meadows, wetland areas, mixed forest, and one of the largest cattail marshes in this part of the state.

Delaney is probably less well known, and consequently less frequently birded, than nearby areas such as Bolton Flats and the Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge. But its habitat variety makes it attractive to a wide range of migrants and to many breeding species. Winter is undoubtedly the slowest season there, but checking the area during milder winters or during flight years of irruptive species might yield some interesting finds. As Delaney is within walking distance of our house, it has become one of our favorite local birding areas. In approximately five years of monitoring the area, we have recorded 133 species — a full list is given at the end of this article.

Access to Delaney

From Interstate 495 take exit 27 (Route 117), toward Bolton and Stow. Follow Route 117 east, in the direction of Stow, for 2.5 miles, passing Skinner Auction, Bolton Spring Farm, and Future Electronics (formerly GenRad) on the left. Just before crossing the town line into Stow, turn left onto Delaney Street and continue for 0.6 mile to where the road ends at a T-junction. At this junction turn left onto Harvard Road and proceed for 0.5 mile to a parking area and boat ramp on the left.

Parking is also possible at trailheads on Finn Road (0.4 mile after the boat ramp, turn left, and proceed 0.3 mile). There is also parking at a dirt pull-off on Old Harvard Road (0.6 mile after the boat ramp, bear left onto Garner Road and proceed for another 0.3 miles) which overlooks the northeast side of the marsh.

As its official name suggests, Delaney sees many uses. It is popular with local residents exercising their dogs, with fishermen, and with hunters in the appropriate seasons — so take the usual hunting-season precautions. On occasion, golden retriever clubs use the area near the dam to train their dogs, including retrieval of objects fired into the pond. Of course, this is not conducive to birding, but the activity can be easily avoided by getting there early. The boat ramp and dam areas are the most heavily used; other parts are much less frequented. Also remember to bring insect repellent during mosquito season (they are abundant!), and don't forget to check for ticks at the end of any outing.

The Delaney area is split into a southern and northern section by Finn Road. This article will describe these two sections separately but without going into detail about all the trails that exist in the area. These are too numerous to mention and are best left to individual exploration once some familiarity with the area has been gained. Plan on allowing 2 to 4 hours for each section.

Southern Section

The southern section will be described by following a clockwise loop around the main pond starting from the boat ramp on Harvard Road. From the boat ramp, take the opportunity to scan the pond for waterfowl. This is particularly worthwhile during spring migration, when Green-winged Teal, Ring-necked Ducks, Common Goldeneyes, Buffleheads, Hooded Mergansers, and Common Mergansers can be seen. Some of these species also show up in the fall but numbers seem to be lower. These migrants tend to stay closer to the other side of the pond and to its northern end, which means they may be blocked from view by a peninsula that juts out to the right of the boat ramp. However, other vantage points give a closer view, and these will be mentioned later.

Canada Geese, Wood Ducks, American Black Ducks, and Mallards breed at Delaney or in the immediate vicinity and so may be seen at any time, March to October. Also check any gulls on the pond and scan the trees on the far side for a perched Osprey during spring and fall raptor migration.

A gravel trail leaves from the left side of the boat ramp, curving around to the right onto the top of a dike leading out to the dam at the southern end of the pond. As you walk out along the dike, watch for landbirds in the trees to either side and in the thickets lower down. Yellow-throated Vireos have nested along this edge.

The dike above the dam gives another vantage point for scanning the pond, but it is also one of the best places to observe migrating swallows, which may number in the hundreds during the spring. They often fly low across the dike and on either side, affording excellent views. In poor weather we have seen them clustered in the bushes on either side of the outlet stream to the left. Tree, Northern Rough-winged, Bank, and Barn swallows are regular. In contrast, we have just one record of Cliff Swallow.

Just past the outlet stream, the dike ends at a bluff overlooking an open, flat, grassy area which is bounded on the far side by more embankments. Savannah, Song, and Chipping sparrows breed in this area. We also have July records of Grasshopper Sparrow from this area in two of the past three years. American Pipits are found here in the fall, and the area looks ideal for Snow Buntings during the winter (though we have yet to record them). A number of obvious trails cross the area, and it is worth walking them back and forth — but please stay on the trails, especially during the breeding season. The sparrows will often

“tee up” on tall weeds, allowing good views. The area is often mown in late summer and so is not very attractive to migrant sparrows in the fall.

From the bluff, one trail drops down and bears off right along the edge of the pond. The next trail to its left cuts directly across the flat area to an obvious opening in the woods on the opposite side. Our route aims for this gap but will bear left and circle around the perimeter of the area. To do this, drop down off the bluff and follow the trail south along the bank of the outlet stream. Check the stream edges for shorebirds — Spotted Sandpiper is most likely since it is a breeder, but we have recorded Greater Yellowlegs in spring and Least Sandpiper in the fall. The stream may provide the last open water in the winter and may harbor a lingering Mallard, Black Duck, or Hooded Merganser. The bushes on the stream banks provide good landbird cover, especially for migrant sparrows and flycatchers. The stream flows into a wider area of open water, which is always worth checking for ducks and herons. Our first record of Great Egret was here in July 1998. This open water can also be viewed from Delaney Street as you come in from Rt. 117, but stay on the road — there is no access from that side.

The trail now climbs steeply up an embankment to reveal another flat, scrubby area with weeds, low bushes, and small trees. Killdeer nest here, favoring the gravelly expanse. The trail continues along the perimeter defined by mixed oak and white pine with a steep drop-off to the left. This edge can be very productive during warbler migration. In the back corner, the trail drops down the bank toward a low swampy area; rather than following this, cut back to the right and continue working along the perimeter of the flat area, monitoring the trees along the edge as you go. The trail here may be indistinct or overgrown, but is readily picked up again as you get closer to the edge of the embankment overlooking the lower grassy area to the right. This will lead you back to the gap in the woods mentioned above.

Follow the broad avenue between the stands of white pine. This is a good area to listen for thrushes (particularly Hermit and Wood), Ovenbirds, Pine Warblers, and Chipping Sparrows. The trail soon emerges into another semi-open area. To the left the area is more overgrown with bushes and low trees and is a regular spot for Indigo Bunting in the summer. The main trail heads straight across the opening toward some large boulders, but follow the trail bearing right to cross the grassy area and re-enter the woods to the right of the boulders. After a short distance in the woods, the trail cuts straight across a flood-control channel, stretching mostly to the left and with thickets forming the end to the right.

The trail continues through the woods, roughly parallel to a stone wall on the left. Another trail comes in from the left through a gap in the wall. Shortly after that the trail forks. Take the right fork, passing a side trail coming in from the right, until the trail goes down into a dip and forks again. Either fork works,

but the right-hand one leads down closer to the swampy southwest edge of the pond before cutting back uphill to rejoin the left fork. From here, the boat ramp is clearly visible across the pond. The buttonbush in this area is a good place to check for migrating blackbirds, including Rusty.

The trail continues, again running parallel to a stone wall, and crosses a slow stream that feeds into the swampy edge of the pond to the right. At the next fork in the trail, bear left through the stone wall, coming out into an open area of meadow, thickets, and edge habitat. Blue-winged Warbler, Gray Catbird, and Eastern Towhee are often found here, and we have seen Ruby-throated Hummingbirds feeding on jewelweed in the later part of the summer. It is worth spending the time to check this area thoroughly for sparrows, warblers, and other songbirds.

The trail cuts across the meadow, with another trail coming in from the left. It continues through a gap in a stone wall (partly adapted into a horse jump) and crosses another field. On the far side of this field there is a tall wooden post where another trail comes in from the left through a "tunnel" formed by cedars, bittersweet, and other vines. Continue straight ahead into the woods and bear right at the next junction, descending into a gravel pit — often a good place to find Eastern Towhees. Facing a steep gravel bank, take the trail to the left and ascend to the top of the embankment; the pond will be straight ahead and below. This spot, with its overlook of the gravel pit and surrounding treetops, can be a good observation point for waves of warblers in migration.

At the top of the embankment, turn left and proceed with the pond on your right (going in the opposite direction will return you to a junction with our route before it enters the meadows). The trail descends and comes down to the edge of the pond. This is another good vantage point for observing ducks, herons, swallows, and shorebirds. In particular, we have noted as many as a dozen Spotted Sandpipers out on the lily pads in the later part of the summer. The cattails and reeds to the left mark the northern edge of the pond, and this habitat looks ideal for bitterns, although we have yet to record one here.

Continue straight along the trail, crossing a low swampy area and a slow stream that feeds the pond. Louisiana and Northern Waterthrush are sometimes found in this area in migration, and migrating warblers such as Magnolia and Northern Parula can frequently be found in the canopy overhead. The trail continues away from the pond edge and soon comes out onto Finn Road — directly across from the trailhead that will be the starting point for the tour of the northern section. To complete the loop of the southern section, turn right and proceed along Finn Road. On the right in a short distance, opposite a yellow house with number 83, there is an overlook of another marshy finger of the northern end of the pond. Check here for herons and blackbirds, and listen for Virginia Rails.

Next, on the left, there is an open field opposite a farmhouse and barn. This is a good area to check for Barn and Northern Rough-winged swallows and Chimney Swifts. Just beyond this field, and just before the junction with Harvard Road, a culvert connects the northern and southern sections. This is an excellent spot for a variety of birds — herons, ducks, warblers such as Common Yellowthroat and Yellow, Warbling Vireos, Baltimore Orioles, and others. A canoe launch behind the screen of trees on the north side of the road is a good observation point for one arm of the open water in the northern section.

Turning right onto Harvard Road will lead you back to the boat ramp (0.4 mile). Before getting there, you will pass a trailhead marked by a wire gate on the right, in a break between sections of crash barrier. This trail leads out onto a peninsula which juts out into the eastern side of the pond and provides another good vantage point for observing ducks in migration.

Northern Section

The section of Delaney to the north side of Finn Road has a different atmosphere than the southern section, both because of terrain and habitat and because it is less frequented. The terrain is characterized by what appear to be naturally formed eskers or moraines, interspersed by low marshy areas and the main cattail marsh itself. Bordering the marshes, the vegetation is mixed woods, predominantly oak and white pine, with some understory in places. As described in this article, it is possible to complete a loop through this section by crossing a couple of “fishermen’s bridges” over narrow sections of open water within the marsh. A word of warning, however: these bridges are somewhat rickety and can be in varying states of repair. In wet springs they may even be underwater. A good part of the route can be covered without crossing these bridges, but some retracing of steps will be necessary.

Our route will start at the pull-off on the north side of Finn Road, 0.3 mile from the junction with Harvard Road and directly opposite where the southern section route came out to the road. Follow the trail into the woods, past a “wall” of railroad ties, and climb up the side of an embankment until the trail levels out, running parallel to a stone wall on the right. The pine grove to the right is a flat area that can be good for thrushes in migration. Also listen and watch out for Brown Creepers, Pine Warblers, and Ovenbirds, which are numerous throughout the woods of the northern section. Red-breasted Nuthatches can also be found, and there is some evidence that they breed here. To the left of the trail is one of the many low, marshy areas that are typical in this section, forming ideal habitat for Northern Waterthrushes and Winter Wrens, both of which have bred here. Canada Warblers may also be found in migration.

The trail continues past a side trail on the right, and soon another low area is evident on the right. At the next trail junction, turn left and follow the trail down into the dip (staying straight at this junction leads out onto a peninsula in the

marsh and our route will return along this). Coming out of the dip, climb up the embankment and turn right to follow this ridge, which separates marshy low areas on the left from the main marsh on the right. The trail descends gradually to where a stream drains into the marsh on the right. This puts you right at marsh level and is one of the good spots to check for marsh birds, including Virginia Rail, Swamp Sparrow, Common Yellowthroat, and Red-winged Blackbird.

Cross the stream and regain the ridge. Soon the trail drops to go around the left side of a wooded mound, with some side trails coming in from the left, and then reverts to following the perimeter of the marsh to the right. Continue along this, and at the next junction turn right to descend a steep bank, again to marsh level, near an old stone wall. The trail continues out onto a small peninsula with the remains of an old blind at the end. This is another good area for observing marsh birds. Before the blind, another trail splits off to the left, leading to the first bridge. Our route crosses this bridge and continues through woods on the far side before reaching a T-junction.

To digress for a moment, turning left at this T-junction will lead you out past the edge of the marsh and through a grove of red pine to a gate on Old Harvard Road, approximately 0.2 mile north of the dirt pull-off mentioned earlier in the directions to the area. Walking south along the road toward the pull-off will give you an excellent overlook of the marsh, with edge habitat that favors migrants such as Wilson's Warbler and Fox Sparrow, and breeders such as Warbling Vireo and Eastern Kingbird. This stretch of road is the best place to observe the Great Blue Heron rookery that is expanding in the pine trees directly across the marsh. The nests started in dead trees but have since spread to live ones. In the summer of 1998, we tallied at least forty-six birds (adults plus young) divided among nineteen nest platforms.

Our route continues by turning right at the aforementioned T-junction and proceeding back down to the marsh edge, where the second bridge leads across to the tip of another, larger peninsula into the marsh. The trail continues along the edge of the marsh on the northwestern side of the peninsula before cutting inland and uphill just before a hunting blind. This leads up to the main trail that runs the length of the peninsula. At the junction, turning left will bring you to the tip of the peninsula, from which it is also possible to view the heron rookery off to the right. Turning right at the junction takes you through the woods along the ridge of the peninsula. (There is also a side trail off this main trail that leads down to and runs along the marsh edge on the eastern side of the peninsula before rejoining the main trail.) The main trail returns you to the junction where the route splits off on the outward leg. Continue straight to come back out to the start point on Finn Road.

In this marsh complex in the northern section, we had recorded small numbers of Soras and Marsh Wrens in previous years, but not in the last couple of years. The reason for the change is unclear, but the water levels have been

very high in the last two springs, and this may be a factor. Other irregular sightings have included Hooded Merganser with chicks in midsummer, King Rail, American Coot, and Common Moorhen. The last three have tended to be fall records, but Common Moorhen apparently bred one year prior to 1994. Also in this section we have observed Great Horned Owl in daylight as well as raptors such as Sharp-shinned Hawk and Northern Harrier during migration, and Broad-winged Hawk and Northern Goshawk during the summer (presumed to be breeding in the vicinity).

Our owl knowledge for Delaney as a whole is very patchy. It seems that the Great Horned is the predominant owl for the area, and it will be interesting to see whether they utilize the heron nests. There does appear to be suitable habitat for Northern Saw-whet Owls in migration, but more observation is necessary to confirm this theory.

Delaney Species List

This list is made entirely from our observations between 1994 and the end of 1998.

Key:

C = Common/regular in appropriate season(s)

U = Uncommon/less regular in appropriate season(s)

R = Rare

* = Breeder (either confirmed by direct observation or presumed by common presence during the nesting season)

** = Breeding suspected but no definitive proof

Pied-billed Grebe	C	Northern Goshawk	U*
Double-crested Cormorant	C	Broad-winged Hawk	U**
Great Blue Heron	C*	Red-tailed Hawk	U
Great Egret	U	American Kestrel	U
Green Heron	C*	Ruffed Grouse	U
Canada Goose	C*	King Rail	R
Wood Duck	C*	Virginia Rail	C*
Green-winged Teal	C	Sora	U
American Black Duck	C*	Common Moorhen	R
Mallard	C*	American Coot	U
Ring-necked Duck	C	Killdeer	C*
Common Goldeneye	C	Greater Yellowlegs	U
Bufflehead	C	Spotted Sandpiper	C*
Hooded Merganser	C*	Least Sandpiper	U
Common Merganser	C	Herring Gull	C
Osprey	U	Great Black-backed Gull	C
Northern Harrier	U	Mourning Dove	C*
Sharp-shinned Hawk	U	Great Horned Owl	U**

Common Nighthawk	U	Nashville Warbler	C
Chimney Swift	C*	Northern Parula	C
Ruby-throated Hummingbird	U	Yellow Warbler	C*
Belted Kingfisher	C*	Chestnut-sided Warbler	C
Downy Woodpecker	C*	Magnolia Warbler	C
Hairy Woodpecker	C*	Black-throated Blue Warbler	U
Northern Flicker	C*	Yellow-rumped Warbler	C
Eastern Wood-Pewee	C*	Black-throated Green Warbler	C*
Willow Flycatcher	U	Blackburnian Warbler	U
Least Flycatcher	U	Pine Warbler	C*
Eastern Phoebe	C*	Palm Warbler	C
Great Crested Flycatcher	C*	Blackpoll Warbler	C
Eastern Kingbird	C*	Black-and-white Warbler	C
Tree Swallow	C*	American Redstart	C
N. Rough-winged Swallow	C*	Ovenbird	C*
Bank Swallow	C	Northern Waterthrush	C*
Cliff Swallow	U	Louisiana Waterthrush	U
Barn Swallow	C*	Common Yellowthroat	C*
Blue Jay	C*	Wilson's Warbler	U
American Crow	C*	Canada Warbler	U
Fish Crow	U	Scarlet Tanager	C*
Black-capped Chickadee	C*	Northern Cardinal	C*
Tufted Titmouse	C*	Rose-breasted Grosbeak	C*
Red-breasted Nuthatch	U**	Indigo Bunting	C*
White-breasted Nuthatch	C*	Eastern Towhee	C*
Brown Creeper	C*	American Tree Sparrow	C
Carolina Wren	C	Chipping Sparrow	C*
House Wren	C*	Field Sparrow	U
Winter Wren	C*	Savannah Sparrow	C*
Marsh Wren	U**	Grasshopper Sparrow	U**
Golden-crowned Kinglet	C	Fox Sparrow	U
Ruby-crowned Kinglet	C	Song Sparrow	C*
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher	U	Lincoln's Sparrow	U
Eastern Bluebird	U	Swamp Sparrow	C*
Veery	C*	White-throated Sparrow	C
Hermit Thrush	C*	Dark-eyed Junco	C
Wood Thrush	C*	Bobolink	U*
American Robin	C*	Red-winged Blackbird	C*
Gray Catbird	C*	Eastern Meadowlark	U
Northern Mockingbird	C*	Rusty Blackbird	U
Brown Thrasher	U	Common Grackle	C*
American Pipit	U	Brown-headed Cowbird	C**
Cedar Waxwing	C*	Baltimore Oriole	C*
European Starling	C*	Purple Finch	U
Blue-headed Vireo	U	House Finch	C*
Yellow-throated Vireo	U*	American Goldfinch	C*
Warbling Vireo	C*	Evening Grosbeak	U
Red-eyed Vireo	C	House Sparrow	C*
Blue-winged Warbler	C**		

The authors wish to thank Mark Lynch for reviewing a draft of this article and for making some valuable suggestions.

Simon and Lisa Hennin started birding regularly in 1993 thanks to Lisa's Maine heritage and Mark Lynch/Sheila Carroll's bird classes at Massachusetts Audubon's Broad Meadow Brook Sanctuary in Worcester. Simon regrets that he wasn't birding while growing up in England or while living in the Netherlands in the early 1980s. Lisa's passion is for hawks and thickets full of little brown jobs; Simon loves birding the expanse of sea and shore. In their spare time, Simon works on air traffic control systems for Raytheon, and Lisa works in health promotion services for the Worcester YWCA.

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