

## **BIRDING THE LOWER EMERALD NECKLACE: JAMAICA POND TO THE BACK BAY**

by Robert G. Mayer

There is a special excitement to birding in the city. Those of us who live in Boston envy the residents of the North Shore, Marshfield, or Concord as we hear of the display of avifauna at the ready. But watching a Peregrine Falcon pluck a Starling on a window ledge of Saks Fifth Avenue, seeing a redstart chase a Yellow-rump along the trees lining the Southwest Corridor near Back Bay Station, standing four feet from a Northern Pintail at the Swan Pond in the Public Garden, or hearing nighthawks call as they feed over the rooftops in the South End seems like nature captured from somewhere it doesn't belong.

City birding is an experience of quality, not quantity, viewing. Apart from robin roosts in the Fens in fall and masses of gulls on Jamaica Pond or the Charles River in winter, most birding experiences in the city are close-up views of a small number of limited species. This reflects the compactness of urban open spaces as well as a tolerance for the hubbub of humanity that urban specimens seem to develop. It is common to pass within ten feet of a Black-crowned Night Heron on the Esplanade in June. Red-tailed Hawks will sit on a fence post no more than an arm's length away in the Victory Gardens of the Fenway. Northern Shovelers follow the Mallards just a few feet from the shore in the waters behind the Museum of Fine Arts.

This is a plan for birding the lower portion of Boston's Emerald Necklace. The walk starts at Jamaica Pond, the primary source of the Muddy River, and follows the water down through several smaller ponds and then to the Riverway dividing Brookline from Boston, on to the Fenway, and down the Esplanade to the Public Garden. While it will be presented in sequence as if one is walking the roughly four miles along this route, the better birding areas of Leverett Pond, the Fens, or the Garden can be approached separately by car, foot, or public transportation; details appear at the end of the article.

### **Jamaica Pond/Olmsted Park/Leverett Pond**

Jamaica Pond is the largest and purest body of water in Boston (it was a major water source for Boston until 1848), a spring-fed glacial kettle over fifty feet deep with a one-and-one-half-mile developed pathway surrounding it. Many species of waterfowl and an impressive variety of landbirds can be seen here in appropriate seasons, but Leverett Pond, downstream, is generally more productive, and because of its smaller size and elliptical shape, offers better viewing as well. If you are doing the complete walk to the Public Garden, it is best to view Jamaica Pond briefly from the northwest side (where some free parking is available along Perkins Street), scanning for a special duck, reviewing

the gull population for unusual species, or admiring the Mute Swans brought in by Boston Parks and Recreation as in the Public Garden.

Cross Perkins Street on the north side of Jamaica Pond at the traffic light on the corner of Cypress Street, and you will approach Olmsted Park, named for the architect of the Emerald Necklace, Frederick Law Olmsted. This area may best represent Olmsted's concept of an urban park: an informal, undeveloped area from which the city populace may "gain tranquillity and rest to the mind." Farther down the Necklace at the Fenway and below, much of Olmsted's original plan has been altered by the addition of formal gardens and playing fields. But here, if you step over a low stone wall on the right, you can descend the hill to Ward's Pond, a small kettle with sharply sloping sides surrounded by a path and boardwalk. This tiny pond can be a trap for warblers and other spring migrants; other woodland birds such as woodpeckers, titmice, and nuthatches are regular here as well.

Exiting on the northwestern side of this pond, you may follow a gravel path along Pond Road or walk along undeveloped trails through mixed woods with many large oaks. There you will pass thickets that remain wet and marshy much of the year, ideal for many birds, including Northern Waterthrush. Whether you take the formal path from Jamaica Pond or the "birdier" route through the woods, you will shortly cross Willow Pond Road and enter a large playing field, which is now Olmsted Park proper. For several years, Red-tailed Hawks have nested on a light stanchion on Daisy Field, apparently oblivious to the day and evening activity there. Two young were fledged from this nest in 1998 and took up residence farther down the Muddy River in the Fenway, where Red-tails are regularly seen.

Leverett Pond appears ahead, one of the hot spots for waterbirds on this walk. In the fall, winter, and early spring, Bufflehead, Common and Hooded mergansers, Ruddy Duck, and coot are usually present, and Northern Shoveler, Northern Pintail, Wood Duck, American Wigeon, Ring-necked Duck, and Pied-billed Grebe have been recorded. Black-crowned Night-Heron, Great Blue and Green herons, Double-crested Cormorant, Spotted Sandpiper, and the three common gull species round out the water-loving birds recorded on this small pond, and the long, thin shape of the pond allows for very good viewing. The woods and shrub-lined paths circling the pond provide good cover for passerines in season. The entire park can be covered in an hour and is almost always rewarding.

### **The Riverway**

To continue your trip down the Muddy River, walk out to and carefully cross Huntington Avenue (Route 9) and follow the sidewalk on River Road, to the left of the slowly meandering and by now quite muddy Muddy River. From here to the old Sears (now Landmark Center) Building at Park Drive, the area is

called the Riverway. An excellent article by Kenneth Hudson in *Bird Observer* ("Birding the Muddy River," Vol. 13, No. 1, February 1985) gives an in-depth account of the birds and other flora and fauna in this area. It is truly a creation of Olmsted, who relocated the outflow from the upper ponds to follow along this route. The Riverway is heavily wooded for the city, and botanists may note that the trees on the west, or Brookline, side of the river are mostly native, whereas the Boston side of the river was planted with some imports, both European and southern, at Olmsted's direction (note the Sweet Gum and Burr Oaks farther downstream).

As the Green Line "D" trolley joins in along the walkway, you pass the Longwood "T" stop, another entry point along this urban nature trail. There is a path on both sides of the stream along here, and several footbridges allow for passage from one side to the other. Because of a noticeable current here, this stretch of the river tends to remain unfrozen most of the winter, inviting waterfowl including Wood Duck and Green-winged Teal. The reeds and trees along the way harbor Belted Kingfishers, Great Blue Herons, Black-crowned Night-Herons, and many smaller woodland birds. On occasion one may find an abundant fall-out of warblers, vireos, and other migrants along this pretty pathway. At the end of this section, Red-tailed Hawks are frequently seen sitting on or near the old Sears Building at Park Drive.

### **The Fenway and the Victory Gardens**

Bearing right and carefully crossing a cloverleaf and Brookline Avenue, you will finally enter the birding crown jewel of this portion of the necklace: the Fenway. It is easiest to keep the river to your right, staying on the Park Drive side, as you travel downstream here. (Another useful article by Ken Hudson, "Birding Boston: the Common to the Fens," appeared in *Bird Observer*, Vol. 20, No. 6 and offers tips for birding this area, starting at the Back Bay and working upstream.) This upper Fens area, with its towering old oaks, maples, and willows, can be a good spot for migrants in May. Many of the twenty-seven species of warblers recorded in the Fenway (*Editor's note: twenty-nine, counting a MacGillivray's Warbler and a Yellow-breasted Chat found here in early December 1999*) can be seen here or farther down in the trees surrounding the South and North Basins of the Muddy River. Notable regulars during migration include Blue-winged, Parula, Black-throated Blue, Palm, and Blackpoll warblers. Other migrants seen in the Fenway, beginning in the early spring, are Woodcock, Fox Sparrow, both kinglets, Brown Creeper, Warbling and Blue-headed vireos, Northern Waterthrush, and Rose-breasted Grosbeak.

After you cross a connecting road and pass several college buildings on the opposite side, the river makes a sharp left turn, and you will be facing an open area of the Fenway with large sports fields and rolling greens that run past the enclosed Rose Garden (at its peak in June) and into the War Memorial area. This

is a particularly good spot to see raptors, which, in addition to Red-tails and the occasional Osprey fishing over the water here, have included Cooper's Hawk, Kestrel, Merlin, Peregrine Falcon, and Northern Harrier. The woodpecker family is also well represented in this area, with highlights including Red-bellied Woodpecker and Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. In the pools or "basins" behind the Museum of Fine Arts, a dozen species of waterfowl have been counted in fall and winter, with Green-winged Teal, Northern Shoveler, and Hooded Merganser fairly reliable, and American Wigeon, Gadwall, and Northern Pintail occasional. Belted Kingfishers, Spotted Sandpipers, Black-crowned Night-Herons, and Great Blue and Green Herons are also attracted to the open water and to the fish species that include huge carp, over-grown "goldfish" carp, sunfish, and alewife; the latter find their way up the Muddy from the Charles and the sea in spring.

Before moving on to the Victory Gardens and the North Basin, admire the stone arched bridge that takes Agassiz Road across the river from Park Drive to the Fenway. Northern Rough-winged Swallows have nested beneath it for several years. The trees along the edge of the *Phragmites*, just across Agassiz Road and behind a boarded-up stone maintenance shed, can be very good for warblers and vireos, and the reeds may harbor Fox and Swamp sparrows, Eastern Towhee, Hermit Thrush, and Veery during the spring. The route to the Victory Gardens is to the left of this area, along Park Drive.

When Olmsted was originally engaged to develop the Fenway, his purpose was not only a scenic one but a hygienic one as well. The area, as well as much of what is now Back Bay, had been tidal in nature and received a "flush" twice a day until a dam was constructed near what is now Beacon Street to power a mill in the 1820s. This, combined with population growth and lack of modern sanitation, had created a serious health problem by the 1870s. Olmsted resolved the problem by designing a series of "water gates" that restored the tidal flow. His original plantings were salt-tolerant, and the rest of the park was left relatively undisturbed and natural, without the athletic fields, formal gardens, and monuments seen here today. In 1910, a dam and lock were built on the Charles River, and the sea no longer had open access to the region, which led to major ecological change as freshwater plants including the invasive *Phragmites* and Japanese Knotweed forced the salt-marsh species out. These plants now threaten to close in the river.

Long-delayed plans to reclaim the scenic beauty of the Muddy River seem to be moving ahead. In November 1999, the City of Boston and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, in collaboration with many public and private organizations, announced a \$70 million plan to restore the area. Projects include dredging Ward's and Leverett Ponds to clear the tons of silt that have settled from storm-drain runoff over the years. In addition, narrow culverts at the north end of the Riverway will be enlarged, channels will be dredged through the basins in the Fenway, and debris and trash will be removed from the mouth of

the river where it flows into the Charles. Throughout its course, the banks of the river will be scraped away in an attempt to eradicate the choking reeds and invasive plants and restore vegetation native to the area.

A project of this magnitude will certainly have a great effect on the birds and other fauna of the area; initially, this impact is likely to be adverse. Hopefully, the project's architects will minimize construction damage and will be kept alert to the environmental issues by activist organizations concerned about the health of this important urban nature preserve.

The Fenway Victory Gardens, between the reedy edge of the North Basin on the east and Park Drive on the west, are the only surviving WW II Victory Gardens in Boston. At their peak in 1944, victory gardens supplied nearly half of the fresh produce in America as part of the war effort. Today they survive as an enchanting collage of fifteen-by-thirty-foot plots representing all manner of style and design. On this walk, the Gardens alone are worth the trip; some are spectacularly manicured botanical gardens, while others are funky and freestyle. Several exhibit finely pruned exotic trees and plants with small ponds and rock landscaping. Others are laid out in rows named for local streets like a floral Monopoly game, or sport small patios with grill, table and chairs, or pink plastic flamingos.

The real birds don't seem to mind the lack of a cohesive theme; they appreciate the diversity of flowers, vegetables, trees, shrubs, and grasses available. Nearly thirty species nest in the area, including the Rough-winged Swallows just mentioned, Tree Swallows in bird houses in the gardens, Baltimore Orioles in the adjacent trees, and Common Nighthawks on the roofs of nearby flat-top buildings. On an early summer morning, the gardens, with their abundance of food including many feeders, and the marshy area behind are a symphony of song. This is a reliable site for Fox and Savannah sparrows, as well as the more common sparrows, in early spring. Red-tailed Hawks and American Kestrels hunt the area throughout the summer. The four hundred members of the Fenway Garden Society are justly proud of their plots and the contribution they make to the ecology of the area. (For more information on the gardens, including how to apply for a garden plot, write to the Fenway Garden Society, PO Box 23038, Astor Station, Boston 02123.)

### **The Esplanade and Commonwealth Avenue**

Below the Fens, the Muddy River is neither an esthetic nor an ornithological pleasure. The river passes under H. H. Richardson's (architect of Trinity Church in Copley Square) beautiful Boylston Street Bridge and nearly disappears beneath a jungle of ramps, overpasses, and cloverleafs that carry the Massachusetts Turnpike and other major roadways to and fro. Those who wish to push on to the Esplanade and the Public Garden may do so by several equally unappealing connections; crossing Boylston and ascending the overpass over the

train tracks and the Pike and following Charlesgate East down to Commonwealth Avenue, or, alternatively, continuing east on Boylston Street to Massachusetts Avenue. Consider a brief detour here a few blocks south on Massachusetts Avenue to the Christian Science Church complex, where from April through midsummer you have a good chance of seeing the Peregrine Falcons that nest on the uppermost window ledge at the northeast corner of the Administration Building, above the reflecting pool.

You can move east to the Public Garden along Commonwealth Avenue, admiring the wonderful brownstones along the way, or follow Massachusetts Avenue to the river and the Esplanade. To reach the Esplanade, take the walkway down at the beginning of the Harvard Bridge (which carries Massachusetts Avenue across the Charles to Cambridge) on the right. There along the Charles River in fall and winter you may see Horned Grebe, American Coot, all three mergansers, Bufflehead, Common Goldeneye, and large rafts of Great Black-backed Gulls. Tree Swallows and Chimney Swifts dive over the lagoon pools in spring and summer. In the spring, don't miss the Black-crowned Night-Herons that hang out along the river and the lagoons, especially on the small islands just off the Community Boating docks, where as many as 35 night-herons have been seen. They begin to arrive in mid-April and peak in May when the alewives run up the Charles; they dwindle in number after the massive crowds and noise of the July Fourth celebration.

### **The Public Garden**

If you have stayed the course (from the Esplanade take the Arthur Fiedler Footbridge near the Hatch Shell to Arlington Street), you finally arrive at the Public Garden — a combined arboretum, botanical garden, city pond, and tourist attraction. Not surprisingly, this mix is an attraction to birds as well, and during the spring migration, warblers, thrushes, and other passerines are well represented here. It is not Mount Auburn Cemetery, but it can be very active in May. The Swan Pond, although it is drained each spring, somehow contains fish, and along with the regular park ducks attracts an occasional Northern Shoveler, Northern Pintail, or Green-winged Teal. The Mute Swans are "stocked." During the late fall of 1998, an Orange-crowned and a Yellow-throated Warbler stayed in the willows around the pond for nearly a month, delighting many birders. If you are seeking warblers here in May, it is best to arrive early, because distinguishing call notes over the noise of traffic can be a challenge (the similarity of the Blackpoll's song and the squeal of brakes on Arlington Street is striking).

This entire walk, assuming a fairly leisurely pace, some active birding, and a stop for refreshment, will take the better part of a day. It can be well worth it, not only for the good bird sightings but also for the beauty and history of this natural area in the midst of the big city.





## Getting There

The best way to get to this area is by public transportation; parking anywhere in Boston is not easy. The Green Line gives access to the Public Garden at the Arlington stop, as well as at Museum or Longwood Avenue (Fenway) or Heath (Leverett Pond) on the Heath Street "E" line. The "D" Green Line stops at Fenway Park (Fenway), Longwood (Riverway), and Brookline Village (Leverett Pond). The No. 39 Forest Hills Bus originates at the rear of the Back Bay train/subway station and travels up Huntington Avenue, offering stops at the Museum of Fine Arts and Longwood Avenue for the Fenway, and at the intersection of Huntington Avenue and South Huntington Avenue for Leverett Pond. It then turns up South Huntington Avenue, giving fairly close access at Bynner Street to Leverett Pond and at Perkins Street to Jamaica Pond before it continues on to Forest Hills Station.

If you do drive, Jamaica Pond offers limited on-street parking. To reach Leverett Pond by car, approach it from the Jamaica way, either from Perkins Street right onto Cypress and bearing right onto Pond Road, or directly from the Jamaica way onto Willow Pond Road, where there is parking for Daisy Athletic Field. There is a parking area off Pond Road on the west side of the pond. Entering Pond Road from the Jamaica way when traveling south is possible from the exit ramp marked Route 9 East, VA Hospital, at the foot of which you can turn left onto Pond Road. There is very limited street parking as well as a few metered spaces at the Longwood MBTA stop on the Riverway.

Parking for the Fenway is also limited. There is some unmetered parking along the Fenway behind the art museum, and metered parking on the side streets. Most other areas are resident parking only, and without a sticker your car may be ticketed. Museum parking is available for a fee. If you approach this excursion from the Public Garden, there is metered parking around the Garden and paid parking in the Boston Common Garage off Charles Street.

Rest stops are available at the Jamaica Pond Boat House (seasonal), some fast food restaurants on Boylston Street near the Fenway, at the MFA (accessible without a ticket or pass), or in stores, hotels, and restaurants in the Back Bay. An all-day trip might land you in the Fenway area at lunch time; there are several inexpensive and interesting ethnic restaurants (with take-out) on Jersey Street that abuts the Fenway on the Park Drive side.

Boston's public parks are officially closed from 11:30 p.m. to 6:00 a.m. All of the areas discussed are quite safe during daylight hours; after dark you should stay on the lighted walkways and sidewalks. Going into the tall reeds or the denser bushy areas of the Fenway is not advised. These precautions are common sense in any urban area.

## NOTABLE BIRDS OF THE LOWER EMERALD NECKLACE

Over 170 species have been documented along the Muddy River and adjacent areas (for a check-list see *Birds of the Back Bay Fens And Vicinity*, Jones, G., and A. Roth, Special Publication #3, available from the Center for Vertebrate Studies, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115). Some of these sightings were single reports or overflights, while many of these species can be seen commonly in season at many birding areas. Listed below are species which are quite reliably present in season in the area identified and which are either uncommon elsewhere or can be seen particularly well here.

(Key: Br = Breeding, J= Jamaica Pond, L= Leverett Pond, O= Olmsted Park, R= Riverway, F= Fenway, E= Esplanade, B= Back Bay, P= Public Garden)

Pied-billed Grebe	L,F	N. Rough-winged Swallow	L,F Br F
Great Blue Heron	L,R,F	Golden-crowned Kinglet	O,P
Black-crowned Night-Heron	R,F,E	Ruby-crowned Kinglet	O,F
Wood Duck	R	Hermit Thrush	F,P
Northern Shoveler	F	Blue-headed Vireo	F,P
Bufflehead	J,L,E	Warbling Vireo	F
Hooded Merganser	J,L,F	Blue-winged Warbler	F
Ruddy Duck	L	Northern Parula	F, P
Red-tailed Hawk	O,F Br O	Black-throated Blue Warbler	F,P
American Kestrel	F	Palm Warbler	F, P
Peregrine Falcon	B Br	Blackpoll Warbler	F, P
Spotted Sandpiper	L,F	Northern Waterthrush	O,F
Common Nighthawk	F,B Br	American Tree Sparrow	R,F
Chimney Swift	F,E Br	Savannah Sparrow	F
Belted Kingfisher	L,R,F	Fox Sparrow	F
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker	F	Swamp Sparrow	F
Eastern Wood Pewee	F	Baltimore Oriole	O,F,P Br

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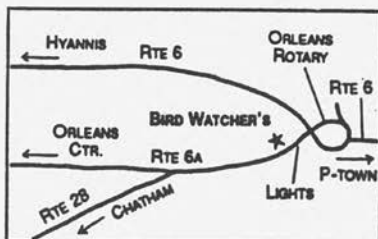
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