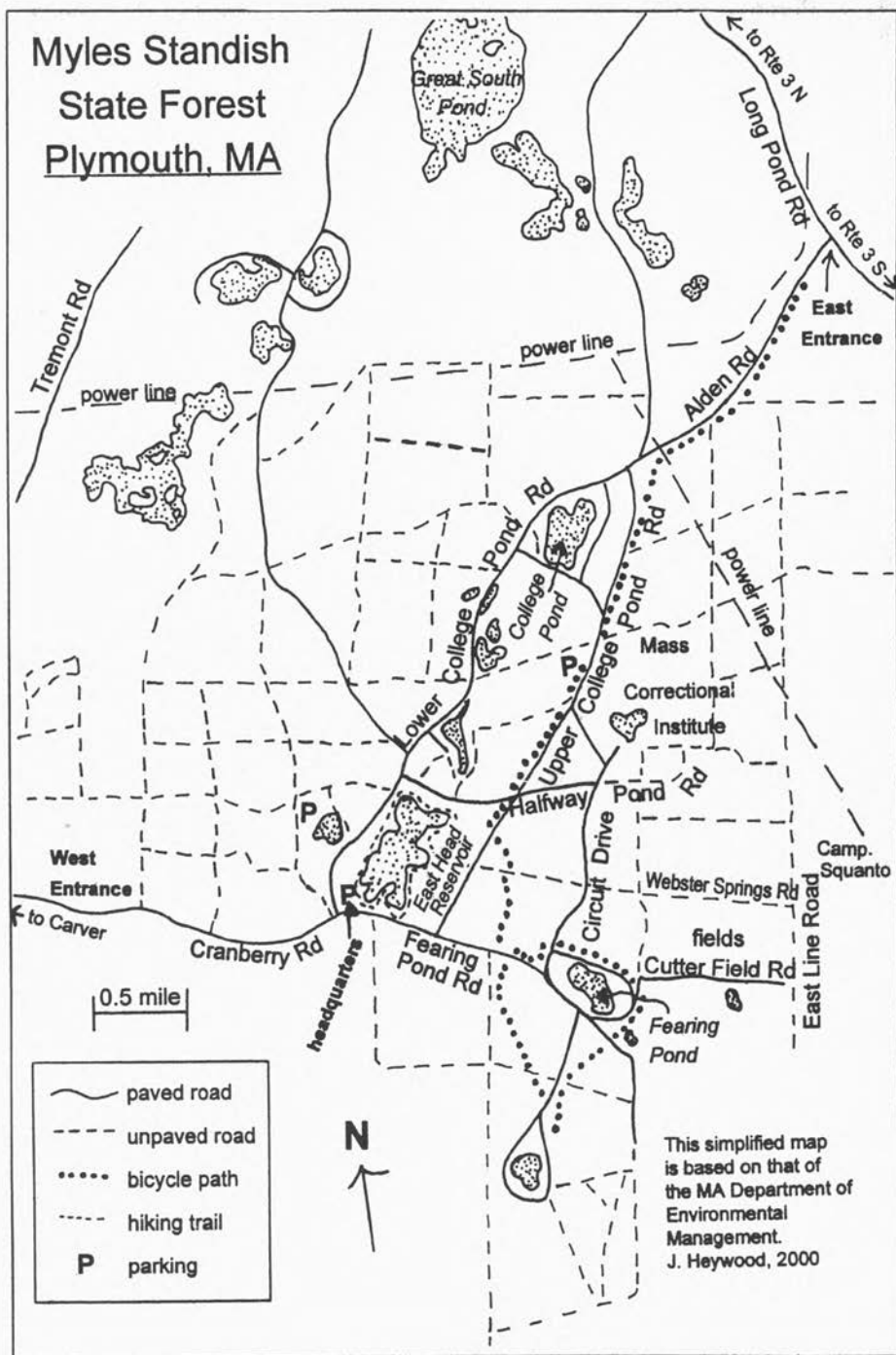


# Myles Standish State Forest Plymouth, MA



# Birding the Myles Standish State Forest in Plymouth

*Glenn d'Entremont*

Forty miles south of Boston is a paradise where a patient observer can enjoy the tranquil transition from day to night. There is no better place to be after a long day's work. Perhaps it is the sandy soil which absorbs the sound waves or its location several miles from any concentration of urban activity. Whatever the reason, the outcome is the same. Hermit Thrushes, Prairie Warblers, and Field Sparrows reluctantly give way to American Woodcock, Great Horned Owl, and Whip-poor-wills.

This is not how it was. Before the filling in of Back Bay in Boston, before the slashing and burning of tropical forests of South America, a pristine hardwood forest was destroyed. At the time of the arrival of the Pilgrims, cherry and chestnut trees stood in the pine barrens now called the Myles Standish State Forest.

Glaciers have shaped this terrain. It is pocked with kettleholes, bodies of water with no inlet or outlet. The water is colored brown by tannic acid. The sandy soil is glacial deposit. This area was the terminus of the sheet of ice covering New England, and when the glacier(s) retreated, pulverized stone in the form of sand was left.

When first cut over by Europeans, the precious top soil was cultivated for a short period, and then it was washed away, leaving the sandy soil base deposited by the glaciers. This soil provides excellent drainage, good for the production of the scrub oak and pitch pine that dominate the landscape today. Fires were frequent in such a dry environment and necessary to maintain the scrubby vegetation that today seems to be disappearing. The largest fire, in 1957, burned all the way to the ocean (some five to seven miles) and made an impression that has just been obliterated in the last ten years. Smokey the Bear does not like pine barrens.

It is here that my story begins. We used to take a ride in the family car on Sunday afternoons. One such trip went to the forest and inspired my interest in the area. I do not recall the event, but my father told me that a turtle was crossing the road. He stopped and moved it to the side of the road. He said that the bottom of the shell was red and claimed he showed it to all of us. If so, then this is the only time I have seen a Red-bellied Turtle. Also, I remember my parents discussing the "fire" and saying "look at the dead trees." I recollect the muted sounds and the look of its being bare. I expect it is the latter reason that this habitat is called the pine barrens.

Barren? Anything but. My explorations in the forest have produced interesting sightings. In addition to birds, coyotes, white-tailed deer, bats, Fowler's toad, gray tree frogs, Plymouth gentian, ferns, oaks (numerous species), poison ivy, cone-headed grasshoppers, tiger beetles (including a rare species I have not seen), numerous moths, and even cockroaches are just some of the things seen and encountered in the barrens.

Just short of 15,000 acres, it is the largest continuous forest owned by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Still, there is little area that cannot be accessed by some road or path. As for roads, they are more or less laid out in a grid pattern with roads every half mile or so. There are few paved roads, and some of the dirt roads I have

walked have sand hazards, so caution is advised if you want to take a two-wheel-drive vehicle on these. Most will be navigable, but you will want to get out of your vehicle and enjoy the area by walking.

I will address the spring and summer birding aspects of this very large public forest. There are not a large number of bird species using this unique habitat for breeding. Those that do breed here are present in numbers not encountered in other habitats. Eastern Towhees are abundant as are Chipping Sparrow, Pine Warbler (found in larger pines over 30 feet high), and Prairie Warbler (in disturbed areas with smaller pines under 30 feet high). In fact, Prairie Warbler is so numerous that a monograph on Prairie Warbler written in the 1960s listed this population as being the densest on the planet! This is the reason why a nice likeness of Prairie Warbler graces the dust cover of the *Birds of Massachusetts* by Veit and Petersen.

American Woodcock, Black-billed Cuckoo, Whip-poor-will, Eastern Wood Pewee, Tree Swallow, House Wren, Ovenbird, Gray Catbird, Hermit Thrush, American Robin, and Mourning Dove are among the common breeding birds. Northern Bobwhite, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Northern Saw-whet Owl, Great-crested Flycatcher, Fish Crow, Brown Thrasher, Yellow-rumped Warbler, and Field Sparrow represent the less common breeding birds. Northern Harrier, Cooper's Hawk, Eastern Screech-Owl, Hairy Woodpecker, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Chimney Swift, Alder Flycatcher, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Blue-winged Warbler, Nashville Warbler, and Clay-colored and Lincoln's sparrow are birds that have bred on rare occasions over the past fifteen or so years.

Our journey begins at exit 5 off Route 3 in Plymouth, the northern Long Pond Road exit. (Coming from the south, take exit 3, which also lists Long Pond Road.) From exit 5, turn right onto Long Pond Road. After about three miles, a power line crosses the road. Shortly on the right, the east entrance to the Myles Standish Forest goes right, while Long Pond Road bends left. (Coming from the south, the road bends right, and the entrance is on the left.) It is well marked with a state brown sign with white lettering. This is Alden Road (unmarked).

Follow Alden Road for about two miles. Take the first paved road to the left. This is Upper College Pond Road. Follow it for a little over three miles until you reach a "T". Turn left. (Since 1997 the bridge over the outlet to East Head Reservoir has forced traffic to the left anyway.) This will take you to Fearing Pond Road. This is a circular road with three paved outlets to the right, each of which leads to a dead end, forcing a return to Fearing Pond. Counting the paved roads on the right, take number three, the road to Camp Squanto. Turn right and drive up the short hill. Follow the paved road as it turns ninety degrees to the right (Cutter Field Road, unmarked).

As you drive, you will see several fields on the left. These fields offer the best diversity in the forest. They are cut to stimulate breeding by Northern Bobwhite with notable success. This is the only area where I hear them. There are approximately six such fields, each with a brushy break in the middle. They extend for about one-half mile to Webster Springs Road at their north end and are about one-eighth mile wide.

Stop and walk any of these fields. You will never be out of earshot or sight of an Eastern Towhee or Chipping Sparrow. Several of these fields have birdhouses which are

breeding homes to Tree Swallows, some House Wrens, and the occasional Eastern Bluebird. Purple Finches are sometimes present. Brown Thrashers and Field Sparrows should be encountered in these fields in small numbers. Prairie Warblers are abundant. Listen for their up-the-scale song. They are certainly feisty, fending off Pine Warblers. Prairies almost always win these battles. Perhaps Pine Warblers know that it is just a matter of time before they take over.

Migrating Alder Flycatchers and Lincoln's Sparrows have been seen. Before the grasses became a solid mat, Vesper Sparrows nested. Northern Harriers occasionally put in an appearance, but Cooper's Hawks are encountered a little more frequently. Song Sparrows are along the edge while Cedar Waxwings and Blue-winged Warblers are sometimes in the edge trees on the north and south ends of the fields. Black-billed Cuckoos are regular anywhere along the edges. Hermit Thrushes should be singing from the scrub. Listen for their slurred upward *reee*. Common Yellowthroats can be anywhere, as can House Wrens. In the denser evergreens (there are some spruces) one might find a Red-breasted Nuthatch.

Black-and-white Warblers are rare but regular breeders in this area, and with a little patience one should encounter them. Their alternate song is amazingly different from their squeaky-wheel territorial song. It is complex, pleasing to the ear, and very interesting. I hear it mostly after mid-June when they should be feeding young.

Pay attention. Clay-colored Sparrows have been present and singing, defending territory against Chipping Sparrows, in at least two of these fields. Listen for their buzzy song, reminiscent of the Golden-winged Warbler's. This forest historically had breeding Golden-wings, so track down any song with buzzy notes.

The Cutter Field Road does a little jog around an unseen pond and climbs a hill. At the top of this hill there is a parking lot. You have traveled about seven and one-half miles from the Long Pond Road entrance. This parking lot is stop number one of a survey I have conducted for close to 15 years to count Whip-poor-wills. It continues to stop 18 at the entrance at Long Pond Road. It is here that I enjoy the dusk. If you stop and look west, then you notice one lone pine tree which stands above the canopy. This tree appears one-third higher than the height it was in 1988 when our Whip-poor-will survey began. But I digress.

Continuing on the road to the east brings you to the East Line Road and off the forest property to Camp Squanto where the road ends. The field to the south has birdhouses and a search should turn up a bluebird or two.

Retrace your path back to the Fearing Pond Road. Since the road is one way, you must turn right and continue the loop. In about one-half mile there will be a road on the right (Circuit Drive) which is blocked off. Park and walk this road. Since there is no vehicular traffic, there is less noise. Prairie and Pine warblers dominate. Chipping and Field sparrows should be encountered. Once I observed low flying Chimney Swifts in June along this road, and I wonder whether there are naturally nesting swifts in the forest. There are several old dead trees which could be hollow for them to use. I have not seen additional evidence of nesting, but keep a watchful eye. If you keep walking along this road, you join another paved road (Halfway Pond Road) from the left. If you continue beyond that intersection, you come to the Massachusetts Correctional Institute-Plymouth.

You will probably hear the loud speakers before arriving at the entrance. I usually avoid this section of road, turning around at the intersection.

Returning to your vehicle, continue on the Fearing Pond loop road to a stop sign. Bear right to return to Upper College Pond Road (turning left begins the loop again). Turn right onto Upper College Pond Road. (Since 1997 the bridge over the outlet to East Head Reservoir has forced traffic to the right anyway.) At the next intersection with a paved road (Halfway Pond Road), park off the pavement on one of the two "corner" cutoffs located on the southwest or northeast corner. Walking back, locate the paved bike trail on the west (right) side of the street. A walk in these woods should turn up Eastern Wood Pewee, Ovenbird, and, in the white pines, Yellow-rumped Warbler. Occasionally a Red-breasted Nuthatch will be here. Both cuckoo species have been recorded here. House Wrens use the openings in the gates to nest. If you go to the east-side bike trail, then you have a chance to see more of these species. A Hairy Woodpecker was in these woods during one walk.

The margins of all the major roads have been cut for greatest visibility for deer. However, on the east side of Upper College Pond Road, there is a single larch tree in the short grass. There was a Clay-colored Sparrow using the larch and the surrounding area as a territory several years ago. The adjacent area along the south side of Halfway Pond Road has not been cut recently. A walk along Halfway Pond Road should yield Pine Warbler on the left (north) and Prairie Warbler on the right (south). Also, Field Sparrow has been on the right (south).

Return to your car and go west on Halfway Pond Road. At the next intersection with a paved road, turn left. This is Lower College Pond Road. The road is windy, and caution is advised. This is a heavily forested area with large pine and other evergreen species. There are numerous pulloffs for a car or two. On the left, there is a small spruce stand that was planted after the 1957 fire. A stop here should produce Red-breasted Nuthatch. Brown Creeper is probably here all the time, but their inconspicuous living habits prevent them from being recorded on every visit. On one May Big Day, I recorded a singing Golden-crowned Kinglet from these spruces. This was 1987, and future visits during prime season did not produce additional records. This is a rare breeder in the southeastern coastal plain of Massachusetts, so this individual may have been a wandering singleton.

Continuing southwest, Lower College Pond Road eventually curves southeast, and buildings appear on the right. These are maintenance buildings for vehicles and equipment. There is one residence. A short distance beyond, there is a paved road joining the road on which you are driving. This is Cranberry Road and is the west entrance to the park off Route 58. Straight ahead of you there will be a barrier just after a parking lot with a large brown building. Pull into the lot.

There are restrooms here, just renovated. They are in the small building called the Interpretive Center and are located on the sides, so that if the center is closed, the restrooms are still available. The long brown building has staff and is open 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. in season. Trail maps are available. The maps are not complete; for example, the fields and trails on Cutter Field Road are not listed, so there may be still some exploring to be done by the adventurous. However, all the major roads and structures are shown.

The headquarters are located on the southern end of the largest body of water in the forest, called East Head Reservoir. It had been diked on the south end by an earthen dam that gave way during spring of 1997, almost killing the driver of the car that was crossing at the time. Cranberry bog owners quickly re-dammed it to prevent loss of cranberry plants downstream. This is now closed to vehicular traffic and necessitates a circular route to get from the headquarters to the Fearing Pond area. A walk along this section of road is quieter than others, and all the above-mentioned common species can be recorded. Listen for cuckoos and Purple Finch, too.

At the headquarters, there should be a trail map for a self-guided nature walk around the reservoir. This walk circles the reservoir and begins on the other side of the dam from the parking lot and returns to the lot. It is a little long, but is worth doing in order to learn about the various plants of the pine barrens. Birdwise, this is the only location for some species, such as Yellow Warbler and Mute Swan. Song Sparrows, Northern Cardinals, and Red-winged Blackbirds are present. Pine Warblers are abundant and an occasional Yellow-rumped Warbler may be encountered.

From the headquarters, return to Lower College Pond Road. If you follow this road northeast, it will bring you back to the east entrance and Long Pond Road. Lower College Pond Road is more serpentine than Upper College Pond Road with blind turns and dropaway rises. A right turn back onto Halfway Pond Road and a left onto Upper College Pond Road may actually be quicker. Either way, the trip back to the east entrance is seven and one-half to eight miles. (The two roads eventually join to become Alden Road before you get back to Long Pond Road.)

There are several species that can be seen anywhere in the forest and, at the same time, nowhere. Fish Crow and Common Grackle are two such species. One can see a flock of several individuals or, more likely, none.

Lastly, there are wildcards, flyovers which can be encountered anywhere. Great Blue Heron and Solitary Sandpiper are two such birds. Some unusual encounters are a flock of Oldsquaw and a Virginia Rail, both heard in the pitch black!

Night birding in the forest is rewarding. Any stop not in enclosed forest will produce Whip-poor-will. These birds call all night in June. They are truly daylight-sensitive so that they begin calling at about 15 minutes after sundown. Birds on easterly facing slopes call first. If it is cloudy, then they call earlier because it is darker. Warm, humid, moonlit night counts record the highest numbers of "Whips." If it is cold and cloudy, then they call briefly at dusk.

Any imitation will produce a response no matter how poor. (I mimic Whip-poor-will so well that they now move away from me.) Some responses will be a bird flying by your nose. Another will be a sharp *whit* as a bird flies by.

As the season progresses, the birds call less and less. By September they must be enticed to call. And then it is only during a short five minute span 10 or so minutes after sunset. I have recorded Whip-poor-will from April 27 to September 30.


Historically, Common Nighthawks nested on the ground in recently burned areas, their dark gray eggs mottled with black and white blending perfectly with the blackened earth. In the 1970s when Manomet staff found the first nest, this was believed to be the

only place in the state where nighthawks still nested under natural conditions. With subsequent suppression of fire, there are seldom any blackened open areas, and nighthawks must search out blackish, graveled rooftops as the closest approximation of their desired habitat. Late May is now the only time I encounter Common Nighthawk. The southward migration seems to bypass the southeastern coastal plain of Massachusetts as they follow a southwestward path from Boston to Narragansett Bay or southern Rhode Island.

Northern Saw-whet Owls are sporadic breeders. There have been as many as five territories on the eighteen stop, seven-and-one-half-mile Whip-poor-will survey route. The most reliable spot has been the College Pond area. (Perhaps this is because by the time I get there it is completely dark.) Sometimes the only sign of residence is a haunting *eeeeeeEEE* which is more emphatic at the end. This call is given later in the breeding season perhaps after young have fledged. I have heard it in April as well. The squeaks and other noises heard during the winter do not seem to be heard here. There have been years with no Northern Saw-whet Owls.

Great Horned Owls may be the most numerous raptor in the forest. They are certainly the most reliable. You may encounter them anywhere. One moonlit night, my friend and I heard two owls. He mimicked the call of an injured rabbit. In a few seconds we were surrounded by four owls! They were flying over the road looking for this rabbit.

On one occasion I heard an Eastern Screech-Owl. It was early August and the species has not been recorded since. This is not a place for this species to be regularly encountered.

One last word regarding the habitat. It is fragile and constantly wanting to mature. The suppression of fire has caused a reduction of disturbed habitat, resulting in decreased numbers of Whip-poor-wills, Brown Thrashers, Prairie Warblers, Field Sparrows, and Eastern Towhees. The Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences is attempting to work with the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife for a prescribed burn schedule to rejuvenate the habitat. 

**Acknowledgements:** I would like to thank Kathleen (Betty) Anderson for her invaluable knowledge of the bird life and other happenings at Myles Standish State Forest. I have used her nighthawk information almost word for word. I would also like to thank Trevor Lloyd-Evans at Manomet Center for Conservation Sciences for reviewing the draft of this article.

**Glenn d'Entremont's** interest in birds was sparked by a visit to the Manomet bird banding station in October 1968. His uncle, Herman D'Entremont, was a volunteer who worked the nets removing the birds caught. A wide-eyed Glenn was handed a few birds to release after banding. He was hooked for life. Glenn has done Whip-poor-will surveys at night in the Myles Standish State Forest since 1987. He occasionally completes surveys during the breeding season of the other birds residing in the forest. Glenn is a General Accounting Manager at CGI Circuits, Inc., in Taunton, and serves on Bird Observer's Board of Directors.