

Birding the Lakes and Marshes of Wakefield and Lynnfield

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Located ten miles northwest of Boston, the towns of Wakefield and Lynnfield contain some easily accessible lakes for busy suburban birders to explore in their free time. Because these lakes are popular with the general public, the focus of this article will be on birding the off season, the months of November through March.

The first lake to be covered is the very popular **Lake Quannapowitt** in Wakefield. This lake and its surrounding lands are in almost continual use year-round. Walkers, joggers, and rollerbladers keep the perimeter of the lake active while sailboats, fishing boats, windsurfers, and ice boats keep the lake itself very busy. Needless to say, the birding is affected by all this activity, but still, many fine birds can be seen at the lake. For a watershed management plan prepared by the Friends of Lake Quannapowitt in August 1997, Peter and Fay Vale and I compiled a list of 118 species of birds seen by us over the years in and around the lake.

Lake Quannapowitt can be easily accessed from Route 128 (I-95). Take exit 39, head southeast on North Avenue (toward Boston), and take your first left into Converse Park. As you drive down this road, the lake will be on your right and a small field on your left. A new office building has reduced the size of the field, but it is still worth a look for Killdeer, Ring-necked Pheasant, and an occasional Whimbrel. There is a small swale just before you get to the first Converse building that during wet times holds water and sometimes birds. On weekends, pull into the Converse parking lot, and scan the lake for ducks. Good looks at Common Mergansers, Buffleheads, Ruddy Ducks, and Hooded Mergansers can often be had here. In the winter, make sure you check out the ditched remnants of the Saugus River that divide the two parking lots. The water is usually open and may hold some birds.

Continue on the road around the old Converse building, where you can view the lake again. At the end of the road, be careful; it is sometimes gated, and you will have to retrace your steps to get to the next stop on this tour. To do this, head back to Route 128N, and follow it for one exit. Off the exit follow the rotary almost halfway around, and bear right on to Route 129 eastbound. If it is not gated, simply turn right at the end of the road directly onto Route 129. If you want another look at the lake, pull over to the right and park; if not, continue along Route 129. If you need sustenance, there are the Gingerbread Construction Company and Honey Dew Donuts on your left, both worth the stop. As you follow Route 129, there is legal parking on the right, and you may want to take advantage of it to scan for ducks. During November and December the numbers of Common Mergansers can build to almost 400, and they often favor this shore of the lake. Scan these rafts carefully for Hooded Mergansers, Ruddy Ducks, and scaup that may be mixed in with the Commons.

Follow Route 129 for one mile. At the stoplight turn right onto Church Street,

and quickly take your next right onto Lake Avenue. This road dead-ends at a playground where you can park and scan the lake. Leaving Lake Avenue, turn right back onto Church Street. You will pass an old cemetery on your right which has a lot of fruiting trees. Check them out, but do not try to park along this side of Church Street; it is illegal. At the end of Church Street, turn right at the lights onto North Avenue, and then turn right into the softball park known as **Veteran's Field**. Park here to check the gulls, geese, and ducks as well as the many mature trees in this park. If you want to walk over to the cemetery you just passed, follow the path to the right. It is an easy five-minute walk, and there are many fruit and berry trees and shrubs that can hold birds year-round. In the winter, keep an eye open for American Robins and Cedar Waxwings.

Leaving the softball park, turn right back onto North Avenue, take your first right onto Lakeside Street, and park on the right. You can walk to the lake to get additional views of any ducks, or walk Lakeside Street checking out the **Temple Emanuel Cemetery** on your left and the brushy areas along the shoreline to your right. This area holds sparrows in the fall and many of the common winter birds.

When you leave Lakeside Street, turn right back onto North Avenue, and take your first right onto Beacon Street. At this point you have two options. First, you can continue straight down Beacon Street, which runs between Emanuel and Lakeside cemeteries and dead-ends at the lake. The end of the road is unpaved, but you can scan from here. On several occasions I have seen Canvasbacks from this site. The second option is to turn left into the **Lakeside Cemetery**. Once inside, take your first right, Elm Street, and slowly follow it as it loops around close to the lake. This is the quietest part of the Lake Quannapowitt area, and the many mature trees and shrubs bear scrutiny for migrants and winter residents. Screech Owls have nested here in the past. As Elm Street bears left, it turns into Lakeside Street, which comes very close to the lake and offers a good view of the cove by the Quannapowitt Yacht Club. In this cove I have seen fifteen species of waterfowl over the years including Pintail, Black and Ruddy ducks, Hooded and Common mergansers, Pied-billed and Horned grebes, Green-winged Teal, and others. Belted Kingfishers, Great Blue Herons, and in the fall Ospreys can be found in and around this cove.

Lakeside Street goes down a slight incline and then bears left. At the bottom of the incline examine the woodlot to the right. Sharp-shinned and Cooper's hawks frequent this area in the winter, feeding on the birds that make use (but not good enough use!) of this cover. Follow along Lakeside Street and leave the cemetery. Turn right back onto North Avenue, and proceed about 200 yards until you come to a blinking light. Turn right here onto Linda Road. As you head slowly down this road check out the last two houses on the right. Not only do they abut the lake, but they often have stocked feeders that attract most of the common birds. Linda Road dead-ends at the **Quannapowitt Yacht Club**. This is private property and should be birded only very early in the morning or from early November through mid-April when the yacht club has pulled its moorings. During these months the folks at the QYC have been fine with people birding the area. The yacht club offers some good vantage points to scope the lake for ducks.

Head toward the sandy beach to the right of the yacht club. Approach the water cautiously so as not to spook the birds. Great looks can be had of ducks in this cove. Scan the trees on the opposite shore for hawks, Ospreys, and kingfishers. If the water level is low, you can walk along the shoreline toward the back of the cove. To your right is a swampy area backed by trees that is often a bird magnet in the winter. Golden-crowned Kinglets, Redpolls, Winter Wrens, and sparrows may frequent this area. About halfway down this shoreline a little creek enters, and it is here that you might jump a Common Snipe in the fall or early winter. In some years there has been a Black-crowned Night-Heron roost here. On foggy mornings in May, huge numbers of several species of swallows have been seen here, too.

Return to the parking lot, and cross over to a path that leads into a stand of trees dominated by half-a-dozen big beeches. It is a two-minute walk to the lake along this path, but you may end up spending a lot longer, since this area can hold many birds. To your left is swamp, often with Green and Great Blue herons, both in the water and in the surrounding trees. During spring migration warblers abound in the trees and brush below. Approach the lake slowly, as Common and Hooded mergansers frequent this shore. It is from here that I have seen Oldsquaws, White-winged Scoters, and Common Loons after strong November storms. If the water level is low, it may be worth your while to walk the shoreline to your right, heading for the swampy area. In winter some judicious pishing may cause this swamp to become alive with birds, such as American Tree Sparrows, American Goldfinches, lingering Red-winged Blackbirds, and others.



After exploring this area, retrace your route to North Avenue. Turn right, and take your second right onto Willard Road. This street also ends at the lake, offering another perspective of the area you just came from. As you start to leave Willard Road, quickly turn right into, and slowly proceed through the Lord Wakefield Best Western hotel parking lot. Stop in to get a cup of coffee if you want; otherwise, once through the parking lot, turn right and park next to the lake. This is the last stop of the trip around Lake Quannapowitt and provides you with a final look at the waterfowl.

The next destination is **Crystal Lake**, just south of Lake Quannapowitt in Wakefield and touching Stoneham on the southwest. Crystal Lake is what I call a two-part lake. The main body of it is rather deep and attracts a good number of diving ducks including Ring-necked Duck, both scaups, Bufflehead, Ruddy Duck, Common

Merganser, and an occasional Canvasback. The back part of the lake is shallow with a lot of weeds, and is swampy along the back shore. Pied-billed Grebe, Black and Wood ducks, American Wigeon, Hooded Merganser, Green-winged Teal, American Coot, and occasionally Gadwall can be seen here. The lake is three-quarters surrounded by woods, with many large white pines close to the shore. These pines often attract migrating Ospreys through mid-November: they use these pines as perches from which to hunt and consume their prey. Belted Kingfishers are commonly found at the lake, too.

To get to Crystal Lake from Lake Quannapowitt, leave the Best Western parking lot, and head out toward North Avenue. Turn left (southeast) on North Avenue and drive for 1.7 miles until North Avenue ends at Main Street. Turn right on Main Street, follow it for 0.6 mile, and turn right onto Merian Street and over the small railroad bridge. Take your first right over the bridge onto Linden Avenue, and park on the right about 100 feet down at the Town Watershed sign. Follow the path through the pine grove, and make a cautious approach to the lake so as not to spook any ducks, which will often be close to shore. From here you get a good look at the main body of the lake. About 100 yards out are two tiny islands, and ducks can often be seen feeding near them. Look along the shoreline to the right to a swampy area that often holds Belted Kingfishers and Wood Ducks and provides cover for land birds. As you head back to the car, check out the pine grove, especially in winter, since it may have Brown Creepers, Red-breasted Nuthatches, Golden-crowned Kinglets, and other birds associated with coniferous habitats.

Once back to your car, turn around and retrace the route you took, going left out of Linden Street onto Merian Street, over the railroad bridge, and left onto Main Street. Follow Main Street back to the lights, turn left onto North Avenue, and take your first left after going over the railroad tracks onto Broadway Street. Follow Broadway for 0.2 mile, and turn left into the Town of Wakefield Water Treatment Building parking lot. From here you can scan the lake, looking back toward where you just were. There are often scaup very close to the retaining wall here, providing good identification practice for those of us who struggle with scaup identification.

Upon leaving this site, turn left back onto Broadway, take your next left onto Sylvan Street, and follow it until it makes a sharp right. Don't take the right; rather, park on the left side of the road. This stop will provide access to both parts of the lake and is worth the walk. Head down the path, but be careful: you will be walking on oak leaves and pine needles, and the combination can be slippery. Follow the path down toward the lake, where you have some good vantage points to view any waterfowl that are present. The path then heads back uphill parallel to the waterline and takes you to the back portion of the lake. Approach the lake slowly since the waterfowl are often close to shore. There are numerous vantage points along here. Carefully scan the marshy section on the opposite side for ducks that may be feeding or resting there. Check out the trees along the shoreline for hawks, and in the fall for Osprey. The trees can hold a good number of songbirds, especially during migration. As you move away from the lake, the forest changes from predominantly pine to mixed deciduous, and the variety of birds increases. Great Crested Flycatcher has bred

in this area. Heading right, you can continue to walk partway around the lake to the next stop on this tour of Crystal Lake, but at some point you will have to retrace your steps to the car.

Back in your car, follow Sylvan Street until it loops back to Broadway, and turn left onto Broadway. Follow this for 0.3 mile to a stoplight. Turn left on to Albion Street. You are now looking for West Park Drive on the left, which is a circle. Go past the first sign for West Park Drive, take the next left onto West Park Drive, follow it to the bottom of the hill, and park on the right in front of an empty lot. Take the path that runs out the back left corner of the lot. As you head along this path, which is a good example of an esker, there is a thicket on the right that provides cover for many of the permanent residents and bears checking out in winter as well. Follow the path up the hill, where the lake will be on your left and a small impoundment on your right. The impoundment has contained Wood Duck, Green-wing Teal, Black Duck, Virginia Rail, Black-crowned Night Heron, American Coot, and in 1998 an American Bittern. You can follow the path straight to the shore where it will offer another perspective of the lake. You can also turn left and walk toward the area you just left. Mute Swan, American Wigeon, American Coot, Ring-neck Duck, and Hooded Merganser often congregate in this part of the lake.

This completes the tour of Crystal Lake. To get to the next stop, the Lynnfield Marsh, you will have to return to Route 128. To do this, follow West Park Drive out to Albion Street and turn right. Follow Albion Street straight through the stoplight for 0.6 mile until you come to a blinking light. Turn left at this blinking light onto North Avenue, and follow it 1.4 miles back to the entrance to Routes 128/95 north. Take 128N to exit 42, Salem Street Montrose. At the end of the exit turn left, and then take your first left back under the highway. This is Audubon Road, formerly known as Pleasure Island Road.

The **Lynnfield Marsh**, or **Audubon Marsh** as it is called by some, has been prized by birders over the years as a great place to see and hear rails. Stories from the early 1900s right up through the 1960s told of common sightings of Virginia, Sora, and King rails, as well as, on occasion, the fabled Yellow Rail. Common Moorhens were also prevalent here as were Least and American bitterns. Unfortunately, time has not been kind to this area, as encroaching development and loss of habitat have taken their toll. However, the Lynnfield Marsh still offers wonderful birding.

As you head down Audubon Road, you will pass the entrance to the Sheraton Hotel. Your first views of the marsh will be on the right. You can pull over and park to scan for ducks, herons, and Tree, Barn, Cliff, and Rough-winged swallows in the summer. A Purple Gallinule was seen here in 1986 and a Eurasian Wigeon in 1998. Continue to the first right into the **Edgewater Business Park**. On weekends when most of the businesses are closed, the security people that patrol the area have been very understanding of people birding the area. A friendly wave or a brief word with them will get you on your way. Many of the office buildings have berry-laden ornamental trees and shrubs. Cedar waxwings are often seen around these in the winter.

Once in the park, turn right and slowly proceed along the road next to the marsh. Black Ducks, Wood Ducks, American Coots, Buffleheads, and Green-winged Teal can be seen from this road. When you come to building number 401, park and walk through the picnic area to the right of the building. A path heads out a short way into the marsh. Rusty Blackbirds are sometimes spotted in this area. Back in your car, continue slowly toward the parking garage and check out the weedy areas around it. One Thanksgiving several years back, a *Myiarchus* flycatcher was found here. Continue along the road, turning right at the intersection. There will be more grassy, weedy areas to check for sparrows and other field birds, especially in the fall. You are asked not to walk out into these areas so you will have to view them from the road. Be certain to scan the large body of water in the middle of the park since it often has Hooded Mergansers in late fall and early winter.

Upon leaving the office park, turn right, and follow Audubon Road to the end. There is a factory at the end of the road, and it is gated. Park outside the gate on the right. Walk along the railroad spur until it meets the mainline tracks, and follow them to the right, under and beyond the power lines and away from the traffic noise of 128. This is where Virginia Rails and Soras can be found. Both breed here and in the spring can be heard calling. Early in the breeding season the rails are quite vocal, and tapes are not necessary. Please do all you can not to stress these birds. Marsh Wrens breed here as well; also be on the lookout for Willow Flycatcher and American Bittern, both former nesters here. In the fall, Common Grackles congregate here in enormous numbers, which always gives hope of finding less common blackbirds.

When you return to your car, instead of leaving consider taking the dirt trail out into the **Reedy Meadow**. It is about a five-minute walk through woods along a dirt road that is often wet, until you come to a small pond. The trees along this road can hold good numbers of warblers in the spring and on occasion, during low water, shorebirds can be seen around the pond. Least Bitterns have been reported along here, too.


Drive out the way you came in, but turn left onto the road that leads into the hotel. Proceed slowly over the speed bumps and check out the small pond on your left. During low water there may be shorebirds present in late summer and fall. Continue along this road through the hotel and golf complex, and at the end of it turn left onto Walnut Street. Follow Walnut Street for 1.1 miles until it ends. If you want an additional view of the Lynnfield Marsh, turn left and follow Summer Street for 0.8 mile until you come to the Baptist Church. Park in the church parking lot, and walk along the railroad bed to reach the marsh. It is a seven- to ten-minute walk until you can expect to see or hear marsh birds.

If you don't take this additional view of the marsh, when Walnut Street ends, turn right onto Summer Street. Just ahead on your left will be **Pillings Pond**, also in Lynnfield. During the early 1990s, as part of a reclamation project, the pond was drained and dug out. It was refilled in 1997, but the ducks have yet to return there. Maybe with time it will be worth the stop. Continue east on Summer Street for 1.3 miles, and turn left on to Moulton Street to get to the last stop of this tour, Suntaug

Reservoir. Moulton Street runs parallel to Route 128 on the north side of the highway. Take your second left onto Oak Street, just before the Bali Hai restaurant, proceed to the end of the street, and park in the playground parking lot. From here you can view the lake from the southwest side.

Suntaug Reservoir, which straddles the towns of Lynnfield and Peabody, holds a good number of ducks from September until it freezes over. Ring-necked Ducks, Ruddy Ducks, both scaup species, Buffleheads, American Coots, and Common and Hooded mergansers are all common birds here in the fall and early winter. A Tufted Duck was here for three weeks in April 1998, associating with the flock of scaups. This an excellent place to spot migrating Ospreys in the fall. At the eastern end of the reservoir is an island, on which there is currently a small Great Blue Heron rookery. For the last several years the half-dozen or so nests have been built in live white pine trees, visible from Route 1 as you drive south (but don't stop on the highway to look!). From the playground parking lot you can walk about 200 yards to your right to scan the reservoir. If you want to get to the other (north) side of the reservoir, you can drive over to the Puritan Lawn Cemetery, but the viewing of the reservoir from there is best done early in the morning or in mid- to late afternoon to avoid looking into the sun.

It is rather involved to get to the **Puritan Lawn Cemetery** in Peabody, but there can be some excellent year-round birding there. Retrace your steps until you come to the end of Moulton Street, and turn left onto Summer Street. Go under Route 128, take a left onto Salem Street, and follow this 0.4 mile until you get to a set of lights. Go through the lights and turn left, following the signs for Route 1N. Stay on 1N for just about 1.0 mile until you come to what the locals call "The Jug Handle," which is the legal U-turn exit. Take this U-turn and head back along Route 1S for 0.4 mile, and take a right onto Lake Street. Follow Lake Street 0.2 mile, and turn left into the Puritan Lawn Cemetery. For the best views of the reservoir, once in the cemetery take your first left onto Humphrey Drive, which parallels the reservoir. There is a pull-off ahead on the left, and you can scan the reservoir from here or walk down to the shoreline for additional views. A discussion of the year-round birding in Puritan Lawn Cemetery is beyond the scope of this article, but suffice it to say that the birding there can be excellent, especially in spring.

I hope this article has presented some new and exciting birding opportunities for you. I have birded these areas for the past fifteen years and enjoy these bodies of water and the birds they hold. Like many other busy birders, I gravitated to these places because they were close to home and quick and easy to get to. I hope that the close proximity of these lakes and marshes to one another and to Route 95 and Route 1 will allow the resident or visiting birder the chance to get in some interesting and enjoyable birding not far from Boston. 

David Williams is a middle-school science teacher in Reading, Massachusetts. He has been a birder for twenty years and leads numerous bird walks for his town, school, and other groups. He is an active member of the Ipswich River Watershed Association. The author would like to thank Peter and Fay Vale and Dana M. Jewell for their contributions to this article. Their knowledge of these areas is extensive.