

POCKET PLACES

Bennett Meadows Wildlife Management Area, Northfield

Vince Yurkunas

The weather was quite mild for New Year's Day in Massachusetts. Bare, brown earth and wizened, dead vegetation surrounded me as I started the millennium birding at Bennett Meadows Wildlife Management Area in Northfield. This spot has quickly become one of my favorite places because of the variety of habitats it offers: swampy wetlands, open cornfields, brushy edges, deciduous woodlands, and open river. A few hours observing here could turn up almost anything!

Proceeding through the northern edge of the cornfield toward the wetlands, I encountered several winter residents. It already was a good winter for Common Redpolls, and several of these finches helped to brighten a dark and overcast morning. Dark-eyed Junco, Cedar Waxwing, American Goldfinch, American Tree Sparrow, and Song Sparrow all were foraging, trying to survive until the spring. Even the Red-tailed Hawk overhead was on the hunt for its daily meal.

Hearing a large flock of blackbirds chattering in the swampy area, I made my way around a wooded peninsula so I might have a clearer look. Before I had a chance to start scanning the blackbirds, a large raptor came barreling out of the woods *directly at me*. I no sooner got my binoculars focused on it when the Peregrine Falcon swung to the left, up and over the cornfield and disappeared beyond the trees at the south end. Wow! What a way to start the year!


Letting the rush of adrenaline die down, I continued walking toward the blackbirds when another hawk came out of the woods from the same direction as the falcon. This bird, though, turned to the right and moved off in a more leisurely fashion over the swamp and adjacent trees. I have never had a better look at a Northern Goshawk as this magnificent forest hawk showed off his blue-gray back and white eye stripe. I could not help but think: What were these two powerful predators doing in the same spot at the same time, and were they aware of each other's presence?

Really pumped up now, I could barely manage to look at the swamp full of blackbirds below me. The redwings I knew were there from their well-known song, but the twenty or so Rusty Blackbirds were an added bonus. This species had always been difficult to locate even during migration, so finding some in winter was quite rewarding.

Leaving this spectacular corner of the cornfield, I turned south along the woods, spotting more familiar birds such as Hairy Woodpecker, Eastern Bluebird, and Pileated Woodpecker. At the southern edge a small area of brush sometimes harbors

sparrows, so a look was in order. Off in the distance a bird with white wing patches flew down to the ground and back up into a tree. Must be a mockingbird, I thought. Upon arriving at the location, I could not believe my luck when the bird turned out to be a Northern Shrike. The scalloped effect on the breast feathers was easily observed, and I was able to get quite close to this visitor from the north.

Turning back north along the Connecticut River which forms the eastern boundary of the management area, I added Common Goldeneye, Downy Woodpecker, Tufted Titmouse, White-breasted Nuthatch, Black-capped Chickadee, American Crow, Mourning Dove, and Blue Jay to the list of birds seen. Back near my car I was feeling pretty good about the special birds that were here for me today. Just then I noticed (yes, you guessed it!) another hawk perched near the top of a tree right behind the car. As I brought binoculars to bear, an adult Merlin became the icing on the proverbial cake. An excellent way to start the millennium — and you can be sure I will be visiting Bennett Meadows Wildlife Management Area more often!

Directions to Bennett Meadows Wildlife Management Area: From Route 2 take Route 63 north. At the intersection of Routes 10 and 63, make a left turn onto Route 10 (heading west). Cross the bridge over the Connecticut River, and look for the sign to the area on the left side of the road. The entrance is just before the sign. Pull in, and drive down the short hill to the circular parking area. 



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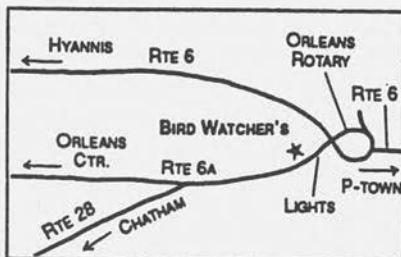
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