

# POCKET PLACES

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## Groton Place, Groton

*Lisa Clark*

I've only been birding seriously for about five years, but my husband and I have enjoyed the Groton Place for at least ten. On the Nashua River near the Groton School, it is a mixed, young forest that is either part of, or adjacent to, a tree farm, but we've only heard saws once. It is lovely and, near the beginning of the woods, features a touching memorial of stone benches and a sculpture of a reclining dog. You can walk for many miles through these woods, and you can feel away from it all, including your own species.



I've never seen anything spectacular at the Groton Place, but I have had my best looks at many more-often-heard-than-seen forest birds there. Each spring this is my most reliable place to see Eastern Wood-Pewee, Scarlet Tanager, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, and Red-eyed Vireo. Dead trees with large, rectangular holes abound, and I've heard that Pileated Woodpeckers breed here, although I've never been fortunate enough to see them. Hermit and Wood thrushes and Veeries sing here every spring, as do forest-loving warblers and other visitors from the tropics. We see Cooper's Hawks cruise low overhead on many of our spring and summer walks. But in the summer, most of our sightings are of mosquitoes and their allies. In the fall, the conifers lining the field near the entrance are my most reliable place for Red-breasted Nuthatches, and in the pines near the boat ramp, the odd White-winged Crossbill appears from time to time. I've also seen Fox Sparrows scratching around under the first large conifers you encounter along the river. In the winter, of course, you can see the usual hardy forest denizens.

I've never seen anything exciting *in* the river (which is used regularly both by Groton School crew and recreational canoers and kayakers; there's a rental place down the street), but I have seen Common Loons, Great blue and Green herons, Red-tailed Hawks, and Turkey Vultures flying above. The river has a fairly brisk current belied by its smooth surface.

Our usual route is to enter around the gate, walk over the stone bridge, check for flycatchers, kingfishers, and ducks depending on the season, and take a right onto a path through the field and toward the river. In the conifers to the left of the path are nuthatches, kinglets, chickadees, and titmice. Song Sparrows and others of that niche enjoy the weedy field on the right. Along the river, one might hear one or more species of sparrows



scratching beneath the tall conifers. There's a bench at the river where you can sit and take in the view. Then take a left onto a path through a field with the river on the right. You will come very shortly to woods and a main trail, which eventually has several branches. The trails closest to the river are the birdiest. As you enter the woods, you'll come to the stone bench and charming dog sculpture.

Shortly thereafter the main trail branches, and then the choice is yours. You can follow the main trail along the river through the woods to the boathouse (a bit more than half a mile) and loop back on the slightly more upland trail. This is the birdiest part. Just before the boathouse are trees in which I saw at least fifteen Red-eyed Vireos one day a couple of Septembers ago. (All those little red eyes were strangely compelling.) The open area just past the boathouse can be very good for seed-eaters (and accipiters looking for seed-eaters), as well as phoebes and kingbirds in season. From the boathouse, we often head back in the direction we've come, but you can continue on.

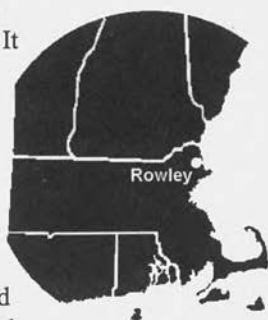
There are many trails at the Groton Place, so enjoy exploring. You can get in a good, long walk. There aren't any trail maps available, but it would be pretty hard to become lost. Basically, follow the songs, calls, and drumming, and enjoy.

**Directions:** From Exit 31 on I-495, take State Route 119 west to Groton center. From the center, turn left onto Route 225, and follow signs to West Groton. A small parking area for the Groton Place is on the left, a few hundred yards before a bridge that crosses the Nashua River. ↗

## NELSON ISLAND, ROWLEY

*Jim Berry*

Nelson Island in Rowley is part of the Parker River National Wildlife Refuge in northeastern Essex County. It lies along the western shore of Plum Island Sound, and is one of several waterfowl hunting areas in the western section of the refuge. It is a club-shaped, almost treeless island completely surrounded by salt marsh, and is thus an excellent place to see waterbirds and raptors. The island itself is perhaps a hundred acres or so, and is primarily a hayfield, mowed annually after the nesting season of the grassland birds that use it. There is a small fresh-water pond tucked into the northeast corner of the island, probably artificial, since it is separated from the salt marsh by a dike. On the dike is an osprey platform.

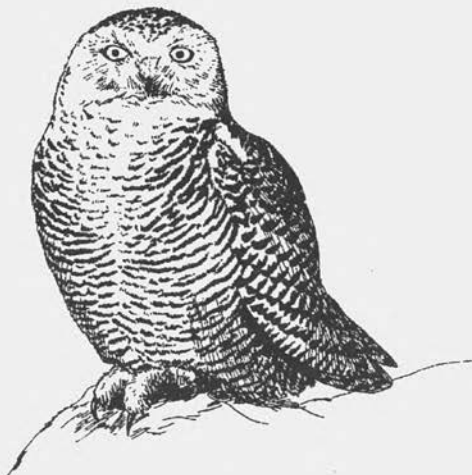


Nelson Island is a good place to watch birds year-round. Late fall, winter, and

early spring are especially nice because of the possibility of seeing Short-eared and Snowy owls, which hunt either the island itself or the vast salt marsh all around it. I see Short-ears more often than Snowys, sometimes two or three, often engaging in aerial acrobatics. They do this also with Northern Harriers, which they sometimes follow around as if hoping to steal food from them.

Other raptors to be seen from the island in winter are Rough-legged and Red-tailed Hawks, any of the falcons, occasional accipiters or Bald Eagles, and Northern Shrikes (if the latter can be considered raptors). The interactions among the various raptors are my favorite events on this wonderful island.

Salt pans abound on both sides of the causeway and all around the island, except at the east end, which overlooks the sound and Plum Island itself. (Nelson is opposite the north impoundment at Hellcat Swamp; the osprey platform is easily visible from anywhere along the Hellcat dike.) These pans are excellent from late March into November for shorebirds, herons, Glossy Ibises, waterfowl, and Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrows, while the sound is good in the appropriate season for Brant, diving ducks, grebes, and loons at high tide and shorebirds at low tide. In fact, birding on Nelson is almost better in some ways than on Plum Island, since more salt pans are within easy viewing range, although some of them require a scope. I have been conducting semimonthly bird counts on Nelson for a decade in my capacity as a refuge volunteer, and although the variety of species is usually less on Nelson than on Plum Island, the numbers can be excellent. On more than one summer day I have counted hundreds of egrets and herons in these pans, in what amounted to a feeding frenzy. Little Blue and Tricolored herons make appearances here, as do Hudsonian Godwits, Whimbrels, and Red Knots. Willets nest in the salt marsh and bring their fledglings into the pans by the causeway. I seldom see rare shorebirds, but the regularity of my visits has taught me to expect anything. For example, the island provides a superb viewing platform for occasional migrating flocks of Laughing Gulls, Forster's Terns, Snow Geese, or Double-crested Cormorants, the latter sometimes in the thousands.



The island itself is also an exciting place to study birds. The large hayfield is managed for nesting grassland birds, of which the most common are Bobolinks. Anywhere from a dozen to several dozen pairs normally nest here. I have seen one or two pairs of Savannah Sparrows some years, and very occasionally Eastern Meadowlarks. In July 2000 I saw an Upland Sandpiper on the island, the first I have seen there. The pond is ringed by cattails, and provides nesting habitat for ducks and rails as well as the ubiquitous Red-winged Blackbirds and Common Grackles. Even

Mute Swans have nested here, although at the expense of any ducks—usually Mallards or Gadwalls — desiring to do the same. In 2000 I heard a pair of Virginia Rails on several occasions, indicating probable nesting. I have heard Soras here too, and have seen both bittern species in the cattails, although without evidence of nesting. Ospreys have nested twice so far on the platform, in 1996 and again in 2000. While they are nesting it is of course inadvisable to go anywhere near the platform. Similarly, visitors should stay off the hayfield while the Bobolinks are nesting, and stick to the dirt road along the southern edge of the island, which is used by Rowley clammers to reach the flats in the sound at low tide.

Land birds on Nelson are not exceptional other than the grassland species and the Orchard Oriole. In 1998 a pair nested in the small copse at the west end of the island, and in 2000 I found a nest in the larger copse adjacent to the parking lot. Mammals are another attraction, particularly river otters, which visit the pond regularly and leave wide trails through the grass punctuated with their scaly scats. One day in 1983 I watched a mink making repeated visits to an apparent den, a reward for sitting still and watching the marsh from a brushy area along its edge. My best butterfly on Nelson so far is the common buckeye, which I have seen twice on the island.

To get to Nelson Island, drive about three miles north on Route 1A from the intersection of Routes 1A and 133 near the center of Rowley. When you are almost to the Newbury town line, Stackyard Road turns right where 1A makes a sweeping left-hand curve (there should be a sign). Stackyard is a dirt road that ends in one mile at the parking lot for Nelson Island; where it forks, stay to the right (straight). The parking lot is at the refuge boundary. From there you must walk several hundred yards along a dirt causeway across the salt marsh to get to the island. If the tide is high, you will need waders (at least in cold weather), since the tide runs freely across the causeway. (Of course you can always bird from the parking lot if the tide looks too high for your footwear.) At low tide you will rarely need waders. The island is open to the public seven days a week except in waterfowl hunting season, when it is open only on Sunday. A sign at the edge of the parking lot informs you of the current access rights. Dogs are not allowed at any time, and violators will be fined if caught.



## The Trails at Pickering Ponds, Rochester, New Hampshire

*Stephen R. Mirick*

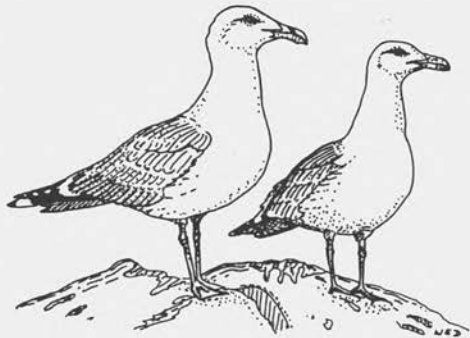
Sewage ponds and landfills are usually productive places to bird; however, access and aesthetics frequently prevent enjoyment and appreciation of these areas by birders. A public trail system has recently opened in Rochester, New Hampshire, known as The Trails at Pickering Ponds.



These trails are conveniently located between the Turnkey Landfill and the Rochester Wastewater Treatment Plant, where they benefit from the abundance of the visiting gulls and the beauty of the Cocheco River.

There are over two miles of trails which have only recently been opened for public use in the fall of 2000. For this reason, few birders have visited the area, and it is difficult to tell what might be found. It is clear, however, that this area is the best location in the state for finding the larger gulls. Thousands of Herring and Great Black-backed gulls visit the ponds and are joined by Iceland and Glaucous gulls from late fall into the early spring. Lesser Black-backed Gull is now annual and Black-headed Gull has been reported here three times in the last nine years.

Two trails start from a gravel parking lot located off Pickering Road. The trail that starts from the north end of the parking lot is the more interesting and productive for birders. It passes through a fence and follows the dikes between and around two old settling ponds. These impoundments are known as the Pickering Ponds, and are popular for bathing and resting gulls. Thousands of gulls can often be seen flying in and out of the ponds when the nearby landfill is operational. The first pond is preferred by the gulls, particularly when there is open water; however, they will also roost on the ice-covered pond in midwinter. Waterfowl can also be found here, and Ruddy Ducks, coot, and teal should be expected during the fall; Wood Ducks and Hooded Mergansers are likely to be found here during summer months as well.



The second pond has more emergent vegetation and has been one of the few nesting sites in the state for the declining Pied-billed Grebe. Black-crowned Night-Herons can sometimes be found here, and American Bitterns may nest in the vicinity.

A side trail known as the Cocheco River Loop leaves the main trail, following the banks of the scenic Cocheco River, and passing through the floodplain of the river. Wet areas with alder, willows, and cattail marshes provide an interesting variety of habitats, which look excellent for migrant and nesting birds.

If you are visiting from Monday through Friday, you should check out the wastewater treatment plant located 1.0 miles farther north and west along Pickering Road. If gulls are not at the Pickering Ponds, they may be here, and there is better potential for shorebirds, particularly in the fall if any ponds have been drawn down. Reports from the plant in the last three years include eight species of gulls, Long-billed Dowitcher, Stilt Sandpipers, Cattle Egret, and the first New Hampshire record for Eared Grebe. The management has usually allowed birding in the plant during business hours; however, you must stop in the main office to check with them before

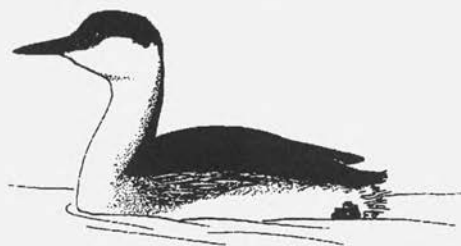
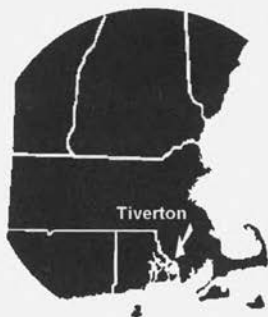
you walk around the impoundments.

To reach the trails from the south, take exit 9 off the Spaulding Turnpike in Dover, New Hampshire, and turn left at the end of the exit ramp, heading south back over the turnpike. In about 1/2 mile, the road ends at a traffic light opposite Liberty Mutual. Turn right onto 6th Street and follow 6th Street north as it enters the village of Gonic (part of the city of Rochester) where the road name changes to Pickering Road. At 4.2 miles (opposite #374 Pickering Road), a paved access road on the left leads a short distance to the gravel parking lot and the trail heads. There is no entrance sign along Pickering Road at this time. 🦋

## Sapowet Fishing Area, Tiverton, Rhode Island

*Rachel Farrell*

There aren't many places where you can check a marsh, look over rocky flats, and scan a large river for birds, all in one stop. At Sapowet Fishing Area, you can do all three without even getting out of your car, making it a great drive-up spot to bird at any time of the year. It's a state-owned area that's really just a pullout onto a rocky beach with a potato field and a tiny marsh on one side and the tidal Sakonnet River on the other. This large saltwater river empties into Rhode Island Sound at Newport, and during the fall and winter seasons, the river can host impressive numbers of wintering ducks and loons. You can check the river near the bridge just as you pull in from Seapowet Avenue, or drive the upper edge of the rocky shore to the sand spit and scan from there. It's safe to drive on the rocks by following the car path, but beware of storms or extra-high spring tides when water may cover the rocks.



In winter, you can usually count on Common Loons, Horned Grebes, Common Goldeneyes, and perhaps a surprise bird or two on the river. Barrow's Goldeneye is sighted almost annually, and there are two late-fall records for Pacific Loon. After storms, I've watched Northern Gannets fly right near the beach.


Rocky flats are exposed at low tide, attracting a variety of shorebirds during migration. Occasionally, birders pulling into Sapowet may spot American Oystercatchers knocking shellfish off the rocks. Gulls are on the beach all year, following behind clammers for any leftovers, or simply resting on the shore. At times,



large groups of gulls may be present in the potato field next to the pull-in, making it easy to scan for a rarity. After heavy spring rains, the field can offer great opportunities to see Common Snipe. There's also plenty of food for the flocks of Horned Larks that winter in the area, and birders may find a few Lapland Longspurs mixed in.

The marsh at Sapowet Fishing Area is small, but because it's next to the parking area, the birds seem to land at your feet. In season, Little Blue Herons and Snowy and Great egrets regularly fly in and out to feed. The shrubs around the edges host breeding Willow Flycatchers. Some years, Sapowet attracts Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrows in the fall. If Nelson's are present, they will usually be found in the first section of marsh on your right. Local birders check this marsh, then go across the road to a much larger marsh known as Sapowet Marsh. You can walk to the edge of Sapowet Marsh or park in the pullout just past the bridge and scan from there. Both Seaside Sparrow and Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrow nest here, and you may occasionally see them quite close to the road. Although this extensive marsh is one of the most reliable spots in the state for Tricolored Heron, it is most famous as the location of one of the first North American sight records of Spotted Redshank.

Birders should be aware that, although unposted, both marshes are part of the State of Rhode Island Sapowet Marsh Wildlife Management Area. Hunting is allowed from October through February. If you walk into the marshes or along the brushy thicket areas during these months, state law requires that you wear 200 square inches of fluorescent orange clothing.

Directions: From Route 24 South, take exit 6, Fish Road, and go left off the ramp. Travel 1.4 miles, turning right at the Route 177 intersection. Proceed 2 miles, and turn left onto Route 77. Follow Route 77 for 1.6 miles, and turn right onto Sapowet Avenue. Travel 1.4 miles, and turn right into Sapowet Fishing Area at the dirt pullout just before the bridge. There is no sign at the entrance. 

## Upper Charles River Greenway Path

*Robert H. Stymeist*

I did my very first birding along the Charles River in Cambridge; I was nine years old and lived within one block of the river, and my mom still is living within one block after 79 years. I guess we like the area. Today I live within a block of the Charles, in Watertown. The river gets a little wilder up here, and the birds sing a little more, at least we can hear them, and it sure is a nice quick spot to visit.



The area that I will focus on is officially called The Upper Charles River Reservation Greenway Path; it opened on October 23, 1997. Prior to the efforts of the Metropolitan District Commission (MDC), the stewards of most of the green space in the area, this spot was overgrown and totally inaccessible to the public. Today a wonderful two-mile biking and walking trail meanders along the bank past wetlands, great thickets, and overlooks of the slow-moving river. The MDC added a great deal of bird-friendly shrubs along the walkway; there are several species of viburnum and ilex, plus they retained all the wild plants like pokeberry and “weeds” like thistle and goldenrod. The birds love it! My best birding here is late fall and into January. The river is never frozen, and the corridor effect of the buildings that the path bisects makes this a warm haven on colder days. Last year on the Boston CBC a Blue-gray Gnatcatcher and a Black-throated Blue Warbler were headliners among Hermit Thrushes, Ruby-crowned Kinglets, and Palm Warblers, to name a few birds that have been found here. The river itself has good numbers of Common and Hooded mergansers and occasional Wood Ducks and Pintails. Great Blue Herons are regular, and a Black-crowned Night-Heron is often seen at this time of the year.



In spring and summer the river here is a stronghold for Warbling Vireo, Yellow Warbler, and Baltimore Oriole and at least two pairs of Orchard Orioles. In fact, as late as September 9, 2000, I had 13 Warbling Vireos, 9 of them singing males. The big show is the Black-crowned Night-Herons gathering in June through early July that are after the spawning alewives that attempt to get over the Watertown Dam. I recorded over 200 here several years ago, but in recent years my counts just reach about 100 individuals.

To reach the Greenway Path from Watertown Square, head west on Route 20, almost immediately after the square take your first left on Cross Street, take a right on Pleasant Street, and after a very short distance you will see the sign for the Path on your left. Park here. My suggestion is to walk left to the dam and the overlook platform. There are great views of Rough-winged Swallows here in spring and summer. Walk left toward Watertown Square a short distance to check the thickets and the river before retracing your steps on the trail heading west. A pedestrian bridge will appear on your left; this will be the end of your circuit of about two miles. The trail continues with several overlooks to Bridge Street; here you cross the river to return on the Newton side of the Charles (there is a small convenience store here to pick up a snack or two). The thickets here can be very good: on a recent fall trip I had four Carolina Wrens and a real surprise — a Gray-cheeked Thrush.

The Charles River has been abused over the years, but with the dedication and perseverance of The Charles River Watershed Association, the birds are there — go and see them. ↗



## West Brook, Whately

*Matthew Williams*

West Brook, a tributary of the Mill River, is accessible by car along much of its length. Because of this, it is a wonderful detour for anyone who is heading north from Northampton. The time spent birding here usually varies from between a half-hour and a half-day, but I've made even shorter stops.

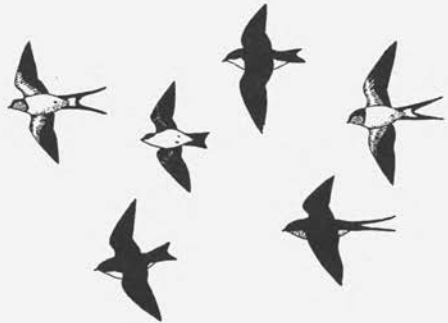
There are a few key places to check along Westbrook Road. Heading west, off Chestnut Plain Road, the gated sandpit (0.2 miles) on the right hosts a small Bank Swallow colony, and late summer visits have produced Tree, Barn, and Cliff swallows. This spot also provides a nice view of the Pioneer Valley. Just up the road, there is a little parking area on the left and a short trail down to the brook. There are mature deciduous trees here that create good spots for Downy, Hairy, or Red-Bellied woodpeckers.

Continuing uphill, the road soon becomes level, and sycamores line the brook, which flows slowly through this flatter section. The area along the road is mostly brush and fields, with sumac and other shrubs that create habitat for Yellow Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, Gray Catbird, and Blue-winged Warbler. In addition, these plants provide food for wintering robins, sparrows, and bluebirds. The utility lines along this section provide perches for swallows, bluebirds, and many Mourning Doves.

This area can also be good for migrant sparrows during autumn.

Once the road turns to dirt and crosses a one-lane bridge, the habitat shifts to eastern hemlock forest. During the summer, the warblers present include Black-throated Green, Black-and-white, Ovenbird, Louisiana Waterthrush, and American Redstart. The thrushes are represented by Veery, Wood, and Hermit. Scarlet Tanagers, Red-eyed Vireos, and Rose-breasted Grosbeaks can be heard from the slopes on either side of the road.

Since there is usually only light traffic, stopping along the road to birdwatch isn't a problem. I usually use the dirt pulloff along the stream about 300 yards beyond the bridge. In 2000, Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers nested in a hole that was visible from this spot. Other less common breeders that may be seen nearby include Louisiana Waterthrush, and even White-throated Sparrow.



Conway Road continues up West Brook, through more hemlock and maple forest, and eventually reaches the brook's source, Northampton Reservoir. Although I haven't checked this spot regularly during waterfowl migration, it definitely has potential for an occasional fallout. The area surrounding the reservoir and the fields across the road are suitable for birds such as Killdeer, Indigo Bunting, and Eastern Bluebird.

I find West Brook to be an enjoyable place to bird because of the diversity of species that can be found by stopping at a few of the places I've mentioned. It provides access to decent woodland habitat without having to travel too far from the beaten path. So, if you ever need a break from the highway and find yourself in Whately, I would recommend making the short trip up West Brook.

Directions: Take Exit 22 (Whately/Hatfield) off Route 91 northbound. Stay to the right, heading north on Routes 5 and 10. After about a mile, take a left onto Mountain Road after you see a blue sign for Nourse Farms. Go over Route 91, and turn right at the stop sign. This is Pantry Road, which turns into Chestnut Plain Road when you enter Whately. Westbrook Road is on the left, shortly after the town line. The road continues along West Brook for almost two miles and then intersects Haydenville Road. At the top, take a left and then the next right onto Conway Road to continue farther upstream, ultimately reaching the Northampton Reservoir. 