

Birding Wompatuck State Park

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Located in northern Plymouth County, in the towns of Hingham, Norwell, Cohasset, and Scituate, Wompatuck State Park is a relatively large tract of semiconserved woodland habitats offering a somewhat diverse mixture of red maple swamps, hemlock and white pine groves, and oak-hickory-beech associations.



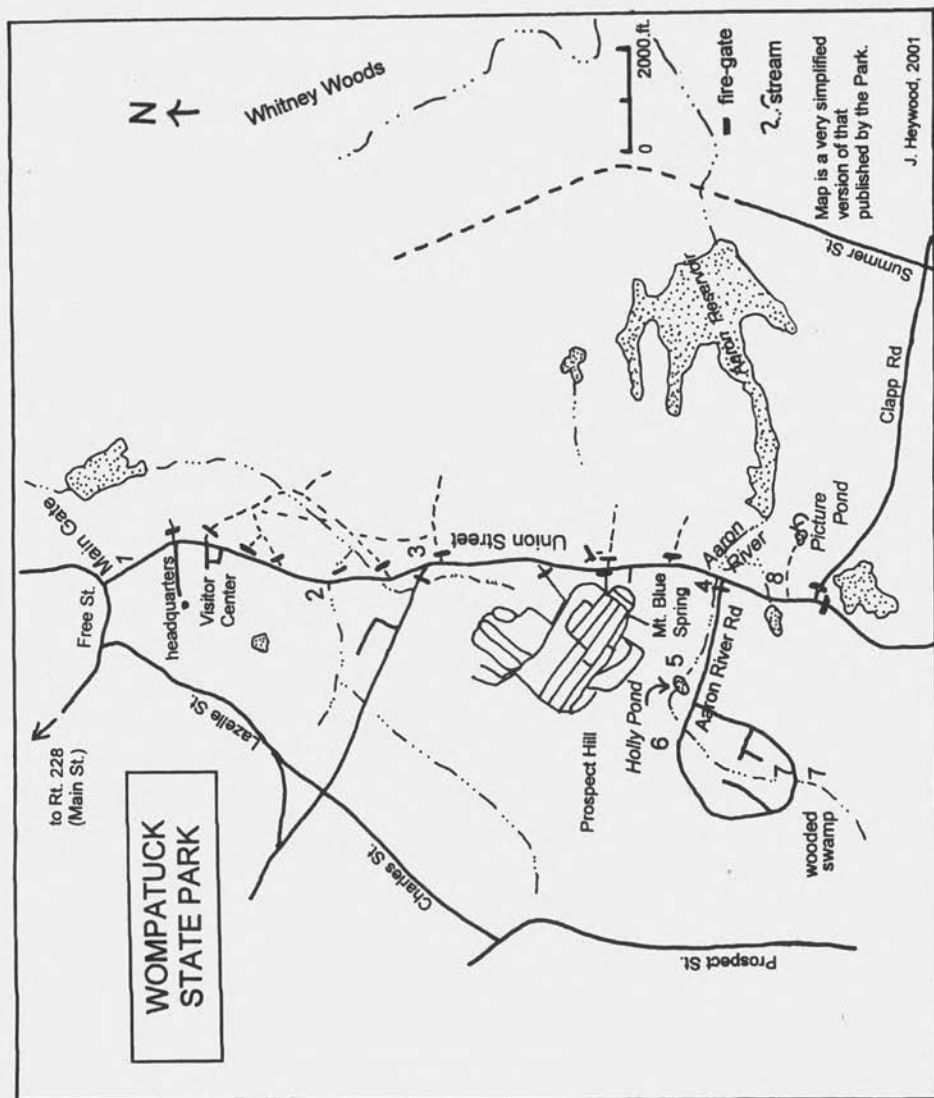
Originally cleared for agricultural uses, the area now occupied by Wompatuck State Park was purchased by the U.S. government as an annex to existing property used as a munitions depot during World War II. Its use was continued throughout the Korean War as a training facility and vehicle repair center. Beginning in 1962, shortly after the annex was declared surplus, the federal government began turning the property over to the state of Massachusetts, which elected to use the property to establish Wompatuck State Park. As of October 2000, the last 125 acres of the former annex were being transferred for use as part of the park, bringing its total acreage to 3002.

Many vestiges of times long past remain: miles of classic New England stone walls lace the forest, evincing the work of bygone farms and farmers; concrete remains of ammunition bunkers and revetments are scattered throughout and evoke images of army-green mobilization during a world war. Many miles of narrow, paved depot roads add to the imagery while creating no shortage of walking paths.

Located in towns comprising the northern-coastal South Shore, Wompatuck lies amid a region in which wildlife habitat has been decimated by suburban sprawl. The resulting scarcity of quality habitat has placed a greater significance on those areas remaining largely undisturbed. In light of this consideration, Wompatuck, with nearly five square miles of woodlands, is important both from the broad perspective of conservation of wildlife habitat and, more specifically, from the perspective of ornithological significance.

The ornithological significance is twofold: as a stopover for migrating songbirds, and as a nesting area for seasonal and resident breeding birds. Its significance as a stopover for migrating birds is especially prominent due to a combination of two salient factors: location and size. Located within one mile of the ocean, Wompatuck is a large, quasicostal, woodland target in an otherwise less sufficient landscape along the Atlantic Flyway, a heavily used migration route on which optimal avian stopover points are becoming increasingly fewer and of compromised quality.

Its relative vastness and subsequent isolation from residential areas are important for those migrating birds whose tendencies place them near or at ground level, where housecat predation becomes a factor. This insulation from housecat predation is especially vital for ground-nesting breeding birds. Ovenbirds and Eastern Towhees,



both of which appear to breed in good numbers in Wompatuck, have suffered sharp declines in otherwise suitable locations proximate to residential areas and the accompanying population of housecats.

Wompatuck is a worthwhile spot to visit in any season. Miles of paved fire roads and wooded paths make getting around easy. Winter Wrens have been found in every month of the year; Pileated Woodpeckers are irregular winter visitors; Ruffed Grouse are reliable in many sections of the park throughout late winter into early spring and again in late autumn; and, during irruption years, most winter finches appear in respectable numbers. For the inquisitive naturalist, a nice variety of evergreen ferns

and allies can be studied in most months, and throughout much of the year, abundant wildflowers are present.

Starting in mid-April, birding begins to get really interesting. This is when neotropical and continental migrants begin to arrive. During this period, which lasts through the first week of June, the greatest diversity and abundance of bird-life can be seen and heard. Learning what species to expect and how to best go about finding them during spring migration will be the focus of this article. First, we will examine an overview of migrant and breeding birds, and then you will learn where and when to find them.

During spring migration, quite a variety of passerines are typically present. Between 1999 and 2000, thirty-four species of wood warblers were observed, including species with more southern affinities such as Hooded, Kentucky, and Prothonotary warblers. All six of our vireos, all five *Empidonax* flycatchers, and all six brown thrushes have also dropped in. I alone have observed a total of 143 species within the months of April, May, June, and July, during only two years of observation.



Among species present throughout breeding season have been Red-breasted Nuthatch, Brown Creeper, Veery, Wood Thrush, Warbling Vireo, Nashville Warbler, and Purple Finch; and, in 2000, at least fourteen pairs of Pine Siskins were present. Both Yellow-billed and Black-billed cuckoos have been relatively abundant breeders, especially during years with heavy gypsy moth infestation. Such a year occurred in 2000: high counts of each were 23 Black-billed on June 12, and 22 Yellow-billed on June 13.

Additionally, some locally and regionally rare breeding birds have likely nested in Wompatuck. Between 1999 and 2000 highs of twenty-one Winter Wrens, three Yellow-throated Vireos, two Canada Warblers, and six Northern Waterthrushes have remained throughout the breeding season, singing in their respectively appropriate nesting habitats. Louisiana Waterthrushes and Acadian Flycatchers both fledged young in 2000, and, as a matter of trivia, appear to be the easternmost breeding pairs of each in the world.

In the following paragraphs, I will suggest an approach to birding the park during spring songbird migration in early May, while addressing a few key areas that I have found to produce the best birding in terms of diversity and abundance. This approach will also include tips on finding some of the park's specialties. Most key areas

addressed will be numbered. These numbers correspond to the numbered locations on the map of the park included in this article.

Directions: To reach Wompatuck State Park from Route 3, take Exit 14 to Route 228 north. Travel north on Route 228 (Main Street) for approximately three miles until you reach Free Street, where you will turn right. Follow Free Street for approximately one mile, at which point there will be a large sign on the right marking the entrance to the park. There is a visitor center two-tenths of a mile in from the main gate where park maps and restrooms are available.

Try to arrive early to start as soon as the park opens at sunrise. This will allow you to maximize your birding time during the dawn chorus. Throughout the following directions, all mileages will be as measured from the main entrance gate at the north end of the park.

Upon entering the park, you will be driving on Union Street. Union Street, which bisects Wompatuck, is 2.3 miles long from the main entrance to the back gate (which is always locked), and is the only road on which you should be driving. If by chance you find an open fire gate, do not drive through it. Driving on the fire roads is not allowed.

Beginning at the main entrance (1), roll down your windows, even if it is chilly, and drive slowly. As you begin, listen for the rolling call of resident Red-bellied Woodpeckers. House and Winter wrens, Ovenbirds, and Eastern Towhees can be heard calling and singing from the brushy thickets, where they stake out and defend their breeding territories with vigor.

Approximately 0.6 mile on the right there will be a steel fire gate (2). (Several gates will be mentioned in this article; if you park near them, be sure not to block them!) Brown Thrashers have been found with some regularity in this area's greenbrier thickets, while an inspection of the adjacent white pine groves may reward the careful observer with a Northern Saw-whet Owl. This reclusive little owl has been stimulated to call at this locality during most seasons and, with no shortage of luck, could possibly be found roosting in these conifers.



The next point of interest is marked by another fire gate (3) at 0.9 mile, on the right. This low, shaded area is flooded seasonally, as evidenced by the presence of broad-leaved cattail, and has been a dependable spot for a seasonal Mourning Warbler, found usually from late May into early June. Listen quietly for Black-billed Cuckoos and Blue-winged

Warblers. Remarkably, this spot produced a state high of *three* Kentucky Warblers on June 10, 1999.

Proceed to 1.8 miles, and look on your right for signage for Mt. Blue Spring, a spring-fed source of fresh drinking water. Pull into the parking area, and listen for a while. This area has hosted at least five Cerulean Warblers in two years and has also been one of the better spots in the park for Tennessee, Blackburnian, Prairie, Bay-breasted, Blackpoll, and Worm-eating warblers.

After spending some time here and grabbing a quick drink, continue a short distance on Union Street until you reach the two-mile mark, and park by the next gate on your right (4). Take a short walk downhill on Union Street until you notice a small stream. This is the Aaron River. Listen here for both Waterthrushes. Louisiana will be the more likely of the two to be present, singing on either or both sides of the road. If a Northern Waterthrush is singing, it will be on the upstream side. Listen also for Canada Warblers, both cuckoos, and the buzzy scolding of the obstreperous Blue-gray Gnatcatcher.



Return to the gate near which you parked, and walk in. This fire road is an unnamed loop, which we will now name the Aaron River Road. It is approximately two miles roundtrip. Beginning at the gate, walk slowly and be quiet. On the left will be a mixture of mature white pines and oaks gradually interspersed with hemlocks and various hardwoods corresponding to the undulating elevation and attendant soil types. On the right will be a cool, dark bottomland of hemlocks, maples, and birches, marginated by, most notably, sassafras and spicebush. These species thrive in the rich alluvial soil of the Aaron River floodplain, which parallels the road for half a mile.

Look and listen carefully for thrushes, often observed in the shadows of the forest floor, busily scratching through the leaf litter. Veerys and Hermit, Wood, and Swainson's thrushes are regular here. The fortunate observer will be rewarded with a Gray-cheeked or Bicknell's thrush, both of which have been present in each of the last two years. These two species can be safely identified in the field by song alone, but proper identification requires careful study, attentiveness, and the humility to let some, if not most, individuals go specifically unidentified.

As you continue on Aaron River Road, listen on the right for Winter Wrens and Louisiana Waterthrushes, two of the eastern forest's finest songsters, frequently heard singing from within the shaded margins of the seasonally swiftly flowing Aaron River. Acadian Flycatchers are frequently found in the dense understory during migration and could be a future breeder at this particular location. A Prothonotary Warbler has also been observed in this area on at least one occasion.

As the fire road begins an incline, you will notice a gated, dirt road ahead on the right. Walk this road about 100 yards to Holly Pond (5), the source of the Aaron River. Scan the dead trees around the pond for Eastern Kingbirds, Cedar Waxwings, and maybe an Olive-sided Flycatcher. Watch for Spotted Sandpipers bobbing along the muddy shoreline, and night-herons hunting frogs and fish on the pond's vegetated perimeter. Above all, listen. Cerulean, Mourning, and Hooded warblers have been observed in the immediate vicinity of this small pond; all were first located by their somewhat distinct songs.

Return to the fire road and proceed. You will pass a white pine grove where resident Red-breasted Nuthatches, Brown Creepers, and Purple Finches can be found year-round. Pay attention for the plaintive song of the Blue-headed Vireo, which would be well within expectations to breed in this habitat.

In a couple of hundred yards the road will fork. This is the actual loop. Bear right and proceed counterclockwise. Along this loop, keep an eye and ear open for Black-throated Green Warblers and Scarlet Tanagers. Ruffed Grouse are frequently heard drumming or seen foraging on the forest floor, and Yellow-throated Vireos are often present singing their burly notes from high in the deciduous canopy.



After another few hundred yards there will be a dirt road on the right (6). This short road leads into an area known, by me, as the gravel pit. This area is approximately three acres of relatively open habitat used by park workers as a stump dump and is completely surrounded by mixed woodlands. Substantially wet in the spring, and heavily vegetated by various shrubs and cattails in certain sections, this unique spot has hosted Yellow-bellied, Alder, Willow, and Least flycatchers, as well as Bicknell's Thrush and Philadelphia Vireo, in both 1999 and 2000.

Breeding birds include American Woodcock, Brown Thrasher, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Indigo Bunting, and Orchard Oriole.

About three-quarters of the way around the loop the road bisects a wooded swamp (7). Look for Wood Ducks, and listen for resident Hairy Woodpeckers. Northern Waterthrush and Canada Warbler have both been present throughout the breeding season here in consecutive years. Other birds of interest in this area are Red-shouldered Hawk, a likely breeder noted here nearly year-round, and its nocturnal counterpart, the Barred Owl. Very localized in distribution on the South Shore, Barred Owls can occasionally be found during the day, roosting in the conifers along the edge of this wooded swamp.

After completing the loop, walk back down Aaron River Road, return to your car, and continue on Union Street until you reach the park's back gate. Park in this vicinity and walk the paved, but very dilapidated, trail on the left (8). This road leads to Picture Pond and has been a reliable area for observing Black-billed and especially Yellow-billed cuckoos as well as Yellow-throated Vireos. As you approach the pond, look and listen for Winter Wrens and waterthrushes. In the immediate vicinity of the pond, be alert for the sharp, abrupt song of the Acadian Flycatcher, which was observed here in 1999 and fledged at least two young in 2000.

Check the pond for Wood Ducks, and search the pond-side thickets for White-eyed Vireo and Mourning Warbler. For the lepidopterist, large stands of milkweed in this area have produced at least eighteen species of butterflies including variegated fritillaries, and a locally rare hickory hairstreak in July of 2000.

When planning a springtime visit to Wompatuck State Park, be sure to consider some form of insect repellent, since the mosquitoes are occasionally, as should be expected, quite nasty. Furthermore, attempt to visit the park during weekdays or early mornings on weekends. The park hosts approximately 130,000 visitors per year and seemingly fifty times that number of unleashed dogs. Optimal birding is best done in the absence of the attendant rowdiness.

I hope you find this information useful and enjoy your time observing the natural history of this fine state park. For further information call the park's headquarters at (781) 749-7160. 🦋

Dennis Peacock is a resident of Hingham and an avid naturalist. When not birding, he can most often be found with his friends and brothers, scouring the countryside in search of ferns, herbs, wildflowers, odes, and butterflies. His love of natural history was a gift from his father and uncles who took a young boy hunting and showed him the world.

