

Birding in Northfield

Mark Taylor

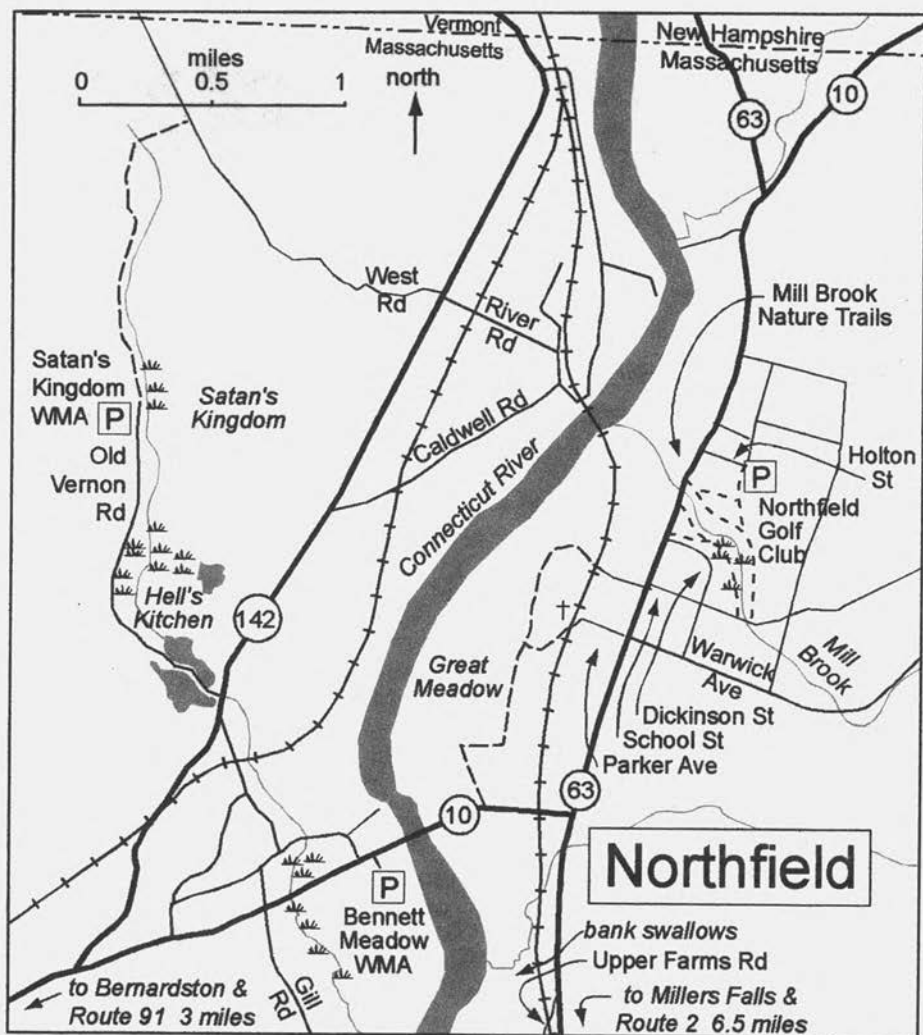
Northfield is a small town in western Massachusetts that borders both Vermont and New Hampshire. It is intersected by the Connecticut River, which makes it a prime flyway for a great variety of birds. The river valley consists of large but relatively narrow tracts of farmland, which are primarily for growing corn. From this agricultural land on the eastern side of the river, the terrain rises to a mountainous region along its eastern border. Main Street (Routes 10 and 63) in Northfield is a beautiful historical village with large colonial homes set back well off the road. It is also the primary access to some of the best birding locations that I will mention later. The western side of town, across the river, also consists of farmland, with deciduous forests and a large expanse of swampy woodlands known as Satan's Kingdom. This is a guide to some locations that many other birders and I are familiar with, but which are still unknown or unfamiliar to many. I hope you will come and explore this hidden corner of Massachusetts. Spring migration is, without question, the best time to bird Northfield, but summer breeding season and fall migration have their own unique attractions as well.



Hell's Kitchen and Vicinity

From Interstate 91 take Northfield Exit 28, which is Route 10 North, 2.3 miles to Route 142 North, on your left. After 1.1 miles on Route 142 you will come to Old Vernon Road on the left, which is paved for 1 mile and clearly marked with a road sign. Take this road 0.7 mile, after checking the ponds on both sides and small swamp on the right, to a large swamp (Hell's Kitchen) on the right (east). At 1.2 miles there are a pulloff and places to park on the left (west), marked by a large brown wooden sign for Satan's Kingdom Wildlife Management Area. From here the road is unpaved, but good for another 0.4 mile. This is where the turnaround area is (parking is limited here with a private drive on the left), although the more primitive road continues. There is a good parking pulloff and turnaround 0.2 mile into this more primitive road. On this unpaved section it is just under 1 mile to the paved West Road intersection, and 1.4 miles to Route 142.

Hell's Kitchen is the largest tract of swampland, among several, that are interconnected along Old Vernon Road. This area on the western side of town is part of the larger Satan's Kingdom Wildlife Management Area and contains large sections of upland deciduous woodlands as well. Sheltered ponds on both sides of this road, at the start, abruptly turn into a chain of shallow swamps along the eastern side, with tall snags rising from the water. On the tops of these dead trees, I have reliably found Olive-sided (migration) and Great Crested flycatchers perched. As would be expected in this kind of habitat, Great Blue Herons nest in this region with several nests visible



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from the road. Broad-winged and Red-shouldered hawks favor this area and can be heard or seen regularly.

Hell's Kitchen is the next stop. This is always a productive spot for a variety of birds including Canada and Snow geese (migration), Belted Kingfishers, and swallows and waterfowl in general. Opposite Hell's Kitchen, a small hillside meadow with several overgrown apple trees offers a nice open area to observe passerines flying in and out of the canopy overhead. Baltimore Orioles, Blue-Gray Gnatcatchers, and Yellow-throated Vireos, among others, are found here every year. Continuing down this road another 0.5 mile, you will find similar habitat, with swampland to the right, woodland to the left. You should bird this area carefully, stopping often to look

and listen for the Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers that nest near the Satan's Kingdom W.M.A. sign in this section. At the end of the road (which would be the 1.6 mile marker), listen for a Louisiana Waterthrush that is often here in the spring. From here the primitive road continues for another mile.

Note: If you do continue down this road on foot or with an appropriate vehicle, you will find more of the same habitat, but it can be rewarding. This is great area for wood warblers (especially nesting Black-throated Blue and Black-throated Green), thrushes, and flycatchers (I've seen and heard Yellow-bellied on this stretch). The road passes through another large snag-filled swamp on the western side, 2.2 miles from the start of Old Vernon Road. It will then come to an intersection, where a right turn onto West Road will ultimately bring you back out to Route 142.

Birds You Can Expect to See

Green and Great Blue herons; Black Duck; Hooded Merganser; Red-shouldered and Broad-winged hawks; Belted Kingfisher; Yellow-bellied Sapsucker; Downy, Hairy, and Pileated woodpeckers; Olive-sided, Least, and Great Crested flycatchers; Eastern Wood-Pewee; Eastern Phoebe; Eastern Kingbird; Tree, Bank, Rough-winged, and Barn swallows; Brown Creeper; Winter Wren; Golden and Ruby-crowned kinglets; Blue-gray Gnatcatcher; Veery, Hermit, and Wood thrushes; Blue-headed, Yellow-throated, Warbling, and Red-eyed vireos; most eastern wood warbler species; Northern and Louisiana waterthrushes; Scarlet Tanager; Baltimore Oriole; and Swamp Sparrow.

Caldwell Road/River Road

From the point you entered Hell's Kitchen (Old Vernon Road), continue north on Route 142 for 0.7 mile to Caldwell Road on your right (east). Take Caldwell Road 0.9 mile, and bear right at the intersection of Caldwell and River Road, at the bottom of the hill. (This will now be River Road.) To get back to Route 142, either road will get you there from here without a long drive.

Caldwell Road takes you to a small area of open brushy wetland on River Road, close to the Connecticut River. Its proximity to Old Vernon Road makes it logical to bird this area next. First, the road takes you through a large expanse of cornfields where you can watch for Horned Larks and Water Pipits. Tree, Barn, Bank, and Cliff (rare) swallows are good possibilities here. As the road drops down away from the fields, it comes to the intersection with River Road. This is where I pull off the road and start to bird. The large willow trees in this section seem to be a magnet for warblers, gnatcatchers, Warbling Vireos, and Baltimore Orioles. I seem to always find my first Yellow Warbler of the year, loudly presenting itself for a mate, at this location. A raised railroad bed is the backdrop on the north side; a shallow wetland lies between it and the road. This wet area has held Green Herons and Northern Waterthrushes on occasion. I generally bird both sides on this short section of road to the railroad trestle and back. As the road continues along the river, the habitat on both sides is good and should be checked.



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Birds You Can Expect to See

Yellow Warbler, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Warbling Vireo, Baltimore Oriole, Northern Waterthrush, Green Heron; Swamp, Lincoln's, and White-Crowned sparrows. (This is a short list, but anything is possible here in the spring.)

Bennett Meadow Wildlife Management Area

Return south on Route 142 to Route 10, turn left on Route 10, and head east 1.1 miles. Bennett Meadow is on the right (south) just before the bridge that spans the Connecticut River (Bennett Meadow Bridge). The access entrance is marked by a brown wooden Bennett Meadow W.M.A. sign, which can be missed. There is a parking lot at the bottom of the access road.

Bennett Meadow is a large cornfield on the west side of the Connecticut River. It is bordered by wet areas with alders and large willows on the western edge, and a long line of locust trees along the riverbank to the east. This area is used for pheasant stocking and hunting in the fall, but in the spring and summer this is a great stop to look for birds on the way to town. Farm vehicle roads run on both sides of the main Bennett Meadow field, making it accessible for walking along the perimeters. From the parking area in mid-May through mid-summer, Yellow-throated Vireos can usually be heard, and this is one of the more reliable places in Northfield to see them. I have seen them on their nests here, built on one of the large willow tree branches. Willow Flycatchers are common and nest in the vicinity, as do Baltimore Orioles. Bank Swallows are a common sight over these fields and take advantage of the tall riverbanks and other areas for nests. There is a large nesting colony across the river from Bennett Meadow, built into a gravel/loam bank in a farm field. This is off of Route 63 (south) and Upper Farms Road, 0.7 mile from the intersection of Routes 10 and 63. Look for the bank in the north end of this field from here.

Birds You Can Expect to See

Bald Eagle (perched along the riverbank), Red-tailed Hawk, Killdeer, Great Horned Owl (at dawn or dusk), Willow and maybe Alder flycatchers, Eastern Kingbird; Tree, Bank, and Barn swallows, Yellow-Throated Vireo, Yellow Warbler, Field and Savannah sparrows, Bobolink, Orchard (rare) and Baltimore orioles.

Northfield Center Cemetery and the Old Dump

From the junction of Routes 10 and 63, drive north on Main Street for 0.6 mile toward the center of town. On the left, at a pedestrian crossing, is Parker Avenue, just before the IGA grocery store. Take this street a short distance to the cemetery and park either before the railroad tracks or in the cemetery itself. Walk down the road, which drops down past the cemetery entrance to the area known as the Old Dump and cattail wetland, which opens out to a large expanse of corn fields.

This area, just off the town center, is one of Northfield's best warbler traps in the spring. From the large locust, maple, white pine, hemlock, and arborvitae that surround the cemetery, to the vine- and bittersweet-covered area of the Old Dump, to the cattail wetland, alder swamps, then cornfields, you'll find no better all-around habitat for birds. The possibilities for a rarity or two are good here as well. A Common Moorhen was found in the pond at this location. Blossoming, overgrown apple trees along the wet edge of the cornfields have attracted occasional Orchard Orioles. The willow trees along this stretch invariably have Willow Flycatchers

offering their *fitz-bew!* song. This section is also a good place to observe a variety of sparrow species as they dart back and forth from field to brush, particularly in the fall.

Start by birding the cemetery loop to look for warblers in the tall mix of trees. Once back at the entrance to the cemetery, you can then follow the road down to the next level or the Old Dump, which really shows no resemblance to one now. The entrance to it is marked by piles of organic material (leaves, cut-up trees, etc.) deposited from town storm cleanup. Sumacs and alders are interspersed in this area with a somewhat crude path between them, and it is a good place to find Blue-winged Warblers. Approaching the edge of the dump, you can scan the cattail-lined wetland and thickets below. This embankment is a good place to look for the skulking bird species that stay low in the brush. I have seen Canada and Wilson's warblers here most years. Backing out to the point where you entered the dump, walk down the road past the cattail swamp on the left and alder swamp on the right. The sound of Red-winged Blackbirds will greet you here, and if you're lucky, the booming call of an American Bittern. This section has been great in the past for Virginia Rails and Common Snipe. Once out to the cornfields, a left or right turn will take you along more prime bird habitat. What really is the remnant of an old brook that has been blocked by agriculture is now wetland. This abuts the fields on the east side, and extends north and south in either direction for its entire length. You could really spend most of a morning birding this whole area.

Birds You Can Expect to See

On a good warbler-push day in the spring you should see just about any of the eastern migratory warblers here around the cemetery. This is a good area to look for breeding Red-bellied Woodpeckers. Swainson's Thrush (migration) has been seen here occasionally along with more common local breeders like Scarlet Tanagers, Baltimore Orioles, and Rose-breasted Grosbeaks. The Old Dump section is good for pishing out Canada, Blue-Winged, and Wilson's warblers, Blue-Gray Gnatcatcher, and Wood and Hermit thrushes. At the cattail pond, Virginia and Sora rails have been heard and seen along with Wood Duck, Common Snipe, four swallow species (Tree, Rough-winged, Bank, and Cliff), Red-winged Blackbird, and Swamp, Lincoln's (migration), and White-Crowned sparrows (fall). In the cornfields look for Red-tailed Hawk, Cooper's and Sharp-shinned hawks, American Kestrel, Peregrine Falcon (rare), Killdeer, Horned Lark, American Pipit (migration), and Eastern Kingbird. Again, Willow Flycatchers can be heard singing from the trees along the edge of the fields.

Northfield Public Golf Course

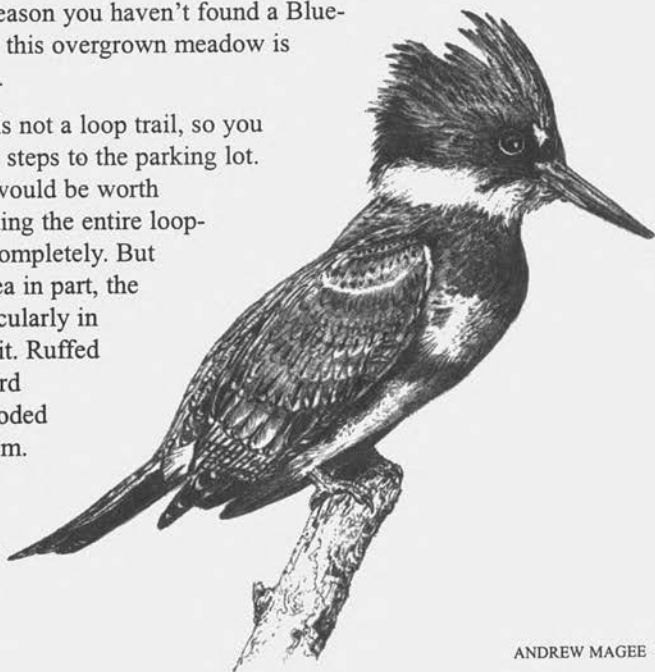
From the intersection of Routes 10 and 63, drive north on Main Street for 1.3 miles to Holton Street on the right, just after the church. A short drive down Holton Street will take you to the entrance to the golf course.

This location is another of Northfield's great birding places. Variety of habitats again makes this a must-bird spot in the spring. From the parking area at the golf course, which is under a canopy of large maple trees, the habitat (along the western edge of the parking lot) is composed of thick tangles of bittersweet, lilacs, and

sumacs. Here also is where the golf course dumps its leaves and other organic material, giving the birder good access to the middle of this area. From the perimeter here, the land drops off in to a dell-like brook area which, in turn, opens up into a wet meadow. This is perhaps the best location in Northfield to find Blue-winged Warblers, which nest here. The meadow and trees surrounding it have proved to be their favorite haunts over the years. A rare visitor, but becoming more frequent, is the Lawrence's Warbler. This hybrid between Blue-winged and Golden-winged warbler has been the subject of discussion among the experts as to its future status due to the decline of the Golden-wing.

From the southern end of the parking lot (near the putting green), an old cart road takes you down through vine thickets, which open up to a large wetland and brook known as the Millbrook Wetland Area. This area also has a marked trail system with a map box at the beginning of the road. It is on and around this trail system, which circumnavigates the wetland and brook, that most of the birding here can be easily done. The main cart path is perhaps the easiest walk, although all the trails are relatively flat. The area is mostly wooded, with the golf course visible on the left, wetland on the right. Wood and Hermit thrushes are easy to find here, and you should at least hear a pair of Pileated Woodpeckers that nest in this section. Marked trails branch off of this road, but if you are short on time, this abbreviated walk will still be rewarding. Warblers such as Pine (common), Black-throated Green, and Black-throated Blue (less common) are found on their breeding territory here. The road ultimately comes to a cornfield and overgrown meadow (less than a mile to this point) where you can check the thickets along the edges. I found a White-eyed Vireo in migration once in these thickets, which illustrates that surprises are always a possibility. If for some reason you haven't found a Blue-winged Warbler by now, this overgrown meadow is reliable for them as well.


The main cart path is not a loop trail, so you will have to retrace your steps to the parking lot. If you have the time, it would be worth spending a morning birding the entire loop-trail system to cover it completely. But even if you walk this area in part, the birds you can find, particularly in May, will still be worth it. Ruffed Grouse can often be heard drumming along the wooded section of this trail system. Solitary and Spotted Sandpipers are a good bet along the more open brook area. Chimney Swifts are a common sight overhead. Wood



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Ducks flush out of the stream every time I walk the trail, and mobbing American Crows signal the presence of a Great Horned Owl that is usually roosting in the tall white pines. If you enjoy the game of golf, after birding you can always put away the binoculars and pull out the clubs for an afternoon round.

Birds You Can Expect to See

Green and Great Blue herons, Wood Duck, Ruffed Grouse, Solitary and Spotted sandpipers, American Woodcock, Great Horned Owl, Chimney Swift, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Belted Kingfisher, Northern Flicker, Pileated Woodpecker, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Least Flycatcher, Blue-headed and Red-eyed vireos, Tree Swallow, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Wood and Hermit thrushes, Veery, Brown Thrasher; Blue-Winged, Nashville, Northern Parula, Chestnut-sided, Magnolia, Yellow-rumped, Black and White, Black-throated Blue, Blackburnian, Black-throated Green, Bay-breasted, Blackpoll, Pine, Palm, Yellow, Canada, and Wilson's warblers, Ovenbird, Louisiana Waterthrush, Common Yellowthroat, American Redstart, Swamp Sparrow, and Indigo Bunting. 

Mark Taylor is an avid birdwatcher and field-trip leader who has lived in Northfield for the past fifteen years. He has been affiliated with and a member of the Athol Bird and Nature Club, Athol, Massachusetts, and has led field trips through Northfield for the Brookline Bird Club. Mark has written articles for the Athol Bird Club Newsletter and Bird Observer. He has traveled throughout the United States and Canada to pursue this interest and has more than 500 life birds to his credit.

Editor's note: Mark Taylor's article and Andrew Magee's illustrations are part of an upcoming bird finding guide to western Massachusetts that will be published within the year. This comprehensive guide will cover birding sites from western Worcester County to the New York state line. Thirty-five illustrations and more than sixty-five maps will accompany the text. It will also discuss conservation and habitat protection issues in the western part of the state. To be notified when the guide becomes available, please send an e-mail to books@umext.umass.edu. If you do not have e-mail, call 877-UMASSXT (toll-free in Massachusetts) or 413-545-2717 and select option 3. Andrew Magee has been a field observer, drawing and sketching the natural world since childhood. He also illustrated *A Guide to Amphibians and Reptiles* by Thomas F. Tynning. He lives in Conway, Massachusetts.

