

An Urban Wonderland: the Boston Nature Center

Robert H. Stymeist



For over twenty years the former Boston State Hospital grounds in the Mattapan section of the city lay vacant, creating a sanctuary for wildlife that responded to the changing landscape. This 175-acre site was the City of Boston's largest publicly owned swath of undeveloped land that, under state controls and the usual bureaucratic factors, went neglected; as a result, a paradise for wildlife sprang from the overgrown fields, woodlots, and marshes. When control of the land shifted from the state to the city, conceptual plans included housing for nearly 750 families, a high school, a youth center, *and* an urban nature sanctuary. Happy to say, the latter is now a reality, and the Massachusetts Audubon Society (MAS) has under its control 67 acres containing a wide variety of habitats. The Boston Nature Center is being developed primarily to serve and educate residents from the surrounding urban neighborhoods. The Society already has a Boston Schools Initiative program to teach second- and third-grade students about the outdoor world and is developing programs that offer site tours for everyone, with a strong emphasis on programs for children. If a kid gets the bug (I was a kid once), it will be a lasting passion! The Boston Nature Center also hosts the largest community gardens in Boston, the Clark-Cooper Community Gardens, continuing a history of agriculture that started when ground was broken for the hospital. The State Hospital raised its own produce and maintained a farm that provided meat and dairy products as well.

The sanctuary's new building (the Nature Center), currently under construction, will feature exhibits, classrooms, and a public meeting place. Thanks to a grant from the George Robert White Fund, the Massachusetts Audubon Society is building Boston's most environmentally friendly building. This structure will have a geothermal climate control system, which will pump water from thousands of feet underground, where the temperature is stable, to heat the Center in winter and cool it in summer. On the roof, solar panels will heat water with the sun's rays, and photovoltaic shingles will generate electricity. South-facing windows will heat the building in winter but will be shaded by plant trellises in summer. The wood used for construction has been cut from sustainable forests, and the furniture will be built from recycled materials. This new Nature Center will use about thirty percent less energy than comparable buildings.

Well, let's get out of the building and explore the trails of this wonderful oasis of wildlife in the heart of the City. The Boston Nature Center is located at 450 B Walk Hill Street, Mattapan, MA 02126. The telephone number is 617-983-8500, e-mail is boston-nc@massaudubon.org, and the web site is http://www.massaudubon.org/Nature_Connection/Santuararies/Boston/index.html.

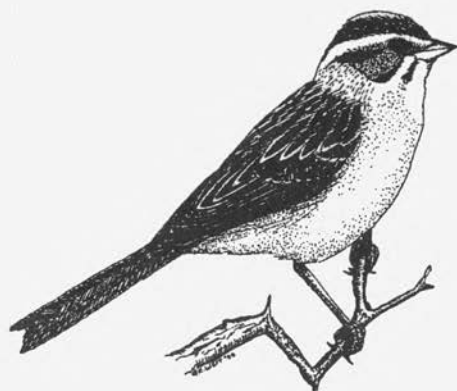
The Sanctuary is within the grounds of the old Boston State Hospital, which is still identified as such on many road maps. The area is bounded by Morton Street (Route 203), American Legion Highway, Walk Hill Street, and Harvard Street.

Directions

From the West and North: From the Fenway area, take the Jamaicaaway South, turn east onto Route 203 at a rotary, go past the Arnold Arboretum, over the overpass, and then straight through another rotary where Route 203 becomes Morton Street. Continue on Morton Street past Forest Hills Cemetery on your right and the Shattuck Hospital on your left. Go under an overpass, and turn right *just* before the next traffic light into the state hospital land. Follow that road past the buildings, and turn right at the Audubon sign to the parking area.

From the South: From the Milton area, follow Blue Hill Avenue North (Route 138, then Route 28) through Mattapan Square. Turn left onto Walk Hill Street, about one-half mile north of Mattapan Square. (Notice a mint-green awning on the left side of Blue Hill Avenue at the corner of Walk Hill Street.) Take Walk Hill Street through the traffic light at Harvard Street past New Calvary and Mount Hope cemeteries on the left. Turn right at the Audubon sign and then take another left into the property to the parking area. Be sure to stop at the set of mailboxes to the left of the three Audubon buildings to register and pick up a trail map.

In my infrequent visits to the property, including some exploration before MAS acquired the site, I have noted 135 different species of birds on the grounds and know of several more that others have seen. I must admit that my most frequent trips have been in fall and early winter, a fantastic time to visit. I have also made a few trips in the spring but have yet to visit in the breeding season. (I hope to correct this situation this year.) Some of the more unusual species that have been seen here include Virginia Rail, Barred and Northern Saw-whet owls, Fish Crow (common), Northern Shrike, MacGillivray's Warbler, Blue Grosbeak, and Clay-colored Sparrow.

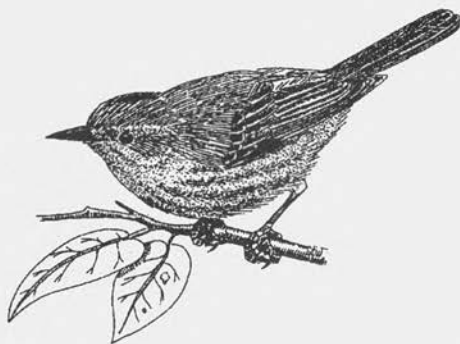


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More often than not, when I tell fellow birders of all the wonderful and abundant birds that I have seen here, one of the first questions is: Is this a safe place to go? The area surrounding the Nature Center has had a reputation as a rough neighborhood. I have never felt uneasy here, but it is sensible to have a companion or two with you, no matter *where* you go birding. There are always a lot of folks working in the Community Gardens through October, and they are very friendly. Ask them about okra! Some of them also like to learn from you about the birds they are seeing and hearing.

To begin the walking tour of the trails, park at the Community Gardens, which has a small parking area at the first set of gardens on the left and a larger area just ahead and to the right, in front of the larger set of gardens. A portable restroom is also located here at the corner. Eventually parking will be at the future Nature Center building. Start on the Rabbit Trail, which begins to the left of the first set of gardens. This trail traverses a semi-wet meadow. A little "spishing" near the beginning of the trail may entice some of the sparrows that are hiding in among the garden plots to tee up on the small shrubs that border the gardens.

This area seems to be a magnet for Orange-crowned Warblers. On three separate occasions in the fall through early winter I have been able to get exceptional looks. The trails are nice and wide, and the wood chips were specially shredded so that they gradually bind together, making a firm surface suitable for a wheel chair. But please, no bicycles! When the trail reaches the boardwalk, there are more small shrubs and several varieties of fruiting trees. I have seen many robins, Hermit Thrushes, and Cedar Waxwings here. The woodlot to the right of the end of the boardwalk can have several migrants in season. These boardwalks are fun to walk on, since they are very "spongy." They were constructed with several low-impact features, including nonarsenic-containing pressure-treated lumber, recycled deck boards, and special "helical pier" supports that minimize the disturbance of the wetlands.



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You have now completed the first circuit and are emerging back into the Community Gardens, which during the growing season may be busy with gardeners and would be best avoided, simply so as not to unduly disturb them. Starting in late August, many of these folks have had it up to you-know-where with bolting lettuce, bulging zucchinis, cherry tomatoes, and summer squash, and with fewer gardeners the area will start to entice some migratory birds. These gardens are teeming with sparrows from late September through October. There are untended spaces at both ends of the established gardens which allow the birds to escape into a variety of plants, collectively known as weeds, when people are working in their plots. I hope that the plans include retaining some of these weedy areas and perhaps supplementing them with a variety of wildflowers as well.

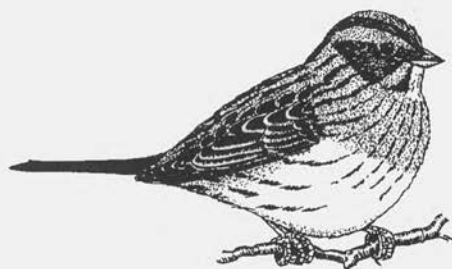
I've noted thirteen species of sparrows here in the following order of abundance, starting with the most common: Song, White-throated, Dark-eyed Junco, Savannah, Swamp, Chipping, Field, Lincoln's, American Tree, White-crowned, Fox, Vesper, and Clay-colored. Other birds that seem particularly fond of these overgrown areas include Bobolink, Indigo Bunting, Blue Grosbeak (one bird remained in the area for

nearly two weeks in the fall of 2001), and several warbler species, notably Nashville, Palm, Common Yellowthroat, and Wilson's. Leaving the gardens, pick up the Snail Trail, which leads you through a small woodlot on both sides of the trail that is good for migrating vireos and warblers; the understory is very brushy with scattered overturned trees, making it ideal for Winter Wrens (seen here three times). Once a Barred Owl was located here on at least two successive days. Unfortunately, this area and the area by the Community Gardens is bordered by the very busy American Legion Highway and at times can be extremely noisy. As you approach the end of the Snail Trail, jog left onto the Fox Trail. If time is short, take the right trail which will lead back to the parking area.

The Fox Trail is the highlight of this sanctuary. I find it hard to imagine that you are in one of the largest cities in America; this could be Concord, Brookfield, or Petersham. The landscape in front of you is peaceful, and the best part is that the noise level from nearby American Legion Highway has virtually disappeared, thanks to the City of Boston's leaf-composting piles that serve as a buffer zone from the highway. It is just at this junction where I, along with Marj Rines, found a MacGillivray's Warbler on December 13, 1998, where it remained through December 16; unfortunately, it was not found on the Greater Boston CBC on December 20, 1998. This was my very first visit to this area, and I was impressed! We found over 140 Tree Sparrows and over 100 Dark-eyed Juncos in the Community Gardens and 2 Gray Catbirds and 2 Ruby-crowned Kinglets, not to mention 11 Ring-necked Pheasants and over 60 Fish Crows!

The Fox Trail is bordered by a brook on one side and a cattail marsh on the other. Not the prettiest stream of water, but it does attract the birds. I have seen Northern Waterthrushes into early December, and other birds noted on more than one occasion

include Wood Duck, Common Snipe, Winter Wren, and Rusty Blackbird. In summer several pairs of Warbling Vireos, Yellow Warblers, and Baltimore Orioles breed along the brook. As noted above, the City of Boston dumps most of its leaves here for composting, and the area is very active with equipment during the late fall season, even on weekends.




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These decaying leaves provide warmth and food well into some of the coldest winter days. I have seen seven Eastern Phoebes together here in early November, and it attracts a good number of warbler species, notably Palm Warblers. (This area is not part of the Boston Nature Center.)

Bordering the Fox Trail is, I think, one of the largest stands of jewelweed you may ever see. Many observers feel that this plant is a great magnet for Connecticut Warbler, which is a much-sought-after species. This warbler spends a lot of time hidden in the underbrush in this type of meadow. I was fortunate once to see not one,

but two Connecticut Warblers in the same bush along this trail during a field trip I was leading. It was a life bird for just about everyone and a spectacular long look as well! This same area looks like "chat-a-tat" habitat, and if we could set up a net lane through the meadow, I think you could spend the day pulling chats and Sedge Wrens out of the nets. Alas, I have not seen either of these species here (yet).

Following the trail, you will find a row of tall trees with a lot of understory trees and shrubs. Here I have seen a number of unusual migrants in the fall, notably Philadelphia Vireo, where on one outing four individuals were noted. The trail winds through a mini-forest of crooked old locust trees that lead onto a boardwalk that overlooks the wet cattail marsh. Virginia Rails live here and have been heard calling at midday in the spring. The area to the left of the Fox Trail, a really nice chunk of undisturbed undergrowth and meadow, is great for Ring-necked Pheasants. A dirt road provides the observer a safe distance to "spish" in a Lincoln's Sparrow or an Orange-crowned Warbler, two species I have encountered on occasion. The trail then continues back to the Visitor Center and the parking areas.

You will want to come back to this urban wonderland; I guarantee it, as a commercial states. I have usually found something new or exciting here, and always a surprise, like a fox, a coyote, a deer, a flock of Wild Turkeys. The meadows are excellent for butterflies, especially in late summer. Red-tailed Hawks will scream, and Fish Crows will be calling in their true Boston accent: *cah, cah, cah*. Come to Boston and discover this truly unique sanctuary. 

Bob Stymeist has been interested in birds since 1958. He started "brown bag" birding in 1961 with his first pair of binoculars and boarded the subway in Harvard Square to visit the Arnold Arboretum. His love of urban birding continues today, and he keeps an annual list of birds found in the City of Boston. His other favorite spot is Mount Auburn Cemetery, which he didn't find out about until 1963, even though it was only two miles from his home. He has recorded 213 species in the cemetery. His current project (obsession) is trying to find a Carolina Wren in all 351 towns in Massachusetts; currently he has found them in 228 towns!

Bob is a founding member of Bird Observer and served as its President from 1978-1984. He has been Treasurer of the Nuttall Ornithological Club since 1981, and has been the Statistician for the Brookline Bird Club since 1987.



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