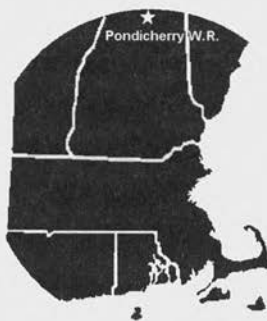


Birding the Pondicherry Wildlife Refuge and Vicinity

Robert A. Quinn and David Govatski

The Pondicherry Wildlife Refuge is located twelve miles northwest of Mount Washington, New Hampshire, in the towns of Jefferson and Whitefield. From Boston, take I-93 North to Exit 35. Take Route 3 North, and then Route 115 East (right) four miles to Airport Road. Turn left, and follow Airport Road 1.4 miles to the Pondicherry Rail Trail Parking Lot. From the trailhead parking lot it is less than a mile to the Mount Washington Regional Airport (locally called Whitefield Airport). The total distance is around 150 miles. The rich variety of habitat, including boreal forests, bogs, fens, swamps, marshes, ponds, and grasslands supports an abundant variety of bird life. This article describes the bird life and provides suggestions for birding the refuge and vicinity.

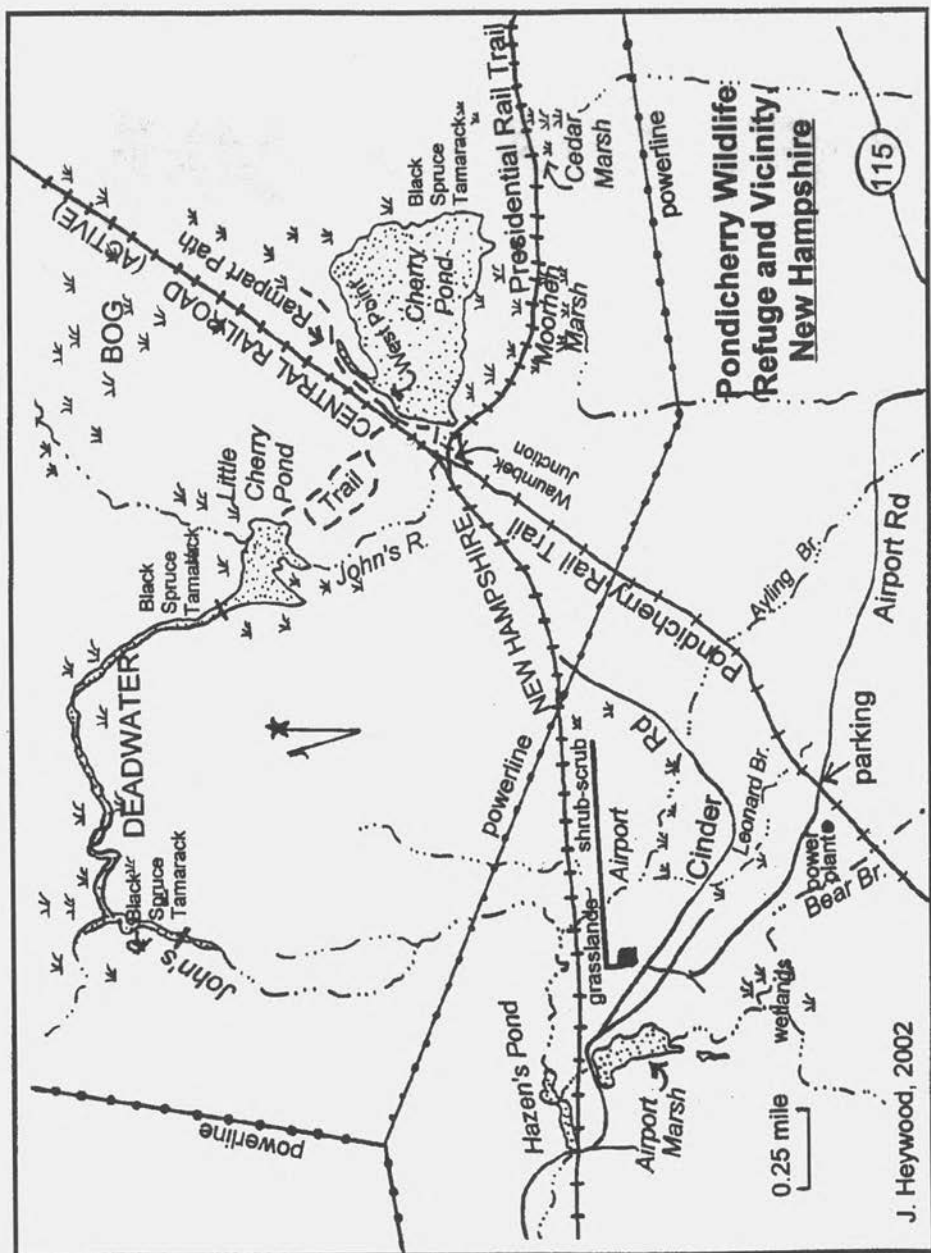


The refuge and adjacent Mount Washington Regional Airport have long been favorite destinations for birders. This location has a greater diversity of breeding birds (125) than probably any other similar-sized area in New Hampshire. Pondicherry is also one of the best inland migration spots in the state. Over the years more than 220 species have been seen here, including over fifty species of waterbirds. Besides the birding, it has several features that make it a wonderful destination: spectacular mountain scenery, relatively easy walking, and isolation. It is a small enough area that it can be covered in a day, but it has enough variety to keep you coming back for years.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, New Hampshire Fish and Game Department, and Audubon Society of New Hampshire jointly manage the Pondicherry Wildlife Refuge. The history of the refuge dates back to 1963 when New Hampshire Audubon acquired 312 acres. In 2000, U.S. Fish and Wildlife acquired 670 acres of wetlands that brought the refuge total up to 982 acres. A dedicated public-access route called the Pondicherry Rail Trail was acquired in 2000 by the State of New Hampshire on the abandoned Maine Central Railroad grade.

The human history of the area dates back 11,800 years when Paleoindian hunters used the Israel River valley for hunting, trade, and the manufacture of lithic tools using a type of Rhyolite that is found in the area. Evidence has been found indicating that native people used the Pondicherry area to hunt and fish until sometime after the arrival of European settlers.

The first scientific work started in 1829 and consisted of botanical studies by J. W. Robbins, who found two aquatic plants new to science. Horace Wright conducted ornithological studies in the area from 1899-1911 and later published a book on his findings. This book, *The Birds of the Jefferson Region of the White Mountains*, was recently updated by Tudor Richards in 2000 and is available from New Hampshire



Audubon. In 1906 Arthur Stanley Pease conducted botanical studies and found over forty species of aquatic plants in Cherry Pond. His publication, *A Flora of Northern New Hampshire*, published in 1924 and revised in 1964, is now out of print. Tudor Richards, working first for the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department and then for New Hampshire Audubon, has conducted bird studies from 1947 to the present

day. Tudor was the driving force behind the 1963 acquisition of the refuge by New Hampshire Audubon.

The origin of the Pondicherry name is uncertain. Pondicherry was shown on early nineteenth century maps of northern New Hampshire. Some people think the name comes from the capital of a former French colony in India. Numerous black cherry trees are found around Cherry Pond, and this could also be related to the naming.

Birding Locations

Cherry Pond is the centerpiece of the refuge. The views from this 100-acre natural pond are considered to be among the finest in the White Mountains, given the spectacular view of the Presidential Range to the southeast. Cherry Pond is a favorite migration stopover for many waterbirds and is ornithologically famous for its migrants in general. It is also the home of a Common Loon family that nests on one of the floating islands that dot the pond. One large floating island became hung up on a rock outcrop during a hurricane and is now firmly anchored. The bog mat on this island rises and falls with changes in water level, but the loons remain the same distance from the edge of the water, helping to ensure successful nesting.

Cherry Pond is now only six feet deep, but 12,000 years ago it was forty-eight feet deep. Scientists are currently studying several core samples of the pond's bottom for pollen and micro-invertebrate fossils to help reconstruct the region's environmental history. This study is part of a research effort in nearby Jefferson at a Paleoindian archaeological complex. One interesting geological feature is the presence of "ice push ramparts" along the north and west shorelines. (These are defined later in this article.)



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Cherry Pond, Pondicherry Wildlife Refuge

Cherry Pond is a warm-water pond and home to horned pout, chain pickerel, pumpkinseed, yellow perch, and golden shiners. Osprey and Bald Eagles often fish at Cherry Pond, but as of yet have not nested on the dark forested shores. Other fish-eating birds seen or heard around the pond include the Great Blue Heron, American Bittern, and Belted Kingfisher. Dragonflies are numerous in August, and thirty-eight species have been recorded. A spotting scope is recommended here; this "pond" is really a lake.

The John's River connects Little Cherry Pond to Cherry Pond. This little stream is canoeable for about three miles below Cherry Pond; that is, both above and below Little Cherry Pond. A short portage trail a hundred feet downstream of the railroad

bridge is where you put in. (See the trail descriptions below.) The John's River is a narrow and slow-moving stream at this point. Expect to cross a dozen beaver dams, paddle through shallow water in thick oozing muck, and be host to swarms of biting insects on the flat journey to Little Cherry Pond. The rewards make persistence worthwhile. Moose, beaver, and muskrats are often seen. Ring-necked Ducks, Green-winged Teal, Palm Warblers, Rusty Blackbirds, and Lincoln's Sparrows reside along the streams and adjacent forests. Black-backed Woodpeckers, Boreal Chickadees, and Gray Jays live and nest in the black spruce/tamarack stands that line the John's River. Spruce Grouse are seen on occasion near Little Cherry Pond.



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Black spruce at Little Cherry Pond

Carnivorous pitcher plants and sundews are found along the boggy edge of Little Cherry Pond. Beaver, otter, and even moose are often seen at Little Cherry Pond in the summer.

The Deadwater is the name given for a flat two-mile stretch of the John's River below Little Cherry Pond. The direction of flow is west toward the Connecticut River. The John's River is thirty feet wide at this point and up to three feet deep. The flow is imperceptible though, hence the name Deadwater. The Deadwater has a big beaver dam at the end and from that point is narrow and tree-lined and unsuitable for canoeing. The beautiful purple rhodora lines the stream as it flowers in May. Wood and Black ducks, Green-winged Teal, and Hooded Mergansers are often seen along the Deadwater.

Airport Birding. Most birders start at the Whitefield Airport and park in a small lot by the tiny terminal building. This is major grassland and has Eastern Meadowlarks, Bobolinks, Northern Harriers, Savannah Sparrows, Killdeer, and even had an Upland Sandpiper in 1997. Across the road from the airport is the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department's Airport Marsh. This pond and marsh have a good variety of waterbirds such as American Bittern, Great Blue Heron, Virginia Rail, Hooded Merganser, Wood Duck, and Belted Kingfisher. The airport area is also excellent for migrants in spring and fall.

The Cinder Road, running east from the airport, is a productive birding area that starts at a navy-blue hangar and becomes a tree-lined lane that Brown Thrashers and

Northern Mockingbirds frequent. In the winter of 2000-2001 a Northern Hawk Owl spent seventy-nine days entertaining nearly two thousand appreciative birders. This abandoned mile-long rail grade soon passes by a large alder swamp on your left where Alder and Olive-sided flycatchers are often seen. Look for Wild Turkeys farther along near the east end of the runway. American Woodcock perform their sky dances here in April. Cinder Road ends at an active rail line; do not walk along this track for obvious reasons.

Hazen's Pond is northwest of the airport and has species similar to those at Airport Marsh, but is less accessible. Scan the tree line around Hazen's Pond and look for Merlins and other raptors. Merlins have almost certainly nested in the Pondicherry area for the past three years (they have also started to breed as far south as central New Hampshire), and you may catch a glimpse of one carrying food items to a nest. Northern Harriers often hunt for prey over the airport grasslands and Hazen's Pond and also nest in the vicinity.

Birding through the Seasons

The best time to visit Pondicherry is normally between ice-out in April and freeze-up in November. It is convenient to break that time span down into three segments.

Ice-out through late May. Early spring can vary from wintry to quite pleasant. The waterbirds and a few land migrants are the first to arrive. Loons, grebes, herons including American Bittern, and just about any species of waterfowl are possible. Unusual spring birds have included Black Tern, Dunlin, Short-billed Dowitcher, and Orange-crowned Warbler.

Late May through mid-July. With warm weather finally in control, a rush of landbird migrants is likely; the rails arrive, and the shorebirds pass through. Under the right conditions birding can be wonderful — on May 27, 1997, we recorded 95 species at Pondicherry. Twenty species of warblers were the highlights, including 25 Nashville, 42 Magnolia, 1 Cape May, 26 Black-throated Blue, 52 Yellow-rumped, 28 Black-throated Green, 17 Ovenbirds, 12 Blackburnian, 10 Bay-breasted, 2 Mourning, 14 American Redstarts, and 2 Wilson's. Not to be overshadowed were 16 Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers, one Gray Jay, one "Gray-cheeked" Thrush, one Philadelphia Vireo, one Rusty Blackbird, and 15 White-winged Crossbills. That was all before noon. A Northern Wheatear was recorded on June 3, 2001.

As June bursts out, the insects become more of a problem (before that the cold keeps them at bay). The voices of the frogs compete with those of the wetland birds, but this is the peak of the landbird breeding season. Territorial birds are easier to track down than migrants, so if you have the time and patience you should be able to see such unusual or hard-to-see nesting species as Cape May Warbler, Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Northern Waterthrush, and Canada Warbler. Northern finches are possible almost any time and any place. A visit to the wetlands at dawn or dusk should result in a chorus of wetland species like Common Snipe, Sora, Virginia Rail, American Bittern, Marsh Wren, Barred Owl, and possibly even a Long-eared Owl.

Mid-July through freeze-up. By the middle of July the landbirds are starting to wander and the shorebirds are migrating. Both yellowlegs and Solitary and Least sandpipers are common. More unusual midsummer visitors have included Pectoral Sandpiper, Northern Shoveler, Bonaparte's Gull, and Common Tern. By August the warblers are moving in significant numbers, and Pondicherry can be a fantastic place in late summer for a large concentration of neotropical migrants. As fall arrives, the ducks and geese come through, and a good variety and numbers are possible almost any time. Grebes and scoters are regular, and some rarities have included Great Cormorant, Rough-legged Hawk, and Red Phalarope.

Year-round residents. Some interesting species can be found at any time of the year. Boreal Chickadees and Black-backed Woodpeckers are often the highlights; Gray Jay and Spruce Grouse have been seen but can't be expected. Winter is usually the slowest time of year at Pondicherry, but the trails make for good cross-country skiing and snowshoeing. Great-horned and Barred owls are often heard during moonlit winter nights.

Irruptive Species. The presence of a wide variety of habitats, including low-elevation boreal forest, makes the Pondicherry Wildlife Refuge an attractive location for many irruptive species. Small numbers of resident Evening Grosbeaks and White-winged Crossbills are joined in good cone-crop years by large numbers of their cousins. Pine Grosbeak numbers vary from year to year as do Redpolls and Pine Siskins. In addition to the Northern Hawk Owl mentioned above, a second Hawk Owl was seen in the nearby Jefferson Meadows.

Pondicherry Birder Trails

The Pondicherry Rail Trail. This pleasant, flat trail follows the abandoned Maine Central Railroad grade for 1.5 miles into Cherry Pond and the Refuge. The Rail Trail starts at a trailhead parking lot along Airport Road that is 1.5 miles from Route 115. The beginning of the trail is opposite a large wood-to-energy plant (you cannot miss it). A kiosk at the parking lot has maps and other information about the refuge.

Right at the trailhead parking lot are some huge white spruce and balsam fir trees that almost always harbor something of interest. The walking is easy, but there may be some wet spots in spring.



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Pondicherry Rail Trail, refuge access

Motorized vehicles are not allowed during the snow-free season, but bicycles are allowed. The habitat varies from fragrant stands of white pine and balsam fir to pungent balsam poplar and other young hardwood stands that have nesting Mourning and Chestnut-sided warblers. You pass several small brooks and a power line that provide even more variety. After about a mile and a half, you come

out at Waumbek Junction (see map). The railroad line is active at this point, so use care in crossing the tracks.

Little Cherry Pond Trail. This 1.2 mile loop trail includes 500 feet of boardwalk that take you across black spruce and tamarack stands to remote Little Cherry Pond. The Little Cherry Pond Trail starts a quarter-mile north of the railroad bridge over the John's River. A bypass trail to avoid the active railroad tracks will be built in 2002 and will allow a connection to both the Little Cherry Pond Trail and the Rampart Path. Listen carefully along the way for Boreal Chickadees and the light tapping of Black-backed Woodpeckers. A final stretch of bridges over the bog mat takes you to a small viewing platform at Little Cherry Pond. Beaver, muskrat, otter, and moose are often seen here. Ring-necked Ducks nest on small floating islands around this twenty-acre pond and can often be seen at the far side. Large stands of rhodora bloom in May, and carnivorous pitcher plants dot the bog mat.

Rampart Path. This quarter-mile path starts at the northwest corner of Cherry Pond, opposite the trail to Little Cherry Pond. Look for a small trail to the right, leading to Cherry Pond. After 100 feet of walking you arrive at West Point, a fine spot to watch for loons and eagles. The unmarked path continues to the left along the shore on an ice push rampart. The path on this rampart looks man-made but is natural, formed by the action of Cherry Pond freezing and expanding. The ice pushes sand, gravel, and even boulders a few inches every year to create this geological oddity. The views of the Presidential and Franconia Mountain Ranges are spectacular from this lightly used path. All three kinds of Scoters, Long-tailed Ducks, and Buffleheads can often be viewed here in October and early November. Mountain holly grows in profusion along this path.

Moorhen Marsh Trail. This trail starts at Waumbek Junction and follows a rail trail east to Moorhen Marsh at 0.5 mile and Cedar Marsh at one mile. A portage trail to Cherry Pond is on your left after 500 feet, along with a spectacular view of Cherry Pond and the distant Pliny Range in



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Moorhen Pond, Pondicherry Wildlife Refuge

Jefferson. Future plans call for a wheelchair-accessible trail to this point. At Moorhen Marsh look and listen for Virginia Rails, Sora, and Common Snipe that are often found in this highly productive area. The winnowing of the snipe in spring is one of the featured attractions of this marsh. Common Moorhen and Least Bittern have been recorded here but are not to be expected. At Cedar Marsh, look for Green-winged Teal. Northern Parulas are often heard in the spruce forest around Cedar Marsh. The rail trail continues to Gorham, NH, in another eighteen miles, but the best birding is back at the refuge.

Conclusions

Birding the Pondicherry Wildlife Refuge can be a very satisfying experience. New access trails and National Wildlife Refuge status have improved opportunities for visiting birders. You can also learn what to expect at Pondicherry by reading *New Hampshire Bird Records* and by obtaining a new bird checklist for Pondicherry at the New Hampshire Audubon website:

<<http://www.nhaidubon.org/sanctuaries/pondicherry.htm>>. You can help increase our knowledge of the bird life by submitting your records to New Hampshire Audubon.

Make the effort to visit Pondicherry and you will be rewarded. Few days in the field can be better than a day in this marvelous refuge with its wealth of bird life, botany, and scenery. Watching the golden glow of sunset on the Presidential Range reflecting off the waters of Big Cherry Pond while a loon calls is a wonderful way to end a day of birding. 

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Robert A. Quinn is a New Hampshire native with a degree in Zoology from the University of New Hampshire. He worked for the Audubon Society of New Hampshire for nine years, becoming their first staff ornithologist, and continues as an active volunteer for Audubon. He has led dozens of field trips including trips to Alaska, California, Oregon, Florida, Hawaii, Maine, New Jersey, Rhode Island, Texas, Ontario, New Brunswick, Trinidad, and Costa Rica. For twenty years he was editor of the nesting season for *New Hampshire Bird Records* and a founding member of the New Hampshire Rare Bird Committee. He is proprietor of a natural history services business, Merlin Enterprises, and has worked on contract for the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Maine and New Hampshire, the State of New Hampshire, the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests, and the Audubon Society of New Hampshire. This article was adapted and greatly expanded from a shorter piece on the area's bird life published in *New Hampshire Bird Records*, 16:3, Fall 1997.

David Govatski is an avid birder and volunteer Pondicherry Wildlife Refuge Manager since 1992. He resides in Jefferson, NH, and is employed as a Fire and Aviation Management Officer with the White Mountain National Forest. He is Chairman of the Friends of Pondicherry and has been actively involved in land acquisition and protection efforts.