

Birding Baxter State Park

Jim Sweeney

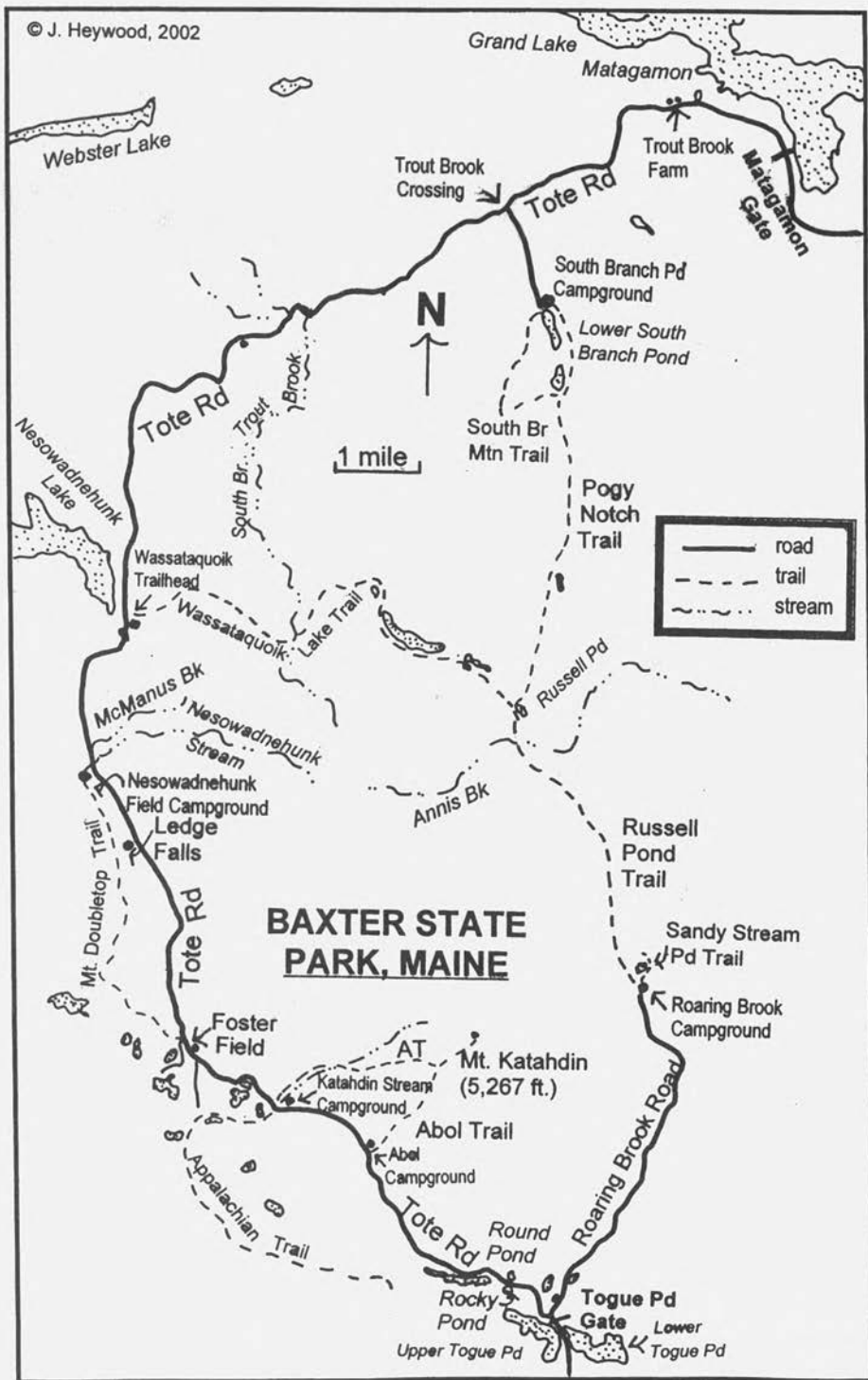
On August 31, 1846, Henry David Thoreau left Concord, Massachusetts, via railroad and steamboat, for Bangor and the backwoods of Maine. His destination was Mount Katahdin, Maine's highest peak and enduring symbol of the northern forest. Today access to the wilderness surrounding Mount Katahdin is much more convenient than it was in Thoreau's day. However, the pristine conditions and natural splendor, so beautifully described in his writings, remain unchanged after more than 150 years.



Thoreau made three trips to the Maine woods from 1846 to 1857. A list of the birds he saw on his last visit appears as an appendix in his book *The Maine Woods*. In addition, Thoreau's book provides the reader with florid descriptions of the ethnohistory and sociology of the region in the mid-nineteenth century.

The wilderness below Mount Katahdin lies within the boundaries of Baxter State Park, a 200,000-acre preserve bestowed to the people of Maine by former governor Percival P. Baxter. The land was purchased in twenty-eight parcels and donated to the state between 1931 and 1962. Baxter State Park covers an enormous area compared with other state parks in New England. The Tote Road, the park's main access road, is primitive and traverses spruce-fir forest, stands of paper birch, moss-clad glacial erratics, gushing streams, and quaking bogs. In some places, when two cars meet on the Tote Road, one vehicle may be required to pull off to the side to accommodate the other. There are no trash receptacles in the park. Visitors are required to carry out what they carry into the woods. Moreover, the amenities frequently associated with family-style camping (e.g., snack bar, arcade) are absent. In short, Baxter State Park is designed for people interested in a pristine experience of the natural world.

The aim of this article is to provide the reader with a sampling of some of the more productive birding areas within Baxter State Park. The species accounts for each site should not be construed as an exhaustive list. Some areas containing the "right" habitat have consistently failed to produce the expected species on more than ten trips to the park. Conversely, unanticipated species have been observed by the author on just about every trip to the park over the past eight years. Therefore, the species described at each site are the ones most likely to be encountered from May to September. The best time to bird the park is from late May to early June, when most of the neotropical migrants have returned to their breeding grounds. Of course, the reason these birds have risked predation, starvation, and exhaustion during their arduous flights is to exploit the swarms of insects that abound at this time of year. Black flies and midges have the capacity to diminish one's enjoyment of spectacular wilderness encounters. The best way to combat these pests is to don a head net at all times.



Because Baxter State Park is so vast, a visitor should plan to spend several days birding this area. A drive from the Togue Pond Gate at the south end to the Matagamon Gate in the northeast corner of the park can take up to two hours. There are many places to stop to view birds between the areas discussed in this article. Stop and explore the pockets of interesting habitat along the road. The birding may be relatively slow for miles, but frequent changes from northern hardwood to boreal forest may yield species such as Black-backed Woodpecker, Boreal Chickadee, and Spruce Grouse. The drive along the Tote Road invariably affords a sighting of Ruffed Grouse.

Sandy Stream Pond

This is one of the most popular areas in the park. Photographers have unparalleled access to Katahdin's aesthetic nuances from the boardwalk at the pond's edge. Naturalists of every stripe can find something of interest in, on, or around this body of water. Furthermore, the pond is one of the best locations in the park for viewing moose. Look for them as they feed on aquatic plants in the early morning and early evening. From the Togue Pond Gate take Roaring Brook Road on the right (at the fork) for 8.1 miles to Roaring Brook Campground. The lot at this campground is large and accommodates day-use hikers who wish to ascend Mount Katahdin from the east. Birding is best at this location before and after mid-August, since there are fewer visitors.

Philadelphia Vireos can be found near the parking lot of Roaring Brook Campground. If you are fortunate enough to secure a campsite, you may have the opportunity to view this species in the paper birch crowns directly overhead. Bird the campground carefully since Blue-headed Vireo, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, American Redstart, Eastern Wood-Pewee, and Least Flycatcher are reliable here. Next, take the Sandy Stream Trail out to the pond. The trailhead is at the north end of the parking lot (near the Ranger's quarters).

The trail forks only a short distance from the trailhead. Be sure to stay on the Sandy Stream Pond Trail (look for the short bridge over Roaring Brook).

This section of the trail usually provides excellent views of Black-throated Blue, Blackburnian, Bay-breasted, and Black-throated Green warblers, and White-throated Sparrow. In late May and early

June, the songs of these last two species resonate throughout the dense, wet forest. Continuing along the trail, look for a boardwalk crossing a small cedar swamp. Ruby-crowned Kinglets and Northern Waterthrushes can be seen and heard. From this



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Mt. Katahdin from Sandy Stream Pond (May, 1998)

location it is only a short walk to the edge of the pond. In the spruce-fir forest surrounding the pond there is a good chance of observing Magnolia and Yellow-rumped warblers, Cedar Waxwings, and, occasionally, Boreal Chickadees. Look for Lincoln's Sparrows closer to the pond's rocky shore.

Between moose sightings, be sure to look for Ring-necked Ducks and Common Mergansers on the pond. Spotted Sandpipers are sometimes seen on the rocks at the pond's edge. For those birders with a botanical bent, the rocky edge of Sandy Stream Pond is a good place to find the carnivorous pitcher plant.

Round and Rocky Ponds

From the Togue Pond Gate take the Tote Road (Perimeter Road on some maps) on the left at the fork for approximately 1.5 miles. The Tote Road rises above Round Pond to the north and Rocky Pond to the south. There are places to park on the side of the Tote Road if you continue over the ridge toward the northwest sides of the ponds. Park at this location, and walk back up the ridge. There are several places at the top of the ridge that afford great views of Mount Katahdin (to the north) and bird activity on the shores of both ponds. This is a reliable spot to observe Common Loons. Scan the shores of these ponds for Great Blue Heron and American Bittern. Blue-headed and Red-eyed vireos, and Yellow-rumped Warblers are easy to locate in the trees on this ridge.

Nesowadnehunk Field Campground

Continuing north on the Tote Road, travel past the popular Ledge Falls swimming area until you arrive at Nesowadnehunk Field Campground (pronounced Nah-So-Dah-Hunk). There is a parking area located in front of the Ranger's quarters. Be sure to



Nesowadnehunk Field

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bird the field and edges to the east of the Ranger's quarters. The field has produced sightings of Merlin on a few occasions. Occasionally, black bears are seen ambling across this clearing. Golden Eagles have been observed from this location too. Reportedly, this species has bred on the inaccessible mountain cliffs in the area.

The spruces behind the Ranger's quarters can be very productive. Look for Evening Grosbeak, White-winged Crossbill, and Pine Siskin in this area. Furthermore, the small clearing northwest of the

Ranger's quarters is sometimes teeming with warblers. Later in the summer there are many immature birds quietly skulking in this densely vegetated spot. Species

observed with some regularity include Black-throated Blue, Black-throated Green, Blackpoll, Northern Parula, Magnolia, Canada, and Black-and-white warblers.

The campsites at this location are situated at the edge of Nesowadnehunk Stream. Lean-to sites are available for those who prefer awakening to the heavy scent of balsam fir. Philadelphia and Blue-headed vireos, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, and a variety of warblers can be seen in the vicinity of the camping area. A short hike along the nearby Mount Doubletop Trail may yield sightings of Winter Wren, Veery, and Hermit Thrush. The exceptionally tame Spruce Grouse has been reported from the Nesowadnehunk Campground and environs. Crepuscular birding may provide a glimpse of American Woodcock on the Tote Road north and south of the campground.

There are several interesting mammals in addition to the black bear that are sometimes observed at this location. Coyote, bobcat, and pine marten have been reported in the immediate area. Watch for moose at twilight on the Tote Road north of the campground.

Tote Road South of Nesowadnehunk Lake

Although Nesowadnehunk Lake actually lies outside the boundary of the park, the dense patches of spruce forest just south of the lake's southeastern shore provide excellent opportunities to observe boreal species from the park's Tote Road. About 1.5 miles south of the Wassataquoik Trailhead, there is a small parking area near the entrance to an unmarked dirt road (on the left side of the Tote Road). Park and walk down the road until you reach Nesowadnehunk Stream. Look for Boreal Chickadees in the spruces in this area.

When you return to the Tote Road, walk slowly along the edge of the road listening for the tapping of a Black-backed Woodpecker. In August of 2001, a walk along this stretch of road produced excellent views of a Three-toed Woodpecker.

In the early 1980s, the spruce-fir forest in this part of the park sustained heavy mortality as a result of a spruce budworm outbreak spanning the years 1970-1985. By 1987, all the mature fir and most of the spruce along the Tote Road, from McManus Brook (near Nesowadnehunk Field Campground) to a distance 1600 meters to the north, had died from spruce budworm defoliation, bark beetle infestation, and windthrow (Oliveri 1993).

Since the mid-1980s Black-backed Woodpeckers have not been as common in northern Maine. It appears that these woodpeckers had benefited from the high fir mortality resulting from the spruce budworm outbreak. In the early 1980s, Black-backed Woodpeckers were observed, in the forest along the Tote Road described above, removing the bark from standing dead fir trees to feed on insects. But by 1987 most of these dead firs had been blown down or had lost their bark, and the Black-backed Woodpecker had disappeared from the area. Interestingly, during the same year, Three-toed Woodpeckers were observed foraging on live spruce trees infested with bark beetles along this same section of the Tote Road. The bark beetle infestation was a consequence of the spruce budworm outbreak that affected so much of the park and surrounding areas (Oliveri 1993).

In 1982 Cape May Warblers reportedly held territory in the spruce-fir forest north of McManus Brook (Oliveri 1993). Cape May Warbler populations fluctuate more than the populations of most other warbler species. Throughout its range, the highest breeding densities for this species are reached during spruce budworm outbreaks. Like the Black-backed and Three-toed woodpeckers, this warbler's presence, in the area described, appears to have been connected to the spruce budworm outbreak of the early 1980s.

Opposite the Wassataquoik Trailhead there is a small parking area with a trail leading to Nesowadnehunk Lake. The parking area is a short distance from the park boundary. Birding along the Tote Road in this area can be rewarding. Check the spruces for Boreal Chickadees and Golden-crowned Kinglets. Listen for the raucous *caw* of the Common Ravens overhead.

Trout Brook Crossing

Located near the access road for South Branch Pond Campground, Trout Brook Crossing is a picnic area that warrants a visit. From the nearby bridge, look for Belted Kingfishers, Barn Swallows, and Spotted Sandpipers. Cross the bridge and scrutinize the birches and maples for Northern Parulas, American Redstarts, Nashville Warblers, Cedar Waxwings, and Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers. Ruby-throated Hummingbirds, Evening Grosbeaks, and Ruffed Grouse may be seen on the stretch of Tote Road for three miles east and west of this location.

South Branch Pond Campground

From the Tote Road take the access road south from Trout Brook Crossing. Keep a careful watch on the road ahead of you, since Evening Grosbeaks have been sighted here. The campground is located at the northern end of Lower South Branch Pond. This camping area is scenic and provides access to low-impact hiking trails close to the pond. The day hiker's parking lot is a good place to start looking for birds. Least Flycatchers, Red-eyed and Blue-headed vireos, American Redstarts, and Yellow-rumped and Black-throated Green warblers are easy to find in this area. As you approach the pond, look for Philadelphia Vireos and Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers. The campground's beach is an excellent spot for viewing Common Loons and, closer to twilight, Common Nighthawks.

The campground is a popular destination for park visitors. Interesting birds can be seen and heard from the comfort of your site. At night, Great Horned Owls may compete with the eerie calls of Common Loons. At dawn, the scratching of a Ruffed Grouse, a few feet from your tent, may alert you to the cacophony of bird song emanating from the treetops. Extensive hiking is not required to experience an impressive array of avian sightings at this location.

If a low-impact hike is desired, take the South Branch Mountain Trail (west of the beach area) over South Branch Ponds Brook. Search the grassy shoreline of the pond for Lincoln's Sparrows. Common Yellowthroats can be found in the tangles along the edge of the brook. Follow the trail as it enters dense stands of birch, maple,

and spruce. Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers are easily detected at this location. Look for the neatly aligned sap “wells” of this species in the paper birches near the trail.

A short hike along this trail is likely to yield a Winter Wren. Listen for the mellifluous rattle of this species in the ravine near the trail. Furthermore, Wood Thrushes, Ovenbirds, Hairy Woodpeckers, and Ruffed Grouse may be observed without hiking too far from Lower South Branch Pond. The hiking becomes much more difficult as you travel farther from the pond.

Mount Katahdin

Mount Katahdin (elevation 5267 feet) is the highest mountain in Maine and one of the highest in New England. The mountain is the northern terminus of the Appalachian Trail and should not be approached casually. If you decide to hike Mount Katahdin, start early, since the entire trip may require a significant amount of time depending on pace, stamina, and weather conditions.

American Pipits breed above timberline. Look for this bird in the alpine plateau known as the Tableland. The Tableland is situated on the northwest slope of Baxter Peak and is one of only two known breeding sites for this species in New England. While exploring this habitat, you may be fortunate enough to see a gray-brown butterfly of the genus *Oeneis*. Lepidopterists know this butterfly as a subspecies of *Polixenes Arctic* (*Oeneis polixenes katahdin*). Usually found on moist tundra, this arctic species is geographically isolated at the top of Mount Katahdin.

The Appalachian Trail, at higher elevations, is a good place to look for Gray Jays. In general, the park's interior trails are the most reliable places to see this species (the same is true for Spruce Grouse). The Appalachian Trail approaches Mount Katahdin from the west and can be accessed from Katahdin Stream Campground. On some maps this section of the Appalachian Trail is called Hunt Trail. At Abol



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Mt. Katahdin from the Abol Trail

Campground (southeast of Katahdin Stream Campground) there is access to Mount Katahdin from the southwest. The Abol Trail is steep and rocky and requires much physical exertion to ascend. The trail becomes more difficult to negotiate as you approach treeline. Please remember to register at the Ranger's quarters before hiking the mountain. Mount Katahdin can be ascended from the east as well. Several trails can be accessed from Roaring Brook Campground. These trails are popular with day hikers during midsummer, and the parking lot is sometimes full by midmorning.

Directions and Important Information

To reach Togue Pond Gate, take I-95 to Exit 56 in the town of Medway. From the exit ramp, travel west on Route 157-11 into the town of Millinocket. Look for signs for Baxter State Park as you approach downtown Millinocket. Follow Golden Road (the road is a short distance from the downtown area) for approximately sixteen miles to the fork with Millinocket Road on the right. Be sure to follow the signs to the park entrance. If you stay on Golden Road past the fork, you will arrive at a toll booth. This section of Golden Road does not provide access to the park. However, for a fee of several dollars, you may travel on this section to reach productive birding sites southwest of the park.

To enter the park at Matagamom Gate (from the north), stay on I-95 North to Exit 58 in the town of Sherman. Take Route 11 (north) to the town of Patten. Once you reach Patten, look for Route 159 North, a left turn off Route 11. Follow Route 159 to the village of Shin Pond. From there, take Grand Lake Road to the entrance of the park at Matagamom Lake.



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Mt. Katahdin from Sandy Stream Pond


Baxter State Park is open from May 15 to October 15. Moreover, the park is open for day use (depending on weather conditions) from October 15 to December 1 and from April 1 to May 15. A permit is required for winter use from December 1 to April 1. There is a year-round fee of eight dollars to enter the park.

If you visit between May and September, expect some rain. If you plan to hike above treeline, keep a close watch on

the forecast. The weather at Baxter State Park is extremely variable. Be sure to have enough fuel, food, and supplies before entering the park. There are supply stores a short distance from Togue Pond Gate (south) and Matagamom Gate (north), but the drive to these locations from most places in the park is far from convenient.

There are ten campgrounds in the park. Eight of these are accessible by vehicle, and two are backcountry (hike-in only). Because summer camping at Baxter State Park is so popular, reservations are recommended. There are several sites within the park designed for group camping. To make reservations, contact the park headquarters at 64 Balsam Drive, Millinocket, ME 04462, phone 207-723-5140, or visit <http://www.baxterstateparkauthority.com>. The park headquarters are located at the intersection of Central and Sycamore streets in Millinocket. You will see the headquarters on the left as you travel west on Route 157-11. If you pass the IGA supermarket on the left, you have gone too far.

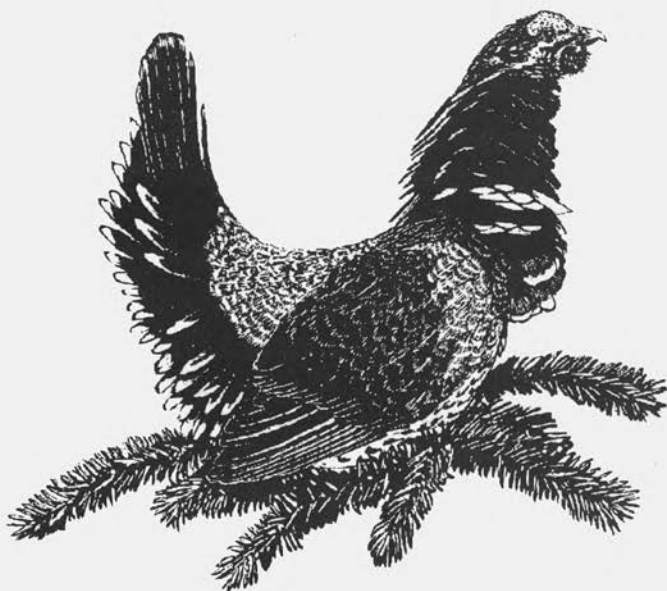
If camping is not an option, there are accommodations on Route 157-11 in Millinocket. There are also several motels in the towns of Patten and Sherman. The motel rates at these last two locations are reasonable, but access to the park may require more than an hour of driving.

For rare-bird information, contact the Maine Rare Bird Alert (operated by the Maine Audubon Society) at 207-781-2332. A good map to have while birding around the park is DeLorme's *Map and Guide of Baxter State Park and Katahdin*. This map is available at most stores and gas stations in Millinocket and other towns near the park. 

References and Sources:

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- Oliveri, S. 1993. Bird Responses to Habitat Changes in Baxter State Park, Maine. *Maine Naturalist* 1(3): 145-54.
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An avid birder since 1980, Jim Sweeney, of Providence, RI, has birded extensively in New England, the mid-Atlantic states, and Arizona. He wishes to thank Jean Hoekwater, park naturalist, and John Slonina for helpful comments regarding the natural history of the park. This is his first article for Bird Observer.



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