

# ABOUT BOOKS

## Town and Country

*Mark Lynch*

*A Birder's Guide to Metropolitan Areas of North America.* Paul Lehman, Editor. 2001. Colorado Springs, Colorado: American Birding Association.

*Quabbin: A History and Explorers Guide.* Michael Tougias. 2002. Yarmouth Port, Massachusetts: On Cape Publications.

In 1999, Sheila Carroll and I spent much of our free time birding in the city of Worcester. To be frank, many folks look at Worcester as a pretty poky city that at first blush does not seem like it could be very “birdy.” Worcester has no ocean, like Boston or San Francisco, and no major river, like Springfield, not even a big lake, like Chicago. The few remaining green spaces are small and isolated, and its ponds are very developed along the shore and are often full of boaters. Winters are bitterly cold and snowy.

Worcester seems to have all the negatives of an urban environment and none of the positives. (No, I do not work for the Chamber of Commerce.) So why bird there?

For us, part of the inspiration for our Worcester Big Year was the Mass Audubon sanctuary at Broad Meadow Brook in Worcester. This small, narrow urban green space nestled between housing developments and auto graveyards proved to be a real Mecca for birds, especially migrants. If this tiny refuge could host such a variety of birds (and butterflies), what about the other parks and ponds of Worcester? I had also been studying how waterfowl utilize Worcester’s often-abused ponds and lakes and was surprised at the variety and number of ducks that do pass through the city’s ponds. Some even stay to nest. I must say that we were also inspired by projects like Take A Second Look (TASL), which has focused on monitoring waterbirds of Boston Harbor, as well as by legendary urban birders like Bob Stymeist. These people and projects taught me to not give up so easily on cities and to look a bit more closely at what green and blue spaces remained. Hopefully, we will help preserve the small green islands that are left. We live here after all; what do we know about the areas right around us?

1999 was a great year for urban birding in central Massachusetts. We saw 197 species, including some you would think of as highly unlikely in Worcester, such as American Bittern, Yellow-crowned Night Heron, Common Moorhen, Golden Eagle, and Grasshopper Sparrow. All these very urban areas with such good birds! It was a revelation. But best of all was the fact that none of them were more than 15 minutes away from my house. Urban birding is often fun, rewarding, and convenient. You cannot beat that.



This is why I really looked forward to the publishing of the American Birding Association's thick *A Birder's Guide To Metropolitan Areas of North America*. Editor Paul Lehman states his purpose for assembling these "where-to-find-amid-the-skyscrapers" essays as: "We hope to show that these human population centers provide some of the best birding on the continent and how you can use your birding time here to best advantage" (p.1).

As Lehman explains, there are many reasons why birding in cities is fun and productive. As you might expect, there are many birders who live in the cities cited in this book, and they cover those small productive urban green pockets with real regularity. Therefore, there is a lot of information known about the status and distribution of bird species in these cities. Rarities are regularly found because of this intense coverage, and word is quickly spread. A birder visiting one of these cities will find it easy to learn "what is around." A local example of this phenomenon is Mount Auburn Cemetery. It is so intensively covered in spring migration that it is hard to believe any bird can pass through unidentified. All those eyes, all those visits, and all those records have combined to create an unrivaled body of knowledge about bird movements in that very small area.

The book is organized alphabetically by city name. Some essays are very detailed, while others are more general. Though some locations have been dealt with before in other ABA/Lane guides, many have not. There are details of when to visit to see the best birds, climate, car rentals, hotels, traffic, and local Rare Bird Alerts, though the depth of this information varies from essay to essay. Urban areas that may be unsafe for solo birders have most often been avoided, but a few are included and clearly described as such. A real diversity of American cities is described in detail. There are those cities that are well-known birding destinations, like New York City and San Francisco, but also cities that may not immediately spring to mind when thinking of birding, like Philadelphia and Cleveland. Canadian cities are also included, and there are chapters on Calgary, Halifax, Montreal, Toronto, and Winnipeg. What, no Moose Jaw? The essay on birding Boston, Massachusetts, was written by Robert Stymeist, Marjorie Rines, and Ron Lockwood; it is a truly fine and concise introduction to the area. The authors use the geographical limits of what is known as "Greater Boston," including cities like Cambridge and Winthrop.

This brings up an interesting point. Many of the essays in this book include spots well outside the actual city limits, but this makes sense in light of the stated purpose of the book. For instance, in the piece on Las Vegas, most of the prime birding spots mentioned are quite a few miles outside of the glare of the Vegas strip. The Pahrnatag National Wildlife Refuge, which is given a section, is more than 62 miles out of Vegas! For purists like myself, that's not urban birding, that's birding from a city. A 62-mile radius around Worcester would include some of Boston, all of Providence, and Quabbin Reservoir! But this book is not just about birding in a city, but also about where to go while you are visiting a city.

This ABA/Lane guide at 508 pages is one of the heftiest published. It is dense with information and birding possibilities. It is also one of the most practical of all the

“where-to-find” guides, because at some point we will all find ourselves in a big city, whether vacationing, on business, or visiting relatives. As the essays in *A Birder’s Guide to Metropolitan Areas of North America* show, “bright lights, big city” can mean a long life list and some great birding too.

But let’s not kid ourselves, a trip to the wild areas around us, whether ocean, desert, or forest, is always special and makes for a great day of birding. Though Massachusetts is a small state, we do have some very accessible areas that allow the casual birder to have a taste of several types of interesting natural habitats. One of these areas most often visited by birders is the huge Quabbin Reservoir in the center of the state. This is, at best, described not as a real wilderness, but as a very human-managed spot. Thomas Conuel summed up this unique aspect of Quabbin nicely by calling it “The Accidental Wilderness”; Michael Tougias has written what I think is one of the most satisfying guides to this complex area, in that it combines aspects of both a trail guide and a concise history of the area. No birder visiting the area should be without it.

There have been several other histories of the Quabbin area, notably the inexpensively produced, but nonetheless fascinating, books by J.R. Greene like *Creation of Quabbin Reservoir: Death of the Swift River Valley* and *The Day Four Quabbin Towns Died*. Tougias has already authored other histories of Massachusetts, like *King Philip’s War: The History and Legacy of America’s Forgotten Conflict*, coauthored with Eric B. Schultz. Tougias has also written about the natural areas of New England and his love of them. *River Days: Exploring the Connecticut River from Source to Sea* is simultaneously a guide to canoeing the Connecticut and a personal memoir of growing up on the river, as well as an entertaining history. It is Tougias’ ability to pull together these aspects of a natural history and trail guide with the human history of a spot that makes his Quabbin book so useful and fun to use.

Tougias starts with a history of the Swift River Valley towns of Dana, Enfield, Prescott, and Greenwich. He nicely summarizes the momentous decision to move the residents out and flood this scenic valley to provide Boston with a water supply for the future. Can you even imagine some project of this scale and with this amount of human impact even being considered today? There are chapters on moving the graves, the construction of the dams and aqueduct, visiting the Swift River Valley Historical Society Museum, and several chapters on odd and anecdotal stories of the Valley. These chapters are illustrated with numerous black-and-white photographs. These are by turns fascinating and poignant. There can be little doubt that Quabbin has a strange and unique history, somewhat sad, somewhat eerie. Quabbin is so much more than just a destination to tick Acadian Flycatcher or look for Golden Eagle.

The last half of this book is a fairly substantial hiking and biking guide, not just to Quabbin proper, but also to surrounding areas like Royalston and the Brookfields. Maps are simple, clear, and easy to understand. There are numerous details of historical and natural points of interest to look for. Specific birding information is not the purpose of this book, but some general information is given. There is a short chapter on Bald Eagles at Quabbin, which includes the history of the program to re-

introduce eagles as breeding birds in the state. Another chapter talks about typical birds you will find in the different habitats of Quabbin. It was here that I found one notable ornithological error. On page 159, under “Birds that inhabit fields and edges,” Tougias states: “Other birds you are likely to see in the fields at Quabbin are white-throated sparrows and Carolina and winter wrens.”

Though Carolina Wrens have certainly made recent inroads into central Massachusetts, and I have occasionally found them at Quabbin, they are certainly not a species to expect...so far at least. House Wrens on the other hand are everywhere where there are fields and brush.

But these are minor quibbles. The real purpose of *Quabbin: A History and Explorers Guide* is to give the reader the cultural and historical background to Quabbin, and then a good map to help the reader make some discoveries of their own in this very large and unique Massachusetts semiwilderness. 🐦

### Other Literature Cited:

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BOREAL CHICKADEE BY JIM BAIRD