

# Birding the Dorothy Frances Rice Sanctuary for Wildlife in Peru, Massachusetts

*Robert Tougias*

**Editor's Note:** *The August issue of Bird Observer reprinted several brief site guides from the recently published Bird Finding Guide to Western Massachusetts (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Extension, 2003). In this issue, we continue our presentation of birding sites in the western part of the state, this time from Robert Tougias's Birding Western Massachusetts, which can be ordered from the publisher, New England Cartographics, Box 9369, North Amherst, MA 01059, or <<http://www.necartographics.com>>. The e-mail address is [geopoes@crocker.com](mailto:geopoes@crocker.com), or you can call toll-free, 1-888-995-6277. The book is available at most booksellers in western Massachusetts and can be ordered from any bookstore. The Globe Corner Bookstore in Boston carries it and Barnes and Noble is scheduled to. The cost is \$16.95. Robert Tougias is available for slide presentations and original artwork. You can e-mail him questions at [rtougias@snet.net](mailto:rtougias@snet.net). You can also order the book directly from the author at 135 Berry Lane, Colchester, CT 06415*

**Closest Town:** Peru

**Best Time to Visit:** May, June, September

**Methods of Birding:** Walking Trails

**Birds of Special Interest:** Ruffed Grouse (year-long), Least Flycatcher (spring and summer), warblers (spring, especially May, and summer), Rusty Blackbirds (variable).

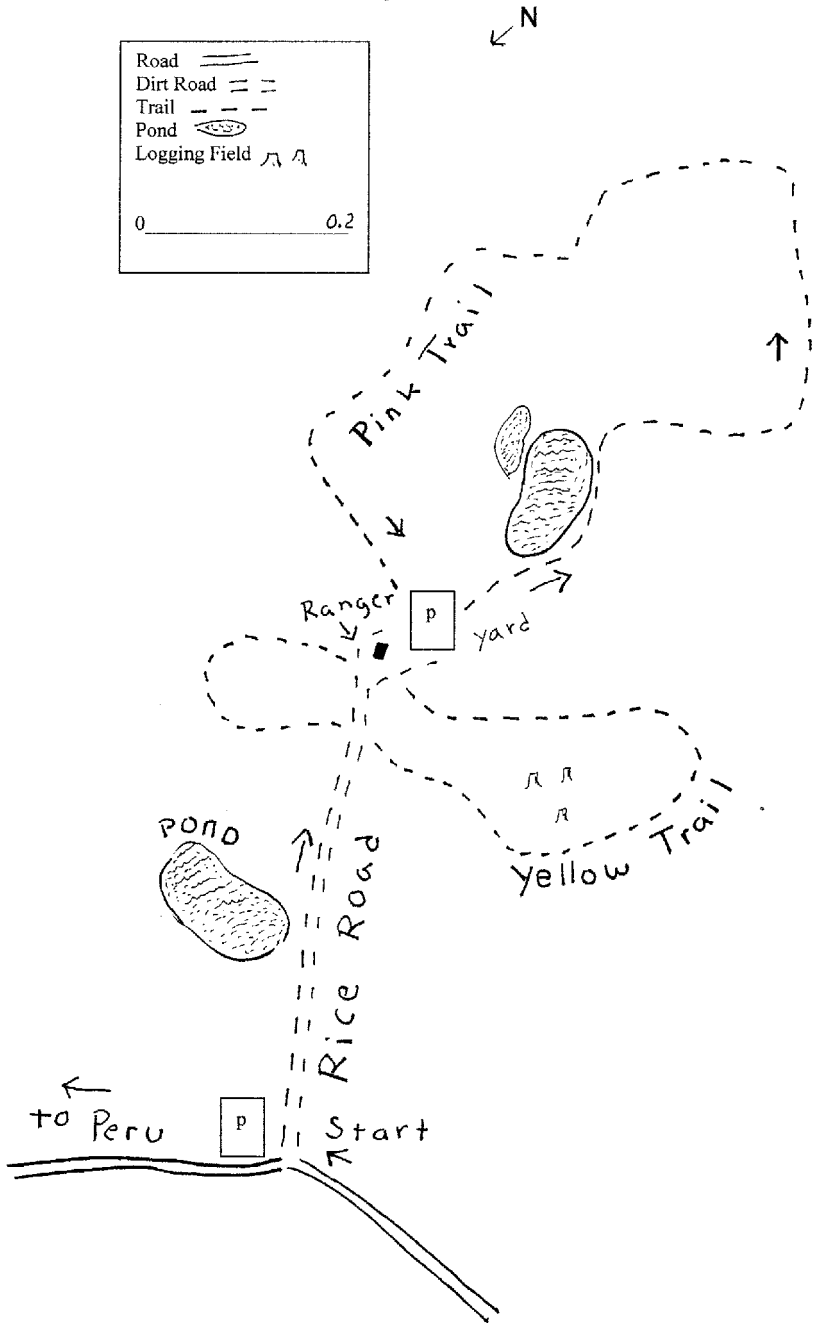
**Advice/Rules:** Be alert for black bears. Cross-country skiing is allowed.

The little-known Dorothy Frances Rice Sanctuary offers six well-marked trails and over 40 nesting species of birds. This hidden sanctuary receives few visitors; nearby Moran Wildlife Management Area and Notchview Reservation receive most of the attention. However, the Rice Sanctuary offers good birding as well.

In the late 1920s, Oran and Mary Rice established this sanctuary in memory of their daughter. Decades later, it was entrusted to the New England Forestry Foundation. The Foundation acquires land and sets it aside for wildlife and people. NEFF is unique in that the land is working land, managed for the twin goals of natural resource use and protection. Their forests are available for logging and small-scale farming, with the idea that such practices can enhance habitat while uplifting economic livelihood for rural residents.

The site offers birders a healthy representation of typical Berkshire County woodland species. Since it is largely unexplored as a birding site, there are no established specialties or sightings. Instead, it offers trails through logging fields,

# Rice Sanctuary



meadows, beaver ponds, and densely wooded hills where nothing but the soothing sounds of nature await the visitor. The Sanctuary protects 276 acres contiguous to state land on the north boundary. Black bears are seen here frequently, and moose are becoming more common each year.

If the prospect of encountering black bears makes you nervous, you may not wish to visit the Dorothy Frances Rice Sanctuary. During the early spring, when they emerge from hibernation, black bears visit the wetlands at this sanctuary, and then return again in the late summer to gorge themselves on the abundant wild blackberries and raspberries. During the summer of 2001, the resident caretaker, who lives in the cabin at the end of Rice Road, saw eight bears. (He also saw a moose and her calf on a regular basis.) Black bear sign is evident all along the ponds and in the “cuts” where logging has allowed for a healthy sun-drenched succession of berry-producing plants.

The Berkshire Hills are rich in history, and the Rice property is no exception. Evidence of the settlers that once worked the land is seen in the stone walls that add an aesthetic charm to the property. Abandoned parts of old tools suggest a time when life was a bit tougher, and there are remains of an old colonial trade route.

## **Getting There**

From the center of Peru, take Route 143 west, toward Pittsfield. Turn left on South Road. Travel 1.0 mile to the gate and the sign for the Sanctuary. Park outside the gate if possible.

## **Birding Rice Sanctuary**

### **Rice Road**

While Rice Road, which begins at the gate, can be driven all the way to the posted map and trailheads, many people choose to park at its beginning. This allows for a nice walk down Rice Road, where there is much to see. Almost immediately on the left, tucked away from the road, is a long beaver marsh. Every spring, on the dead trees or bushes along the circumference of the marsh, members of the flycatcher family abound. There may be Alder and Least Flycatchers from spring into September. Yellow-bellied and Willow Flycatchers have been seen occasionally in migration. Look for Great Crested Flycatchers along Rice Road high up in the trees. Occasionally they will descend, and this is when they can be matched with their distinct dweep-dweep call, which is different from all other flycatchers.

Check the marsh along the road for spring warblers. Farther down Rice Road, along the open roads and fields by the caretaker’s cabin, look for Yellow Warblers. Sometimes Common Yellowthroats and Northern Cardinals can be found in the cover or “edge” habitat. Just before the cabin, there is a field on the left; Ruffed Grouse and Wild Turkeys are seen here almost daily. Blue Jays, American Robins, and American Goldfinches are well represented, but less common birds may include Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, Eastern Bluebirds, Cedar Waxwings, and Tree Swallows.

The Ruffed Grouse is known for its drumming while displaying on a decaying log. The log is usually that of an older tree and of large size. Logs hidden beneath brambles or low-hanging evergreens are frequent choices, as there is a preference for a covering of debris and moss. Birders have been known to elicit a response by cupping hands and beating one's chest in order to imitate the sound. In the silence of the woods, the beating of the grouse's wings may often sound like the beating of one's own heart; especially at the beginning, when the drumming starts off soft and slowly increases in speed and intensity. If you hear a drumming grouse, it is probably closer than you think. Try locating it in the direction of where there may be some old decaying logs.

### **The Pink Trail**

Rice Sanctuary is criss-crossed with well-marked, properly maintained, color-coded trails. From the large map posted at the rear of the parking area, go directly to the right to find the trailhead of the Pink Trail. This trail will take you along the edge of an active beaver pond and up into a forest, where you will ascend gradually to a hilltop lookout.

At the start of the trail, look for Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, Gray Catbirds, Common Yellowthroats, and Wood Thrushes, from May to October. If you travel quietly toward the beaver pond, you may see a Great Blue Heron feeding patiently along the water's edge. Although this is a small body of water, these majestic wading birds are



WOOD THRUSH BY ROBERT TOUGIAS

frequently caught off guard while taking a fish from the beavers' carefully engineered reservoir. They are often seen flying from this pond over the lawns and fields of the Nature Center toward the pond on Rice Road.

This beaver pond is also a great place to enjoy a less noticeable species, the Rusty Blackbird. It is sometimes seen along the shoreline. This species is in general decline and becoming increasingly rare. Found here during migration, rusties may be highly erratic in their appearance during both journeys north and south. They are usually seen between mid-March and mid-April, but they travel in small single-species flocks and show up in unlikely places. Sometimes they are found nesting in this region, but for the most part, this bird is an inhabitant of boreal black spruce bogs. Rusty Blackbirds are an unobtrusive species, presenting a challenge to even the best birders. They feed along the shores of densely covered ponds and bogs and can be hard to see. Song is the best way to locate them; listen for an unmusical squeaking or a wavering whistle-like call. If you're close enough, a pair of yellow eyes will help to identify them.

The Northern Waterthrush is similarly reclusive and occupies the same shoreline zone. Other birds of specific interest at the pond are the flycatchers. Look for the same ones mentioned under the Rice Road section. Of the group, the most likely flycatcher at this pond will be the Least. Eastern Wood-Pewees and Eastern Phoebes are in the surrounding trees. Other insect-eating birds will include Tree Swallows and Cedar Waxwings. The Belted Kingfisher is another possibility, but it prefers to nest inside sandy embankments and is not a confirmed nester here.

Near the little beaver pond and the Pink Trail are the remains of old carriages that probably belonged to the Rice family. These relics await your analysis hidden deep under twisting trees and a blanket of leaves. Although travel far off-trail cannot be recommended, you can usually stray a few hundred feet from the trail without getting lost.

Shortly after passing the pond, you begin to ascend toward the peak. The woods are mixed deciduous with some spruce and white pine. Listen for canopy-dwellers such as Scarlet Tanagers and Red-eyed Vireos. In fall, the Philadelphia Vireo is possible. Blue-headed Vireos occur at the summit; they are seen frequently throughout the summer and are suspected nesters.

The summit offers a magnificent view to the north. There are plans to take down an acre or more of trees to enhance the view and allow for the pond to be seen. This may bring in Mourning Warblers, which favor slash growth in logged areas along hillsides. In the meantime, check for Nashville Warblers. There may be a few Black-throated-Green Warblers in the higher canopy.

After spending some quiet contemplative moments at the summit lookout, you will exit to the right and begin a quick descent. In about fifteen to twenty minutes you will arrive at the edge of the forest. An uncommon woodland nester, the Black-billed Cuckoo is believed to breed here. One might reveal itself in a brushy area. Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers frequent the tree trunks, along with Red-breasted and White-

breasted Nuthatches. Screech Owls have been heard at this point where the Pink Trail terminates. In the dead of night, Great Horned and Barred Owls fill the air with their distinct hooting calls.

Enjoy your walk through this section, and emerge opposite to where you began, in the grassy area by the cabin at the end of Rice Road. Cross over the grassy area toward the parking lot while keeping a hopeful eye out for Blue-winged Warblers.

### **The Yellow Trail**

The Yellow Trail begins a few yards from the Pink Trail. This trailhead can be found at the edge of the grassy area across the road from the cabin. From the end of the Pink Trail, walk back toward the cabin and across Rice Road to reach the trailhead. Near the trailhead, set back in the woods, opposite the caretaker's cabin, there once spanned an impressive stone-arch bridge over what is now a small stream. It eventually collapsed, releasing a burden of stones and dumping them like weary travelers into and across the stream. If such interesting remains as these can still be found, consider the myriad of other treasures that have yet to be revealed or discovered. When the settlers left New England for places in the West, they left many things behind, which have remained, reclaimed only by the growing forest and its countless layers of leaves. Do not take any "souvenirs." Remember that everything here belongs to the sanctuary.

The Yellow Trail is where the black bears are frequently found feeding during late August and early September, when the berry crop ripens. Make your presence known if you see recent evidence of their presence. They do not like surprises. If the bears have not eaten all the berries, this is a great time of year to find early migrants adding some fruit to their diet. Cedar Waxwings are a possibility, and even more so later into the fall. During the fall migration, Hermit, Wood, and even a few Swainson's thrushes may turn up. Certainly flocks of American Robins will make quick work of the fruit if they happen upon it. Aside from migrating members of the thrush family, there will be dozens of sparrows, primarily White-throated Sparrows. Their call notes are a welcome and peaceful sound at the end of summer or on crisp cool fall evenings when dusk falls and mists begin to rise.

At this same time of day, just after sunset, Dark-eyed Juncos can be heard with their chipping, high-pitched, short notes. Juncos nest on the higher hills at this site, but will flock in the fields during fall. Canada Geese might be heard in the distance, but in general, after a noisy spring and early summer of song, this berry-filled field is mostly quiet until spring.

Follow the Yellow Trail down a hill along the "cut," enjoying a wide variety of birds from spring through summer. Look for Carolina and Winter Wrens. Common Yellowthroats are hiding all about the regrowth, while nesting Wood Thrushes fly in and out of the clearing. Ruffed Grouse walk concealed beneath the tangles of saplings and brambles. An occasional Northern Flicker may settle here and try for a meal of carpenter ants in the decaying logs buried beneath the dense vegetation. Indigo Buntings may nest—singing males have been seen in the summer on occasion.

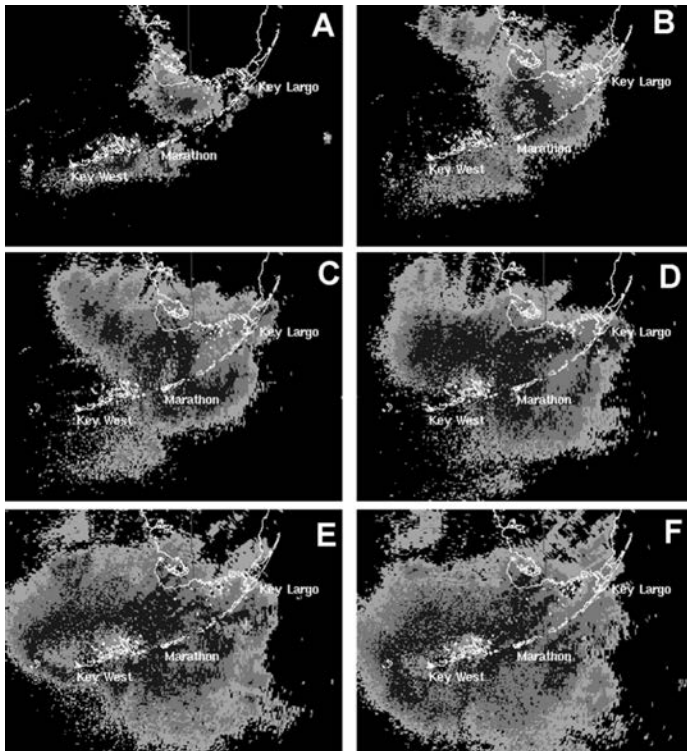
The Yellow Trail cuts back up along this log field and then shoots off to the left. From there it dips down across some wet areas and eventually comes out to Rice Road and continues across it. You may turn left to return to your car at the beginning of Rice Road. If you choose to continue on this trail, it will take you through a forested area and come out on the lawn at the caretaker's cabin.

Throughout this part of the Sanctuary birders can expect to see a healthy representation of typical mixed-forest species. Although this site is not known for rarities, it offers a quiet birding experience where the visitor can enjoy a typical New England forest at its finest. 🐦

*Robert Tougias syndicates nature articles in newspapers throughout New England and writes two birding columns for newspapers in Connecticut. His articles on wildlife have appeared in many magazines, including Appalachian Trailways and Fur-Fish-Game. A native of western Massachusetts, Robert has been birding since age seven. His artwork has won awards and is often seen in juried shows.*

### Fall Migration Update: Key West Radar on October 1

Here is a series of images from the NOAA weather radar showing a heavy departure of nocturnal migrant birds crossing the Florida Straits toward Cuba. These images, from <http://www.badbirdz.com/>, show 8:00 pm to 10:30 pm at half hour intervals (A-F) . For more information on radar ornithology, see *Bird Observer* 29:293, 2001.



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