

# Birds of the Laurel Lake Recreational Area, Erving State Forest

*Mark Taylor*

The Laurel Lake Recreational Area, part of Erving State Forest in Erving and Warwick, Massachusetts, is one of my favorite local spring birding hot spots. Once the winter snows have melted, this area can be easily accessed by car on a paved road and has its own unique habitat from which the lake name derives: a thick mountain laurel understory. When I want to find spring migrants that may have eluded me in other birding locales, this is where I go to find them, and in many cases it is the first place that they seem to arrive for me. Birds such as Blackburnian and Canada warblers and Eastern Towhee are a few that come to mind. The habitat, as I mentioned, is thick with laurel, which benefits and flourishes from the well-managed woodland that shades it. Large stands of red oak, white birch, black cherry, and other deciduous trees, along with some of the best groves of mature eastern hemlock in the area, create a great overall habitat for migrating and breeding birds.

Two year-round brooks, one at the western entrance to the forest and the other the outflow of the lake on the east end, and of course, the lake itself, complete this ideal riparian environment. The shaded laurel “stands” hold snow and ice as well, which, once melted, create many vernal pools that last late into the spring. These are perfect spots for finding Northern Waterthrushes. There is also one location from the road where I reliably find several pairs of Canada Warblers on breeding territory. Many trail systems branch off from the paved road for those with time to hike and explore the woodland further, but here I will mainly cover the approximately two-mile stretch of the park from the road. Trail maps are provided at the entrance and at the Contact Station.

The town of Erving, a small community on the edge between central and western Massachusetts, is intersected by Route 2, the most northerly east-west highway through the state. Erving State Forest, which takes up a large portion of the town, lies just to the north of Route 2 and in some locations borders the highway itself. The recreational area in the summer is a popular swimming, camping, and day-use spot and can get quite crowded on weekends. The lake itself, a relatively long, narrow, spring-fed water body, is lined with seasonal homes and camps and is a popular fishing spot, with a boat landing on the west end and sandy beach on the northeast end. There is a day-use charge for parking after Memorial Day, but generally this coincides with the end of spring migration. You can park for no charge outside the park entrances and walk in to check out the summer breeding birds if you don't want to pay. Day-use fee is \$5.00.

## **How to Get There:**

Take Route 2 from either direction to Erving, which is approximately 80 miles west of Boston and 17 miles east of Interstate 91 at Greenfield. Once in the center of

Erving on Route 2, turn north on Church Street (which becomes North Street), next to the Erving Fire Station. (Note: Set your trip odometer to 0 as you enter Church Street.) Take Church Street/North Street for 0.8 mile to Swamp Road (on the right). Take Swamp Road to the entrance for Erving State Forest/Laurel Lake Recreational Area (1.5 mile odometer reading). From this point and for the next 2-plus miles, I'll zero in on the specific spots that I bird from, and near, this paved road. Just to reiterate, I will use continuous odometer readings from the beginning of Church Street as a guide so you won't get distracted by the need to reset your odometer.

### **Pulloff #1: Park Entrance (Odometer 1.5)**

Just before you cross the wooden bridge over "Keyup Brook," there is a dirt road on the left (Great Swamp Road) which I use as a pulloff. This road is primitive, so you won't be blocking traffic. From here take a short walk up the Great Swamp Road where you can check for Louisiana Waterthrushes, which regularly sing and feed along the brook edges, especially on rainy days. Barred Owls can often be heard from this general location as well. Noise from the roaring brook can sometimes overwhelm most bird sounds other than these loud singers, so after searching for these I usually move up the road to the next stop, which is in sight of the brook, but far enough away to hear birds.

### **Pulloff #2: (Odometer 1.6)**

This pulloff on the left is situated halfway up a steep incline in an open glade of large white pines. On the opposite side of the road a thick stand of eastern hemlock dominates. The brook is visible from here, but the din is less distracting. From this spot I usually hear or see my first Blackburnian Warbler of the year in the hemlocks. Other birds, such as Black-throated Green and Black-throated Blue warblers and Blue-Headed Vireos, find these hemlocks attractive and are usually here without fail every spring and summer. The open white pine area where you park gives you a good vantage point to see or hear Broad-winged Hawk, Barred Owl, Pileated Woodpecker, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Least Flycatcher, Winter Wren, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Brown Creeper, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Pine Warbler, Black-and-White Warbler, American Redstart, Ovenbird, Louisiana Waterthrush, and Scarlet Tanager.

Note: From this point, once you crest the hill and the terrain levels off, to Pulloff #4, thick mountain laurel dominates on both sides of the road. Vernal pools abound, and ears and eyes should be open along this stretch for Winter Wren, Wood Thrush, Veery, Swainson's Thrush (rare), Hermit Thrush, Canada Warbler, Ovenbird, and Northern Waterthrush. Black-throated Blue and Black-throated Green warblers singing on their breeding territory are common here as well.

### **Pulloff #3: (Odometer 2.2)**

This pulloff on the left is marked by large stone borders. It is a good flat open area, with deciduous and coniferous trees interspersed. This spot is also where you can get out and walk on a somewhat overgrown but passable road through the mountain laurel. I reliably find my first Eastern Towhees of the new year here, and

they are always welcome arrivals. The males seem to really love to sing from these dense laurel stands while they vie for mates. These skulkers tend to be hard to see, but here it's fairly easy with a little patience. Most of the species found back at Pulloff #2 can be seen or heard here as well, but I usually find a Magnolia Warbler or two here as well. This pulloff, though, is unique for Eastern Towhee, so I call it the "Towhee Stop."

#### **Pulloff #4: (Odometer 2.4)**

Here the parking area is marked by a residential road that goes over a short causeway dividing the west corner of Laurel Lake from a shallow boggy area. Parking is limited here; do not park on this access road or block the entrance. If there are more than two vehicles, the boat-landing parking area just up the road at mile 2.5 is the best place. Once safely parked, I generally walk out to the causeway, which has good views of the lake on the right and a shallow area on the left. In the shallows on the left, Wood Duck, Great Blue Heron, Spotted Sandpiper, Solitary Sandpiper, and Belted Kingfisher are typically seen. The shrubs and trees that line both sides of the road and the water edges provide cover for Winter Wren, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Palm Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, Swamp Sparrow, and Lincoln's Sparrow. Great Crested Flycatchers and Eastern Phoebe can often be seen flycatching from the row of tall white pines on the far side of the causeway out over the shallows. Scan the lakeside for Common and Hooded mergansers, which make migration stops here and are the most common waterfowl with the exception of Mallards and Black Ducks. Occasional rafts of Black Scoters or a few Buffleheads drop in, but in general Laurel Lake doesn't seem to draw big numbers of waterfowl.

Note: From here to the next stop, summer residences along the lake will be encountered on the left. There are a few good parking areas along this section that are for day-use, picnics, etc., and can be checked out. Be considerate by not blocking private driveways. For the most part, though, I move directly down to the main parking area at the Ranger's (Contact) station and beach concession area (Pulloff #5).

#### **Pulloff #5: (Odometer 3.1)**

This is the main parking area for access to the beach, picnic, and camping facilities. It is a good place to get out and check the large trees bordering the lot and around the buildings. A relatively short but hilly trail of moderate difficulty loops off the main road behind the Contact office and comes out a short distance down the road. This, if time allows, is a recommended hike. A small brook runs along the trail for a short distance as you ascend; a good place to see Hermit Thrush, Veery, and Ovenbird. The flora then changes to dense mountain laurel on both sides of the trail. Red oak, white birch, and black cherry are usually alive with migrant warblers and are easier to see from this higher vantage point. Seeing birds down low in the dense laurel can be frustrating, but I once found a White-eyed Vireo here. Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers are commonly found along this section of the trail, drilling the birches for sap. This section is prime Black-throated Blue Warbler territory, and the dense mountain laurel offers them ideal nesting sites.

As the trail winds to the top, you enter a rockier, red oak woodland and finally reach the top of an open rocky ridge with great views south. Great Crested Flycatchers and Eastern Wood-Pewees can be heard from here, and many of the common migratory wood warblers hug this ridgeline on their way north. I found a migrating Mourning Warbler in this general area once, so it always has good potential for a rarity. From here the trail heads back down through the laurel and back out to the paved road.

#### **Pulloff #6: (Odometer 3.4)**

This pulloff at the east end of Laurel Lake is marked by a wooden bridge that spans the outflow to the lake. This is a year-round brook and can be the most active and diverse area in the park. It can also be the buggiest, so make sure bug repellent is handy. There is enough room here to park on the far side of the bridge. I usually get out here and walk the road going away from the lake for several hundred feet. The road here is bordered by thick laurel “hedges” in which one or two pairs of Canada Warblers nest. These warblers can be tough to see on their breeding territory due to their habitat requirements: that is, wet thickets of dense brush, areas hard to get to and to see into. Here, this is not the case, particularly when they first arrive on territory in mid-May, as they fly back and forth across the road singing from the trees at middle to low levels.

The brook itself meanders slowly through the woods here before dropping down a steep incline to join Moss Brook in Warwick, and is alive with the sounds of Winter Wren, Ovenbird, Louisiana Waterthrush, Veery, and Hermit Thrush. (A section of Erving State Forest and Laurel Lake is in the town of Warwick, as the map indicates.) On a “big” warbler day, standing by the bridge to watch them “drip” from the trees here is as good as it gets. Even though Yellow-rumped Warblers, with their flycatching feeding tactics, seem to outnumber all others here, many other species, including Red-eyed, Warbling, and Blue-headed vireos, American Redstarts, and Nashville, Magnolia, Black-and-white, Black-throated Blue, Black-throated Green, and Palm warblers are in the mix. Eastern Phoebes nest under the bridge, and Eastern Towhees nest in the laurel nearby, adding to the resident birds regularly seen here.

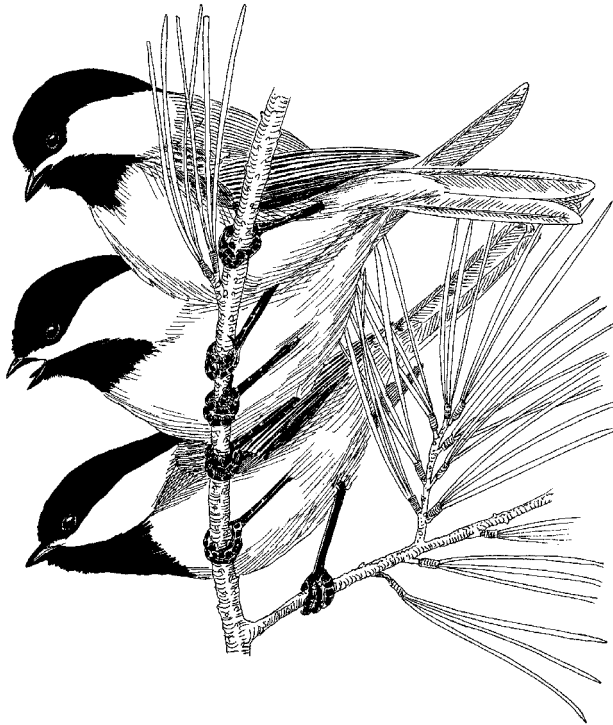
This stop is a fitting place to end our tour. There are, as I mentioned earlier, many more trails or primitive roads to explore in Erving State Forest, as indicated on the map.

Essentially, the access road to Laurel Lake Recreational Area in Erving State Forest is the only area accessible by car in the forest, with the exception of the road to the camping area. The main paved road continues out of the park and exits onto Orange Road in Warwick. The campground area is on a paved road (not indicated as paved on the map), and is another spot that can be birded. The camping area does not open for vehicular traffic until after Memorial Day, so it must be walked. Like the hiking trail that I described earlier, this road brings you up to a slightly higher elevation where the tree canopy is a little more accessible or viewable, a welcome relief to the neck after looking straight up for a few hours. The empty campsites also create clearings in an otherwise heavily wooded area, which allow for good viewing.

This is a fine place to see Broad-winged Hawk, Hairy, Downy, and Pileated woodpeckers, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Great Crested Flycatcher, Least Flycatcher, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Red-eyed and Blue-headed vireos, thrushes, and common migrant and resident warblers. As in any diverse habitat, rarities can be encountered with a little luck and patience.

Overall, Laurel Lake Recreational Area is an easily accessible place just off a main highway, which can be birded in a relatively short time or at a more leisurely pace, depending on where you are heading on your way through the area. It is a place where I rarely, if ever, run into other birders, so it is for the most part undiscovered by the birding community. Check it out this spring! 🌲

*Mark Taylor is an avid birder who has led birdwatching field trips for the Athol Bird and Nature Club and the Brookline Bird Club. He has written a bird-finding guide titled "Birding in Northfield," which was published in Bird Observer February, 2002 (30:5-12) and subsequently published as a chapter in the new Bird Finding Guide to Western Massachusetts. Mark has lived in Northfield for 18 years and has traveled extensively throughout the U.S. and maritime Canada pursuing his passion for birds.*



BLACK-CAPPED CHICKADEES BY GEORGE C. WEST