

Horn Pond Reservation, Woburn, Massachusetts

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Horn Pond was a popular destination as a vacation resort in the early nineteenth century when the creation of the Middlesex Canal made it easily accessible to Boston citizens. Today, the traces of the canal are all but gone, but Horn Pond Reservation still serves as a great attraction for joggers, dog walkers, and naturalists. The town-owned conservation area covers a wide variety of habitats and is a year-round favorite birding spot.



The pond now serves as a water supply for the town of Woburn, and it is divided by a dike separating the main pond from the upper lagoon. Several other smaller ponds feed into the pond. The main path that circles the pond and the upper lagoon is wide enough for maintenance vehicles and is easy to follow. Beyond this, a rabbit's warren of paths weaves throughout the area and provides access to some of the most interesting habitats for birders.

In the warm seasons Horn Pond is an ideal location to bring a budding naturalist. The walk can be long or short, depending on the attention span of the child, and there is so much to see and discuss. Even a simple row of painted turtles lined up on a log is exciting to a youngster, so bring your binoculars and bring a child.

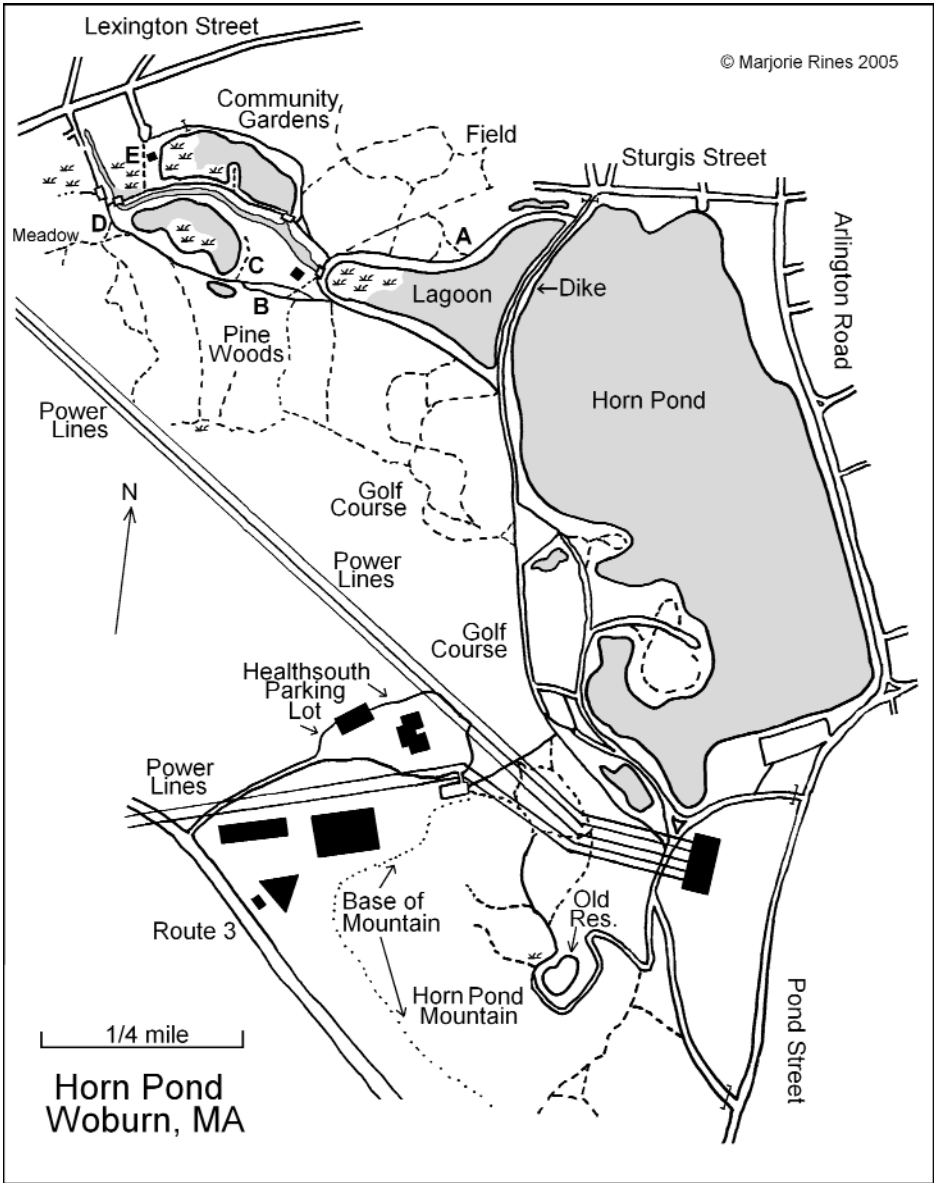
The Seasons at Horn Pond

In early March blackbirds invade the marshes, and by April dabbling ducks have arrived, with Gadwall being the specialty of the house. Later in April there can be scores of Yellow-rumped, Pine, and Palm warblers actively feeding along the edge of the ponds. As spring progresses, migrants can be found almost anywhere.

In summer a wide variety of species breed here. There are at least six pairs of Orchard Orioles, a remarkable number for a relatively small area. Two pairs of Eastern Bluebirds breed in natural cavities, encouraging news for a species that so often relies on humans for housing. Yellow Warblers and Warbling Vireos are so plentiful that it is often difficult to sort one territory from the next.

A large community garden is the place to go in fall, where seedeaters are abundant. In some years the water on the main pond is low enough to expose mudflats that draw an impressive selection of shorebirds. Unfortunately, these conditions have not happened for five years, leading to the supposition that the water management strategy has changed since then.

In the winter the water does not typically freeze over until after the New Year, and waterfowl can be diverse and plentiful. Long-eared Owls have wintered several



times, and more common owls are annual (if you can find them). Birches along the edges of the wet areas host redpolls and siskins in flight years.

Getting Started

There are several ways to start a walk at Horn Pond, but the simplest and most central is on Sturgis Street, just off Arlington Road. From Route 95 (better known as Route 128) take Exit 34 (Winn Street) and head south 1.8 miles. At the rotary, turn

right on Pleasant Street, drive less than 0.25 mile to the traffic light, and turn left on Arlington Road. There are two lefts at this light – take the far one. Drive about 0.25 mile, and take your first right on Sturgis Street.

Turn into the first pull-off on the left, which is a boat ramp where people feed the ducks. In addition to the numerous dabblers of dubious parentage, you can almost always find a small flock of American Coots in the winter. In every season except summer there are usually large flocks of gulls which may include Iceland Gulls. In winter, if the pond is unfrozen, scan the water for diving ducks. In spring and fall look for sea ducks, loons, and grebes.

Once you have checked out the pond, continue down Sturgis Street to the metal gate on your left opposite Woburn Parkway. Parking on the south side of Sturgis Street is plentiful. The gate leads to the dike that separates the main pond to the east from the lagoon to the west. Most maps show this dike as an extension of Woburn Parkway, but it is not open to traffic. It is possible to circle the main pond, but half of the two-mile walk (on the east side) is outside the reservation, adjacent to heavy traffic, and there is little habitat on the edges to support birds. The best birding is in the reservation itself to the west of the main pond.

Exploring the Reservation

The walk described here is only one of many possibilities, but it covers the widest variety of habitats. Several “Side Trips” are described, detours you can try or ignore. They are lettered on the map. Directions that follow continue from the point prior to the side trip.

Walk through the metal gate and turn right, leaving the lagoon to your left. In spring and summer you are immediately assaulted by bird song: Warbling Vireos, Yellow Warblers, and orioles are plentiful along this edge. On your right, between the path and the houses beyond, there is a small wet spot with a tangle beyond. Some of the homes have feeders and this can be a good spot to look for sparrows, although it is sometimes a challenge looking for them among the large flock of House Sparrows that are there year-round. Continue walking along the edge of the lagoon.

Side Trip A: On your right there is a small path that leads into the pine woods. Pine Warblers and Red-eyed Vireos breed in here, and Great Horned Owls occasionally roost in these pines. On a warm day look for painted turtles sunning in the wet areas. A little exploration will take you to an open field, then double back to the main path.

Partway down the path the water of the lagoon gives way to a marshy area, and if the water is low there are often exposed mudflats which draw in shorebirds in the fall. One year there was a Stilt Sandpiper here among the peeps and yellowlegs, plus a surprise Sora foraging on the flats.

At the end of the lagoon, turn left over the bridge. Eastern Phoebe have nested here as long as I have been visiting Horn Pond. Don't continue on the main path to the left, but go straight on the grassy path that leads past the red brick pump house.

Check the wet woodland beyond the pump house for spring and fall migrants. The path continues through marshy woods; when you get to the intersection with the sandy path, turn right, passing pine woods with little understory on your left.

Side Trip B: *In winter, turn left into the pine woods. Golden-crowned Kinglets love this area, and Brown Creepers and Red-breasted Nuthatches are not uncommon. At the far edge there is a marsh, and Hermit Thrushes frequently overwinter along this edge. The real fun here is looking for owls. Long-eared Owls (up to three) have been almost annual since 1998, as have been one or two Barred Owls. Great Horned Owls and Eastern Screech-Owls have also been seen here.*

The trail that leads through the pines and past the marsh eventually ends at a trail in an area of secondary growth. In the summer, thrashers, towhees, and Rose-breasted Grosbeaks breed in this area, and if you turn right, the trail eventually leads to one of the pockets of unexpected habitat that are typical of Horn Pond. A small bog makes the path all but impassable, but those interested in botany will enjoy looking for the sundew that grows there. If you are able to continue along this path, you will come out at Station 8 (see below). Or, double back through the pines to resume the main path.

As you follow the sandy path past the pines, look for the sign on the left saying "Station 6, Deep Stretch." This is part of an exercise trail, and in summer it is sometimes overgrown and hard to see. Directly opposite this sign is a trail that leads between a pond and another pine woods with a heavier understory.

Side Trip C: *In spring and fall migration turn right down this path to look for what can often be a bonanza of warblers. It leads only a short distance into a clearing, but it is well worth the diversion. The sandy soil is a favorite place for snapping turtles to lay eggs (most often seen after being exhumed by skunks or raccoons). Also, note the beaver workings on the left at the pond's edge.*

Continue along main path with one pond on your right and a smaller pond on the left. In the fall, if conditions are right, the smaller pond can have sandpipers. A woodsy area on the right is damp, but generally accessible in spring to look for warblers (in fall it is generally overgrown). The path eventually leads to "Station 8, Pull-ups" (part of the exercise trail), and the path to the left leads to the bog mentioned above in Side Trip B. Although it can be good birding, it is often overgrown in summer since the bog creates a dead end. Continue on the main trail until you come to a bridge in front of you and another to the right.

Side Trip D: *On the left is a path that leads uphill through a small grove of sumac into a meadow. The meadow is surrounded by fruit trees that draw in large flocks of frugivores in fall and winter. On one Christmas Bird Count six Hermit Thrushes were counted in this area. On the right side of the meadow, you get an excellent vantage point to view a wet area below, which is often good for migrants.*

Walk straight ahead onto the bridge, and use the break in the foliage on all sides to look for birds. You can continue a short distance beyond the bridge where there are wet areas on both sides, excellent for hiding a Northern Waterthrush or Winter Wren. Double back when you reach the driveway, go back over the bridge, and turn left, crossing a second bridge over a small brook. Breeding season bird song is particularly intense here, and it is well worth pausing to scan the edges of the brook and trees. If you look carefully at the brook itself, you are likely to see ebony jewelwings hovering over the water and perching on leaves.

Beyond the bridge the path continues between a cattail marsh on the left and the brook on the right. The left edge is lined with small birches, and on the right are fruiting trees and willows with a dense tangle of undergrowth. This path is a delight at any time of year. In breeding season there is a cacophony of song: Eastern Kingbirds, Warbling Vireos, House and Carolina wrens, Gray Catbirds, Yellow Warblers, Common Yellowthroats, and both Baltimore and Orchard orioles. On a few occasions I have heard Virginia Rails calling from the cattails. In spring and fall migration, both sides of the path can be filled with songbirds. There is a small gap of water between the path and the cattails where you can sometimes find a Northern Shoveler or Blue-winged Teal. Beyond the tangle on the right are numerous dead snags which are ideal perches for Olive-sided Flycatchers. In winter check all the birches for redpolls or siskins. A short distance down, you will see a path on the left.

Side Trip E: In fall do not miss this detour. Turn left on the path, and follow it past the brick pump house until it merges onto a dirt driveway which leads out to Lexington Street if you go straight, and goes right to lead to the Woburn Community Gardens. Turn right on this driveway, checking the thickets on both sides for sparrows. Continue along the drive, past the metal gate which is the entrance to the gardens. Most of the gardens are utilitarian vegetable gardens, but many are bordered by massive stands of sunflowers. Unused plots are covered with grasses that bring in impressive numbers of sparrows, and small flocks of Bobolinks are not uncommon. On a good day you could easily spend a morning just walking the edges of the gardens watching the activity.

Continue on the main path with a pond on left and the same stream on right. Check out the pond in spring and fall for Gadwalls and other ducks. If the water is low enough, look for shorebirds on the mud at the edges. One fall an immature Little Blue Heron spent a week here. At the end of the pond you will cross over a bridge that provides a good view of the thickets across the stream, and it's worth climbing down the bank to check these out. A left turn after the bridge takes you to the Community Gardens (see Side Trip E). Go straight on the path after the bridge, and take your first right to again cross the bridge where the phoebes nest, referred to before (Side Trip B).

This time stay on the main path bearing left. Take your first right, which follows a small set of power lines up a hill, and continue as the path (and power lines) turn left. On your left is a flat expanse of low secondary growth, beyond which are burnt-

out woods going down the hill toward Horn Pond. On your right are thin mixed deciduous and coniferous woods.

This combination of habitats makes for a wonderful diversity of breeding species. Eastern Wood-Pewees, Great Crested Flycatchers, and Pine Warblers can be heard from both woods, while Brown Thrashers, Prairie Warblers, Field Sparrows, and Indigo Buntings often perch up to sing on a snag in the lower vegetation. In early June of 2003 and 2004, I found Common Nighthawks roosting on tree branches on the right edge, and for several years I have seen Cooper's Hawks cruising the area during breeding season.

The path eventually spills out on a paved path beside the golf course. When the paved path goes right, turn left onto an overgrown path, walk a short distance, and turn left again. This leads you out of the overgrowth into a more open area. Continue past several intersecting paths to a fork, bear right, and walk downhill through the thin, fire-damaged woods. For several years Eastern Bluebirds have nested here in a natural cavity, and in mid-summer it is not uncommon to see the adults feeding fledged young in this area. This path eventually leads to the road around the lagoon where you turn right.

Early exit: The dike across Horn Pond appears immediately on your left, and you can return to your car here, or continue on to Horn Pond Mountain.

Bear right on the paved road past the dike, past a grassy area and garden with a lion statue, and past the golf course on your right. When the mountain comes into view, the paving narrows and peters out and leads to an opening (where Red-bellied Woodpeckers nested in 2004). Take the unpaved road to your right toward the base of the mountain.

At 287 feet above sea level, Horn Pond Mountain was actually an operating ski "resort" in the 1960s, chair lift and all, but folded rather quickly when the lift equipment was repossessed by its Italian manufacturer. Artifacts of the ski lift can be seen in many places.

Today this side of the mountain is a steep, rocky hillside with a big set of power lines climbing across the rim. The power company comes in every few years to rip away vegetation that may have begun getting out of hand, so this area stays open, creating ideal habitat for Brown Thrashers, Prairie Warblers, Field Sparrows, and Indigo Buntings. At least two pairs of Orchard Orioles have nested here for several years as well. Standing at the base of the mountain, you can often hear any and all of these singing without even climbing a step. In addition to birds, the mountain is excellent for butterflies (I have logged forty-nine species here), and its botany is exceptionally diverse.

When you reach the base of the mountain, the first path on your left forks right away, and both paths lead to the summit. The mountain is covered with paths crisscrossing each other, and the best approach is to take whichever path appeals to you and keep heading up. In breeding season you will hear song from everywhere, so

follow the song. There is no way to get lost since you have a clear view of the base at all times.

At the top, you will find yourself on a wide path heading south across the summit, which is a large flat area. Scattered here and there are slabs of concrete, probably vestiges of the ill-fated chairlift. Most vegetation is short, with scattered live and dead trees providing plenty of snags for songbirds to use as perches, so you can get excellent views when males are singing. The second pair of bluebirds nest here (again in a natural cavity), and in June 2003 I discovered a male Blue Grosbeak singing on a snag.

The main path eventually leads past a chain-link fence which you follow until you see a gate on your left. Walk to your right, and climb the large rock for a spectacular view of the Boston skyline. The gate is an entrance to an old reservoir, now dry and overgrown with sumac and shorter vegetation. In 2004, the steep rock sides hid several dens for a family of foxes.

The main path continues onto a old black-topped road leading downhill through the woods. Scarlet Tanagers, Eastern Wood-Pewees, and Red-eyed Vireos serenade you as you wind down the mountain. At the bottom, bear left on the paved road and under the power lines again. Shortly after passing the power lines you will see Horn Pond on your right. Look for a depressed wet area on the left, where birds often like to bathe. Follow the main path until it leads you out to the lion statue, and eventually to the dike and back to your car. 🐦

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PINE SISKIN AND AMERICAN GOLDFINCHES BY DAVID LARSON