



BIRDING THE LYNNFIELD MARSH

by Bennett Keenan, Lynnfield

Probably you saw a Least Bittern at Mt. Auburn. Did you find King Rails in the Nahant thicket? How about those other elusive, mysterious marsh birds--Gallinules, Marsh Wrens, Soras? Do you just hear them sometimes, or have you really watched them the way you watch a Robin on your lawn? If you've seen all these things, you don't need to visit the Lynnfield Marsh, although there's enough there to be exciting even so. On the other hand, if seeing these birds has some appeal, you owe yourself a trip.

The Lynnfield Marsh--Reedy Meadow, if you want to know its real name--is roughly triangular in shape, bounded southeasterly by Route 128, northeasterly by Walnut Street, and westerly by Main Street. In addition to its extraordinary wildlife, it has some other unique features: you can see it, you can find it, and you can get into it to find the birds. The most exciting time to visit is from mid-April to the end of May. It's almost that good in August and early September. Sora, Virginia and King Rails, Common Gallinules, Least and American Bitterns, Willow Flycatcher, and Long-billed Marsh Wrens not only breed here, but for some reason are fearless and often are seen at the birder's feet. The marsh seems also to be something of a magnet for rarities--I have seen Whistling Swan, Turkey Vulture, Black Tern, Red-headed Woodpecker, Prothonotary Warbler, Summer Tanager, and a long list of other unconventional visitors. How about eight Orchard Orioles in one tree? But then, I go there frequently; maybe you should.

The usual approach is to take Exit 32, Pleasure Island Road, off Route 128, at the colonial Statler Hilton Motel in Wakefield. The exit pattern is different from most, not the conventional sloverleaf, so you have to follow your nose and the signs, depending on whether you're headed North or South on Route 128. But how lost can you get on a highway exit ramp? Anyway, head north on Pleasure Island Road for approximately a quarter of a mile until it curves to the left. You will have marsh on both sides of the road. There is an opening through the trees bordering the road on your right that gives you a full view of some open water with the marsh grass beyond. Gallinules, grebes, geese and ducks swim in the open water. Sometimes rails walk on the marsh grass across the water--or at your feet. Don't overlook the small section of marsh on the other side of the road.

Then drive slowly and quietly along the road. Stay alert for landbird flocks in the woods to the end of the pavement. There are rumors that some birders go right into the paved parking lot of the factory that is there, but even though the lot is empty on weekends, it is private property. The proper thing is to bear a little to the right onto the indistinct dirt road, cross the railroad tracks and park in the obvious spot. Walk along the railroad spur until it meets the main line tracks, then walk the main line tracks to the right, under and beyond the power line. This is usually where the rails are. Sora and Virginia should be no problem. There should be a half dozen of each calling, and it is not unusual to see them, particularly Virginias, walking around on the lily pads. Don't be afraid to talk or make noise. Rails are naturally secretive, and therefore hard to see; they are, however, oblivious to people. Any normal or moderate noise you make won't cause them to hide--if anything it may make them move around a little. Plan to spend not less than a half hour in this railroad tracks-power line area.

Then walk back to your car, but instead of getting back into it, walk out the dirt road that begins at the tracks and goes under the power line, at a right angle to the tracks and the power line. It goes a few hundred yards through good warbler woods out to a small pond that shorebirds frequent. This little area is a finger-shaped peninsula sticking out into the marsh. Stay alert for marsh birds while you're walking it.

Next, drive out the way you drove in, but turn left into the parking area along the back of the motel. Cross the little bridge, continue up through the golf course past the restaurant and down the hill to Walnut Street. Turn left over the hill. After about a half mile, at the very bottom of the hill, where the brook goes under the street, there is a tiny area where you can park on the left side of the street. I have had the best luck finding herons and both kinds of bitterns looking out over the marsh from here.

If you haven't found all you want yet, there are two other shots. Continue along Walnut Street to the railroad crossing--about a mile. Walk along the tracks into the marsh. Good land birds, then plenty of marsh birds. Finally, continue along Walnut Street, bear left at the common onto Main Street, and turn right into Heritage Lane (almost exactly one mile from the tracks). Park on Heritage just off Main Street. On the opposite side of Main Street, and about a hundred feet before Heritage Lane, is a wooden highway fence

which marks the beginning of the Partridge Island Trail. There should be a sign marking it, because it is a joint project of the Conservation Commission and the High School, but the sign gets knocked down every once in a while. You can find the path, anyway. It goes through a quarter mile of wet woods out to Partridge Island (the trail has been bridged and cleared), which commands an excellent view of the marsh.

Let me close with a few observations about marsh birding. These may not be scientific, and some people whose opinions I respect don't agree, but they are based on frequent trips to this marsh over the last thirty-five years.

1) The earlier in the day, the better. You will hear five times as many rails, bitterns, marsh wrens, and others at 5:30 on a May morning as you will at 7:30. The birds stay active later--you will see them as frequently at 9:00 as at 5:30--but you don't actually see them often at any time.

2) Weather is important. I have my best luck on a still, damp, cloudy morning. Rain is not good, sunshine is bad, and wind is terrible.

3) The birds will change their location in the marsh to respond to differences in water table. Normally the best area for rails is in the railroad tracks-power line area, but in a dry spring or in late summer, look around the open water behind the motel or where the brook crosses Walnut Street.

4) It helps to be lucky!

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AN AVIAN DOUBLE-CROSS

It's well known that Blue Jays can imitate the calls of several other species. When the Red-shouldered Hawk was a common summer resident, the jays would mimic its "kee-you" cry; now they have switched to the peewee-like whistle of the Broad-winged. So, whenever I hear a call that doesn't "fit," I first think of Blue Jay.

In April a bird gave repeatedly four of the short, harsh calls of the jay, but followed by a pair of two-note phrases that should have come from a Northern Oriole. A Blue Jay? No, an American Robin! Later, this bird sometimes followed the jay motif with a couple of normal robin phrases.

All of this recalled the celebrated Mt. Auburn robin of a few years ago, who could imitate Whip-poor-will to perfection. We should pay more attention to the songs of the thrushes; they may sometimes be as provocative as they are beautiful.

L. J. Robinson