






# CUTLER LAKE

KEY TO HABITATS :

-  cattails/cattail marsh
-  mixed woods (hardwoods + softwoods)
-  red maples
-  red oaks
-  red pines (planted)

SCALE : 1" = 500'

## A BIRDING TOUR OF CUTLER PARK

by Neal C. Clark, Needham

Cutler Park Reservation, 850 acres of MDC-owned land in Needham, is an oasis bountiful in its varied scenery and wildlife amid the ribboney desert of industrial Route 128. During 1960-1972, the Needham Bird Club counted 137 species of birds there, the great majority of which were seen on or around Cutler Lake, with its surface area of about 55 acres. When I tallied up my own species count recently, I discovered--to my surprise--that I had recorded 100 species at Cutler Park from 1973-1977. This article covers only one section of the entire park, that which is most accessible and which contains the greatest number of different habitats.

If you were to walk leisurely around the entire lake, you would notice five or six different types of vegetation areas (or habitats) including cattail marsh, mixed woods, and aquatic (the lake). To see these habitats we shall follow the main trail which hugs Cutler Lake, an easy dirt and gravel path.

For birding around the lake, which should take at least two hours, I recommend starting directly behind the AP Parts Co. building. To me, the very beginning of the tour, for the first 300 yards of so, is always the highlight of the day. Several ecological communities meet around here, and because of the resultant "edge effect" (the tendency for increased variety of wildlife at community junctions, as between a field and a forest), I always count the most species in this relatively small area.

At the first curve, in front of AP Parts, you will be at an intersection of varied natural and man-made habitats: aquatic, cattail marsh, scattered trees and vines, and the long porch of the building which faces towards the water. Many species of birds may be found here at almost any time of the year. Depending on the season, you may find: Mallard and Black Ducks, Ring-necked Pheasants (with their 2 1/2 inch tracks seen in snow crisscrossing the trail), Virginia Rails, Common Snipes, Common Flickers, Gray Catbirds, Mockingbirds, and many species of warblers. In addition, there always seem to be a few Warbling Vireos present in spring and summer. Nesters in this immediate area include the Red-winged Blackbird at the lakeshore barely above the water level, as well as in the marsh. The Mourning Dove nests in the vines and in the pines, while under the back porch of AP Parts Co. you may just observe four species nesting within about thirty feet of one another! They are: the Eastern Phoebe, American Robin, House Sparrow, and the Rock Dove. All four of these species build on a rafter approximately fifteen feet up. I find it amazing that these birds nest successfully, considering all the commotion made on the porch by men moving mufflers around.

Moving on, you will soon find cattails on your right filling in along the lakeshore, as well as on your left bordering the Charles River. Alders, dogwoods, and willows (indicative of an early successional stage--new growth on its way to maturing to a forest) then unfold before you. Do linger, for this is all beautiful and choice territory

for many creatures. Pairs of Eastern Kingbirds and Northern Orioles may be found together (nesting next to or one above the other), and from early May through October, at least one pair of Long-billed Marsh Wrens may be seen. The wren is an unusual bird because the male builds a number of "dummy" nests which are unlined on the bottom, while the female constructs the final frail-looking home later. While on the lake during a snowstorm a couple of years ago, I was able to locate at least a half-dozen of their nests (mostly unlikely) in a small area. It is truly an odd nest, due to its oblong shape and a side entrance to its roofed structure. The Swamp Sparrow is in the vicinity, also, and can be viewed more easily than the shy little wren.

Next, just before you lose sight of water, notice an area of hardwoods around you (much Red Maple) where Red-eyed Vireos, Scarlet Tanagers, and Rose-breasted Grosbeaks habituate, among other tree-top dwellers. Below them in the same area should be Rufous-sided Towhees, Brown Thrashers, and the ubiquitous Song Sparrows, all of which have extremely hard-to-find nests. Take a last good look and listen, for up ahead...

You are abruptly entering a long, dark, and slightly forbidding-looking plantation of Red Pines. They are at least thirty feet high, very tightly packed, and interwoven with a few misshapen White Pines. The straight trail seems to tunnel right through the ambient evergreens, with the windy movement of the old trees themselves as sometimes the one sound to be heard. Because of homogeneous vegetation, this pine stand does not yield much of a variety of birds, but both nuthatches, the Wood Thrushes, and the Veerys may be heard, if not seen. Look carefully for the little Brown Creeper, because it is there. I can only pick it up by seeing it, due to my inability to hear its high notes; perhaps others can detect it more easily. Finally, and most exciting, I and others have spotted a Great Horned Owl in this plantation. On a February afternoon in 1975, as I was passing through the heart of this pine stand, I heard Blue Jays calling out fiercely, apparently harassing someone or something. I rushed on through the mud and freezing slush, flushed with hope--of at least a glimpse of a hawk or an owl. Looking up, I got a good view of a Great Horned perched against the upper trunk of a swaying Red Pine less than fifty yards distant. I glued my binoculars on it for a couple of minutes, and as the jays fled, the owl soon floated away, too. I believe my slight unsteadiness in holding the binoculars was due to the excitement of the scene as much as the cold temperature. It was a real thrill, and I recommend to all owlers a visit to Cutler some January night, to at least hear the low, eerie hoots. These are the sounds of wildness and weirdness.

In March of 1976 I found the nest of the Red-tailed Hawk almost directly across the river from the location of the owl-sighting. After seeing Red-tails in the park area many times, I set out to locate the nest; it was not too difficult. The large and fairly deep structure was about forty feet up in a Northern Red Oak in a small grove of oaks and White Pines. I was surprised to see the nesting site so close (within 75 yards) to a large parking lot of an industrial area. The nest really stood out then, but by the time observations stopped in late May, it was totally obscured by surrounding foliage. I used a 9 to 30x zoom spotting scope in making the viewings from the Needham side of the Charles River. The eggs hatched in early May, with two chicks seen soon after. I was

delighted to see this, for it gave me an opportunity to watch them grow, all from about 100 yards away. I was able to accomplish this (apparently without being seen) by setting up, alone and very quietly, at the edge of the Red Pine stand amid grape vines overlooking the river. I only wished I had had a handy maple to climb where I could have built a small platform to support and steady my tripod. It is always a treat to be able to see a bird of prey, especially so close to civilization.

Back on the trail, and beyond the pine plantation, as you turn to the right and proceed slightly uphill, you will be on stones and gravel through some mixed woods. The Red Pines have not altogether disappeared, however. You are now headed back towards the lake, this time on the far side with the water still on your right. In less than 200 yards the lake will again be visible, and at its shore there are many Red Maples and cattails. In this location look for American Bitterns, Green Herons, and sometimes the prehistoric-looking (at least in flight) Great Blue Herons. For a good distance you will have hilly Northern Red Oak terrain beside the trail, which, incidentally, can be very wet and miry at any time of the year. This terrain, unfortunately, blocks out little of the Route 128 traffic noise which can be heard on this side of the lake most of the time. In winter, Tree Sparrows in great numbers gather around here by the shore's dense vegetation. To me they are always a joy to spot because of their limitless energy and their seemingly endless sharp, slightly musical calls, rendered on even the most frigid of days.

As the trail breaks out into a real clearing, which goes all the way to the Polaroid building, you may see a couple of Canada Geese, in season, by the shore. A very good overall view of Cutler Lake may be obtained from here, just before reaching the blacktop. It was from this area in October, 1975, I saw an Osprey up in an old dead tree, back near the narrower part of the lake, being badgered by diving Common Crows as it fed on a pan-sized fish. The crows did not seem to faze the huge hoverer much, because it continued to eat.

The blacktop beside Polaroid takes you to an old spur railroad track which leads back to our starting point at the AP Parts Co. But don't stop yet! Right around the Polaroid building and out to the street (Kendrick) is an excellent vantage point to see another raptor--the sleek and very colorful American Kestrel. Be observant, for although there are some Mourning Doves in the area on the telephone wires, not every bird spotted will turn out to be one!

Cutler offers all I have described here and more. It depends on what you seek and what you like to do. The future of the park looks bright because, as the Metropolitan District Commission has informed me, this particular reservation is to stay natural and not be developed into a playground, complete with picnic tables, swings, and boat landings. In other words, it is not destined to become an active recreation area, but will receive only minor trail maintenance and some clearing. "Develop" a park? To me these terms are incongruous together. So I was pleased, during this past summer, to see that the two access points to the park were gated so that only pedestrians and perhaps bicyclists can now get through. Motor vehicles can go almost anywhere nowadays, but they shouldn't go everywhere. I believe anyone can receive enough satisfaction

just from walking around, fishing, or perhaps canoeing without making the park into a motorized, man-made playground.

For an even longer-ranged view of the area, I see the lake itself and the life in and around it as being in just a temporary, emerging vegetation stage--that is, with certain plants such as cattails breaking the surface of the water and starting to fill in around the edges and towards the center. Then after many more years, the lake as we know it will only be wet when it rains, and even later in time it will be a forest. By then the Red Pine stand should be a climax forest of beech and maple, and also be more conducive to wildlife because of more diversity of the surrounding vegetation. Not forever will the loud "pumping" of the Bittern (or, Stake-driver) be heard echoing across the lake on an April dawn. But for now, it sounds just fine.

#### WATERFOWL BREEDING SUCCESS IN 1977

by Theodore H. Atkinson, Billerica

The waterfowl breeding grounds survey conducted this past spring by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Canadian Wildlife Service, and various state agencies noted a marked reduction in breeding-ground conditions throughout western Canada and bordering areas of the United States. Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, the Dakotas, Montana, and Minnesota normally produce 50 to 75 per cent of the North American duck population. This region is post-glacial, with many lakes and potholes, but it also receives a highly variable annual rainfall which results in frequent periods of drought.

The deterioration of conditions in these areas was due to a major drought that has affected most of western Canada and the United States since the summer of 1976. Last autumn and winter were mild, with record high temperatures that increased evaporation of ground water. Precipitation over the drought area was 50 per cent below normal, and some areas reported the driest conditions ever recorded. In May heavy rains provided only temporary relief.

In southern Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta the breeding duck population was down 25 to 50 per cent, and Montana and North Dakota conditions were similar. Though South Dakota's water levels were up this year, the duck population was down. In contrast, Minnesota's duck population was somewhat higher than last year, despite a decrease in water area.

Dismal as the picture was in traditional breeding areas, stable water conditions to the north attracted a large number of ducks by early May. Nevertheless, these northern areas have traditionally produced poorer breeding results.

However, the total duck breeding population appears to be less than in 1976. Traditionally the most numerous species, the Mallard, decreased 5 per cent from 1976; other breeding populations fared as follows: Gadwall +5 per cent; American Wigeon -1; Green-winged Teal +6; Blue-winged Teal -8; Northern Shoveler -11; Pintail -18; Redhead -27; Canvasback +2; and scaup +7. Overall, the breeding populations of these 10 species declined an average of 4 per cent.