

IPSWICH (EAST)



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Ipswich Bay
 Crane Light
 PARK
 dunes →
 Sand Hill
 Castle Hill
 ROAD
 Little Neck
 Ipswich River
 Neck River
 Argilla
 Private Road
 Random Pond
 Island Street
 Essex Road
 Northgate Road
 Medecroft Farm
 Argilla Road
 Northgate Road
 Essex Road
 153
 Lakeman's Lane
 Cable Hospital
 County Road
 Hertbreak Road
 Jeffrey's Neck Road
 Ipswich River
 Ladder-in-Vain Creek
 1A

BIRDING IN IPSWICH

By James W. Berry, Ipswich

Essex County, Massachusetts, is one of the best birding areas in the eastern United States, and Ipswich is one of the real highlights of the region. It has extensive salt marshes, a small amount of rocky shoreline, and just about every sort of upland habitat short of mountains--farms; orchards; duck ponds; a beautiful river; fresh marshes; wooded swamps; deciduous, coniferous, and mixed forests; and various fallow fields and meadows, not to mention the dump (now closed). Doubtless, it is the variety of habitat, combined with the amount of coverage by birders venturing back and forth between Cape Ann and Plum Island, that makes Ipswich such a birding attraction.

No one article can cover all these habitats, especially since many desirable spots are on private property inaccessible to the public, but I will mention the more popular ones and lay out for the visiting birder an itinerary which can be covered in a day or less, depending on season, weather, and time available.

Crane Beach and Castle Hill. I could not begin this account anywhere else. Ipswich Beach, re-named after the Crane plumbing magnate who acquired the land in 1910 and eventually donated it to the Trustees of Reservations for permanent protection, is, for the naturalist, the undisputed highlight of Ipswich. Crane Beach Reservation is not just a beach, but includes the entire ecosystem of Castle Neck, which is some five miles long and over half a mile wide in some places. This biologically valuable peninsula lies between the mouths of the Ipswich River on the northwest and the Essex River on the southeast. It comprises the beach on the outside, the salt marsh and tidal flats of the Castle Neck River on the inside, and seemingly endless (but thickly vegetated) sand dunes in between.

To reach Crane Beach, take Argilla Road east from Route 133/1A at the South Green to the beach parking lot at the end of the road, a distance of about five miles. From about Memorial Day to Labor Day, be prepared to pay a stiff parking fee, especially on weekends, unless you come after 6 P.M.; the rest of the year the charge is less. (It is no longer free in winter.) For those who prefer to bird on foot rather than by car, the beach and dunes can easily fill up a whole day, and if time permits, it can be well worth while.

Notable breeding birds here are Pine Warblers, which are usually common in the extensive pitch pines not far to the southeast ("down" the beach) from the parking lot; White-eyed Vireos, of which there are usually a few pairs in the thick undergrowth behind the seaside dunes in either direction from the parking lot, but especially to the northwest toward Castle Hill; and, interestingly, Whip-poor-wills. The latter species appears to be getting scarce around Ipswich, but there are still several pairs near the parking lot and in the nearby pitch pines. With patience and a good flashlight, they can be stalked and seen as they call from the edges of the parking lot at twilight.

Breeding water birds are Least and Common Terns, which usually form two or three colonies at various spots behind the high-tide line between the parking lot and the Essex River, and Piping Plovers, which nest in small

numbers either with the terns or at other beach locations where the large crowds of people offer the least interference. Roseate Terns are occasionally seen here, but to my knowledge Arctic Terns have not been seen here for several years. Green Herons nest singly in a few of the thickets in the dunes; I have been lucky enough to find two of their nests so far.

Fall and winter birds of the beach and dunes include Snow Buntings (especially in the parking lot in late fall), Lapland Longspurs, Horned Larks, "Ipswich" Sparrows, Yellow-rumped Warblers in abundance, and occasional Snowy Owls, Short-eared Owls, Merlins, and Marsh Hawks. Various loons, grebes, and ducks are commonly seen off the beach in winter except for those species associated with rocks, of which there are almost none along Crane Beach. The dunes catch their share of migrating land birds in spring and fall, but the area lacks the coverage necessary to determine how good a migrant "trap" Castle Neck is. (It also could use some hawk-watch coverage.) White-tailed Deer are plentiful all over the dunes, and the lone observer will once in a while be rewarded with a close encounter with a Red Fox. Castle Hill, a half-mile walk to the northwest of the parking lot, is good for many land birds as well as for great views of the surrounding landscapes and seascapes. The pine stand on the west side of the hill is a reliable spot for Great Horned Owls. Twice I have seen Yellow-billed Cuckoos on Castle Hill in summer, while Black-billed Cuckoos occasionally nest in the thickets in the sand dunes. The best birds I have recorded at Crane Beach are a Wilson's Plover (on Memorial Day 1974) and a pair of Black Skimmers, which sometimes wander north as far as Plum Island in the summer. Occasionally, Whimbrels can also be seen on the beach, as can numerous other shorebirds at low tide.

Rantoul Pond. On your way to or from Crane Beach you may want to visit this large pond lying between Argilla Road and the marshes of the Ipswich River estuary. It was formed decades ago by damming a small creek and today is excellent for ducks in migration. All through December 1978 it was frequented by a Whistling Swan which was enjoyed by many observers. Mute Swans have nested here for several years, a wild male rejoining a captive female each spring as the pair try to raise their young before the Snapping Turtles eat them all. The pond is very dependable in migration for Ring-necked Ducks and several other species of both diving and puddle ducks. In early fall, Black-crowned Night Herons roost here by the dozen, though several fruitless searches have produced no evidence of nesting.

The pond is on your left as you drive toward Crane Beach and can be approached only from Argilla Road. The property owners at this end of the pond have kindly given permission for birders to view the pond from their land and for the pond to be included in this article. However, parking along the road is difficult; one shouldn't stop if there are more than one or two cars already parked here. Also, the pond is surrounded by several other landowners whose property is posted, so keep to the front end of the pond. Look it over from the grass by the garden and leave quickly so your disturbance will be minimal. This is especially important in the warmer months when there is beach traffic. Visitors can attract other visitors who otherwise wouldn't even notice the pond, let alone the birds. (Fortunately, there is little to look at in the summer months.)

Maplecroft Farm area. The quadrangle bounded by Argilla, Heartbreak, Essex (Rt. 133), and Northgate Roads is primarily pasture land and is one of the best places in Ipswich for Rough-legged and Red-tailed Hawks, the former

in winter and the latter year-round. One March it contained a white-phase Gyrfalcon for a few days. Canada Geese graze in the fields year-round and are occasionally joined by a stray Snow Goose. The fields closest to Rt. 133 at Maplecroft Farm are dependable for Cattle Egrets all summer and, in migration, for Black-bellied and occasionally Golden Plovers, Pectoral Sandpipers, Common Snipe (if it's muddy enough), Killdeer, Horned Larks, and, more rarely, Water Pipits. Yellow-headed Blackbirds have occurred at least twice in this quadrangle in recent years, once in October and once in April. There are places you can pull over on Essex, Northgate, and Argilla Roads--the latter with difficulty--so it is not necessary to enter the pastures, nor is it possible without permission.

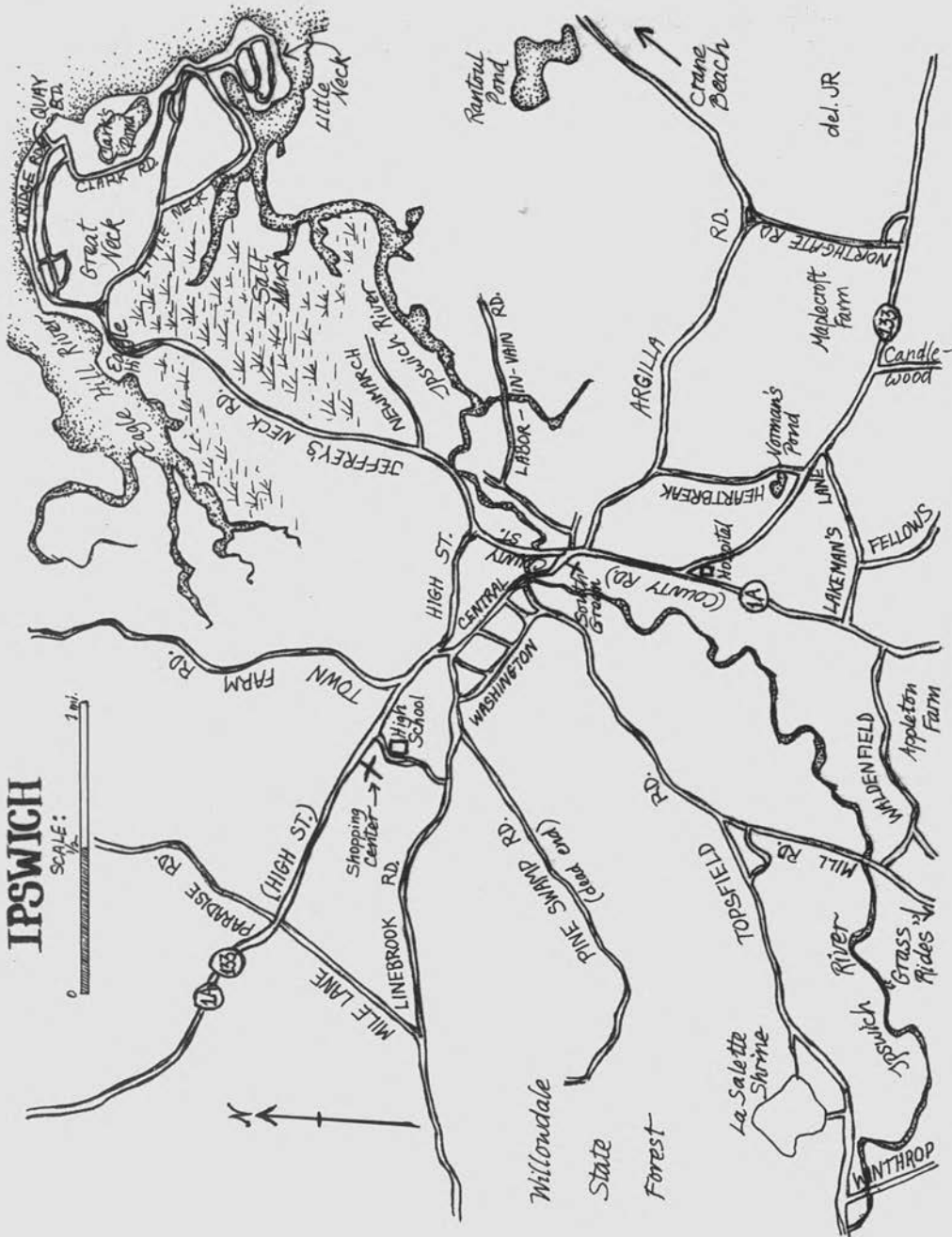
Just to the west of the Heartbreak/Essex Rd. intersection is Norman's Pond, a productive little duck pond during migration. It is accessible from Heartbreak Rd. and from the Norman residence, a brown house on Essex Rd. fronted with evergreens. The owners are always pleased to have birders observe the pond, which can be viewed from either side of the house. Regular visitors are Black Duck, Mallard, American Wigeon, Northern Shoveler, Gadwall, Pintail, Wood Duck, and Green-winged Teal; occasional are Hooded Mergansers, various other diving ducks, and once in a while a European Widgeon. Rusty Blackbirds sometimes congregate in the trees here in autumn, and Willow Flycatchers may breed here, as they do in many Ipswich wetlands.

Appleton Farm area. Appleton Farm, about two miles south of the town center on Rt. 1A, is one of the scenic highlights of Ipswich, especially if one rides the B&M commuter train, whose tracks run right through the middle of the farm. Both Cattle Egrets and Glossy Ibis can sometimes be seen from the train, especially in spring. Fortunately, both species can also be seen from Rt. 1A, which is wide enough to permit easy pullover. This is another good place for Rough-legged Hawks in winter and Red-tailed Hawks year-round. Do not attempt to drive through the farm, as it is not open to the public.

Immediately to the south of the main farm, in the town of Hamilton, lies the tract known as the "Appleton Farm Grass Rides." This is an extensive mixed forest, much of it swampy, criss-crossed by wide trails and open to the public, though strictly off-limits to off-road vehicles. This is the best place I know of for Ruffed Grouse, for they are common here and are easily heard drumming in April and May. One morning in 1978 I recorded five grouse, including a close look at one in the act of drumming. Pileated Woodpeckers, Red-shouldered Hawks, and Great Horned Owls also occur here, and I suspect Pine Siskins may breed here some years. The tract is accessible from the north end of Cutler Rd., which goes southeast (left) from Mill Rd. about a half-mile south of the intersection of Mill Rd. and Waddingfield Rd. (see map). There is a small parking area at that intersection (i.e., Cutler Rd.) but parking along this dirt road is very limited and large groups are out of the question. (Large groups are out of the question to look for grouse anyway!) There is a gate where you can enter the forest a few hundred yards down Cutler Rd. Be sure to come at dawn for the best chance of seeing and hearing grouse. From late May on, be prepared to do battle with some of the best-trained mosquito armies to be found anywhere. The swamps that produce them, however, also entice a delightful array of migrating and breeding birds. Another feature of the Grass Rides is its several stands of thick evergreens, which harbor not only grouse, but owls. So far I have found only horned and Screech Owls here, but I have little doubt that Long-eared Owls may be found here, too.

IPSWICH

SCALE: 1/4" = 1/2 mi.



Jeffrey's Neck. "The Neck" is thickly inhabited at its bulbous end, by birds, as well as by people. Here you will find Ipswich's only rocky shoreline and some of the birds associated with that habitat, as well as extensive salt marshes, tidal flats, and the best duck pond this side of Plum Island. In fact, Clark's Pond is only a few hundred yards from Stage Island Pool at the south end of Plum Island, whose observation tower is easily visible from various parts of the Neck. For this reason, it is not unusual for birds to wander back and forth between the two ponds, which is something to keep in mind when you are in Ipswich but don't have time (or gas) to drive the twelve-plus miles to Newburyport and another ten or so to get down to Stage Island Pool.

To reach the Neck from the south, follow County Street (not County Road) where it splits from 1A/133 at the South Green (see map). From the north, follow High St. The two streets merge and become Jeffrey's Neck Rd, which brings you to Eagle Hill about half-way out on the Neck. On the left, just after the big curve at Eagle Hill, is a good tidal flat for shore-birds, especially at mid-tide. Diving ducks are common here at high tide. Stay on the main road, eschewing all forks to the left, until you come to the isthmus between Great Neck and Little Neck, where you can park and look out over the sound to the south end of Plum Island. From this point, Ipswich River flows in from the right, behind Little Neck. This estuary is like a waterfowl crossroads and virtually any littoral species can be seen here. In addition, the pelagic Parasitic Jaeger comes here in late summer to harass the terns. Jaegers can also be seen from the north end of Crane Beach and from the south end of Plum Island. At low tide it is easy to walk out on the rocks at the base of Little Neck where Ruddy Turnstones and Red Knots are regular, and I have seen a Willet or two here, as well as an occasional Laughing Gull--both in late summer. In winter, this same area has produced Brant, Barrow's Goldeneye, Iceland Gull, and Snowy Owl, and it is an infallible hangout for Common Loons. Almost any sea duck can occur here and views are always excellent because of the relative narrowness of Plum Island Sound. An added attraction in the winter is the regular presence of Harbor Seals on the rocks at the base of the red channel marker at low tide.

From here follow the map to Clark's Pond, which is only about a half-mile away. This man-made pond can be observed from several places as one drives along Clark Rd. Just be sure not to trespass on the developed lots. In summer, Gadwalls nest here, and sometimes bitterns of either species, as well as Virginia and Sora Rails. Purple Martins and Cliff Swallows nest on Great Neck and often feed over the pond. Later in summer hundreds or even thousands of swallows (mostly Tree and Bank) gather on the weeds, wires, and trees, as they do next door on Plum Island. If the summer is dry, the pond's shallow water can be loaded with egrets and herons. Late-summer and fall bonanzas seen here in years past include Black-necked Stilt, Avocet, Sandhill Crane, and a flamingo (1965) afflicted with a severe case of wanderlust. Then, until the pond freezes, it is a haven for Gadwalls, which often number over 100. Hooded Mergansers are also very regular in fall and up to 30 have been recorded. Any puddle duck is likely, and there are always a few Pied-billed Grebes. When Bonaparte's Gulls are on the pond, look carefully for a Black-headed Gull.

To leave the Neck, continue around the north side on North Ridge Rd. until it rejoins Jeffrey's Neck Rd. There are one or two martin houses along the way, and on Quay Rd., a short little dead-end, there is a pier by the

yacht club which offers a perfect spot from which to observe the water-fowl and shorebirds of Plum Island Sound.

Ipswich Shopping Center. This ornithologically famous shopping center, built right over a fresh-water marsh in the true "development" style, ironically provides birdwatchers one of the best places in the state to study the behavior of Virginia and Sora Rails. The parking lot give easy access to the marsh. The reason for the presence of the rails is that no matter how cold it gets, the water running through this marsh from under the shopping center never completely freezes, thus attracting a few rails to spend the entire winter. When there is considerable open water, they can be impossible to find, but if one comes during a prolonged cold spell or after a heavy snowfall, and there is only a narrow stream of open water, you are almost guaranteed seeing Virginia Rails. One January day a few years ago I had six of them along with two Soras. Snipe and Swamp Sparrows also winter here, and every bird in the neighborhood comes here for water, so needless to say, it is a popular place on Christmas counts. I can't be sure that the rails nest here, but Willow Flycatchers do, and Cliff Swallows sometimes nest in the rafters of the canopy right over the shopping center sidewalk, in full view of the shoppers below.

Willowdale State Forest. Had I written this a year ago I would not have included Willowdale, for the simple reason that I had not explored it. This year (1979) I spent a lot of time in this extensive mixed forest because the area had not been adequately covered for the Massachusetts Breeding Atlas Project. I was pleasantly surprised to find several species of Canadian Zone birds breeding here, or at least present throughout the summer and presumed breeding. The most common of these were Black-throated Green and Canada Warblers; less common were Nashville and Blackburnian Warblers, Northern Waterthrushes, White-throated Sparrows and Hermit Thrushes. Other common nesters in this tract are Black-and-white Warblers, Ovenbirds, yellowthroats (even in deep woods), Scarlet Tanagers, and Ruffed Grouse. Broad-winged Hawks also breed, and I hope someday to confirm the Red-shouldered Hawk in this swampy woodland. It is quite similar in habitat to the Grass Rides where they definitely occur. There is also an attractive marsh near the Linebrook Rd. side, the desolate upper end of which held an Olive-sided Flycatcher in late May.

To enter the forest, take either Linebrook Rd. or Topsfield Rd., both of which connect with U.S. 1 two or three miles west of the map. The forest headquarters are on Linebrook Rd. about a mile west of the intersection with Mile Lane. Several trails, all wide enough for state vehicles to drive on, penetrate the forest from this vicinity; parking is no problem, although there are no parking lots as such. Access from Topsfield Rd. is best at the Ipswich-Topsfield town line about a mile west of the LaSalette Shrine, where canoeists often park next to the Ipswich River. A brook flows into the river from the north here. To the left of the brook is an old road one can use to actually drive into the forest. To the right of the brook is a trail that quickly brings you within hearing range of most of the species mentioned above. I have a feeling that more exploration of this forest by birders will show that its potential has barely been tapped.

I would like to thank Gerald Soucy for providing information on some of the sightings mentioned in this article and for acquainting me with some of these locations when I first came to Ipswich in 1972.