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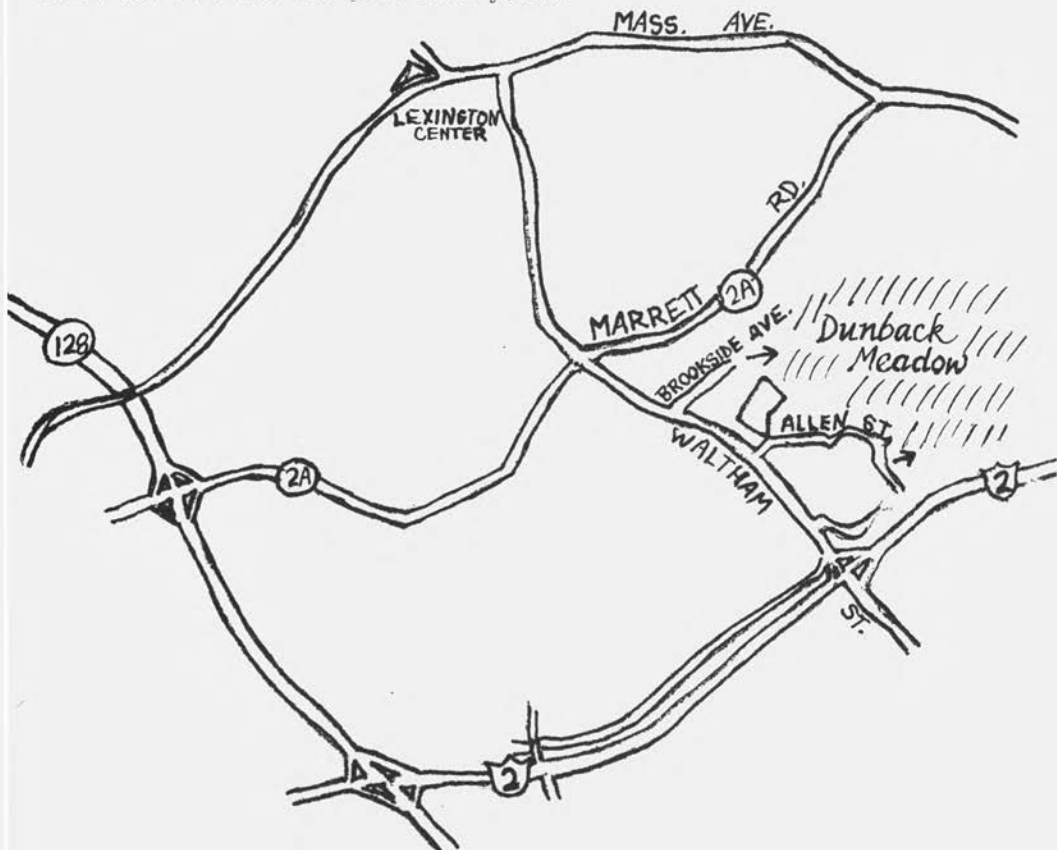
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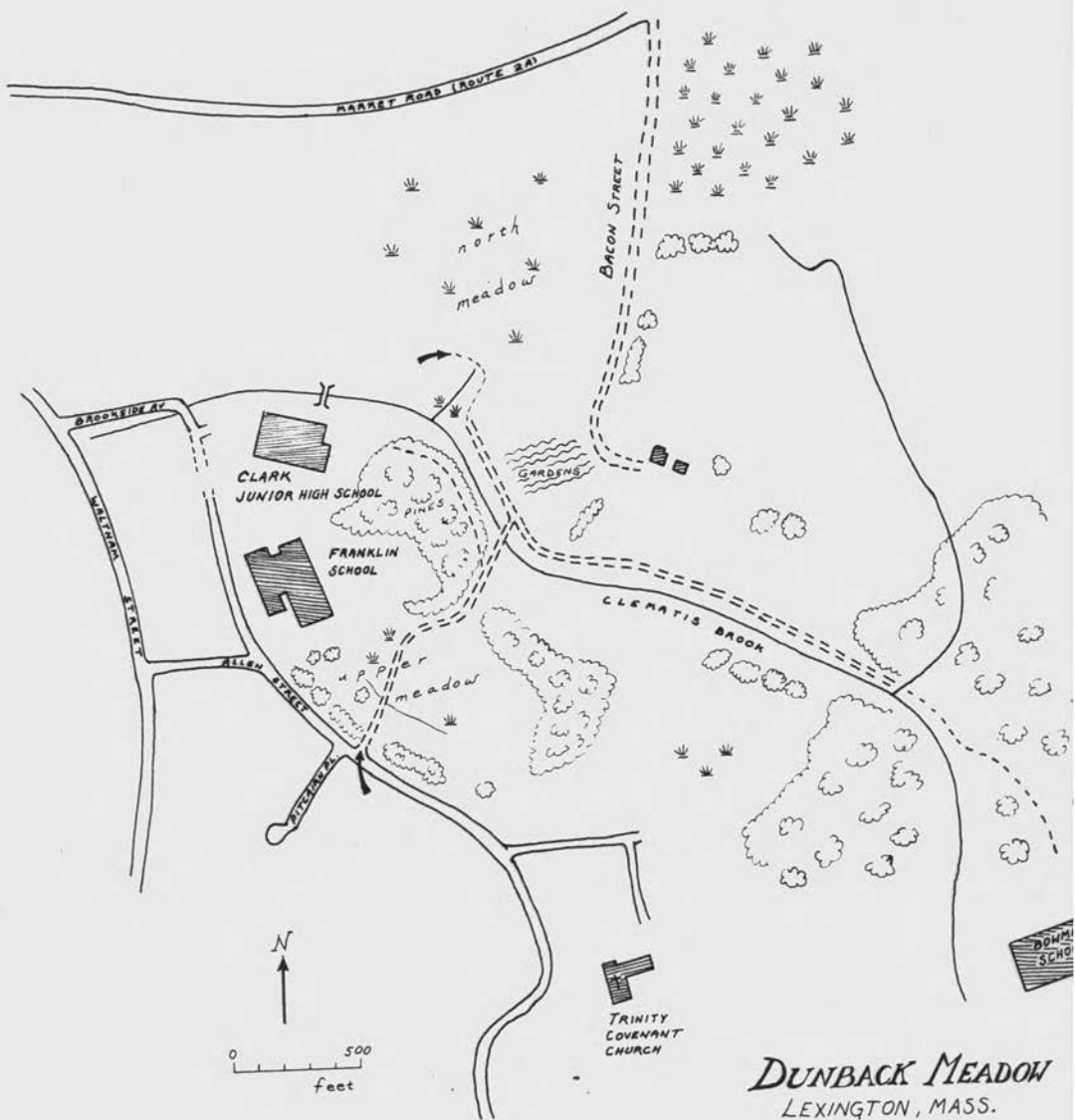
BIRDS OF DUNBACK MEADOW

by John W. Andrews, Lexington

Have you ever seen ten hummingbirds take over a thicket - chasing each other at breakneck speeds and terrorizing other birds many times their size? Or three solemn Long-eared Owls peering down from the pine in which they rode out a great blizzard? Or an ungainly Woodcock spiral up on twittering wings to perform his sky dance against a fading sunset? Anyone who appreciates the beauty and intrigue of wild birds might travel far for such experiences. But my memories of such scenes are associated with a site in Lexington easily reached by MBTA bus lines. It is known as the Dunback Meadow Conservation Area.

Dunback Meadow is probably the choicest piece of wildlife habitat remaining in Lexington and its reputation as a good place for birdwatching has spread far beyond the borders of the town. One event which put it on the map, ornithologically, was the discovery of a MacGillivray's Warbler there in November, 1977. (See R.H. Stymeist, "A MacGillivray's Warbler in Lexington, Massachusetts," Bird Observer of Eastern Massachusetts, Vol. 7, No. 1, Jan-Feb 1979) That western species had never before been recorded in Massachusetts and bird enthusiasts from all over the state came to view the find. Over 120 other species have been recorded at the site over the past three years.





DUNBACK MEADOW
LEXINGTON, MASS.

This guide to avian activities at the Meadow begins with a description of the principal features of the site. It then provides an account of the birdlife according to the natural divisions of the year as the birds experience them. This approach is necessitated by the fact that the lives of wild birds are driven by the changing of the seasons; differences of even a few weeks can produce dramatic changes in the avian population. Finally, a brief summary of the conservation history of the site is provided.

FEATURES OF THE SITE

Entrance to Dunback Meadow can be obtained by parking at Clark Junior High School, crossing the footbridge over Clematis Brook, and finding the dry path across the drainage channel. Alternatively, one can park on Allen Street (across from Pitcairn Place) and enter at the Dunback Meadow sign. Most of Dunback Meadow was formerly farmland, and the cart roads once used to carry produce to market remain the best means of traversing the area.

From the junior high school one can survey a large open meadow (which is identified on the map as the north meadow). This area is transected by several drainage channels. At the southerly end of this meadow are over 100 small garden plots which the Lexington Conservation Commission leases to individuals as part of a community gardening program. The Clematis Brook flows past the junior high school, largely paralleling the cart road. Across the brook from the cart road is a grove of conifers consisting mostly of Red Pines, but including a few White Pines and Spruce. This grove is bordered by deciduous trees (primarily Wild Cherry, Red Oak, and Glossy Buckthorn).

One branch of the cart road turns southwest at the pine grove. This branch skirts the edge of the woodlot and soon passes the main side trail into the pines. It continues through a scrubby area and emerges into the upper meadow near the Franklin School. Here a marshy area with scattered Red Pines and Sumac extends to Allen Street.

The main branch of the cart road continues to run parallel to the brook until it terminates at a drainage channel, which is difficult to cross except during periods of low water. If one succeeds in crossing here, the trail may be followed through deciduous woods to the Bowman School.

THE SEASONS OF THE YEAR

Remembers two things: First, birds can fly. Second, they live quickly. Today there are warblers in every tree. Tomorrow there may only be the wind. Birds move. And they keep one eye on the calendar.

Early Spring (Late March - April)

Spring begins with the first Red-winged Blackbird flashing his red epaulets over the shrunken weeds of winter. Invariably, the first blackbirds to arrive each year are males, who immediately begin the serious business of establishing claim to some choice piece of marsh or wet meadow to be used as a breeding territory. This is an excellent time to observe all the aspects of bird behaviour entailed with territoriality. Much calling, displaying, and chasing back and forth ensues until territorial boundaries are gradually settled.



Redwinged Blackbird

Another breeder who becomes active long before the first green of spring is the Song Sparrow. This bird must be the most abundant species in the meadow during its breeding season. At times the persistent song of this sparrow seems to ring from every corner of the meadow. Nevertheless, its nest is extremely difficult to locate.

A much less conspicuous late March arrival is the American Woodcock. This "recluse of the boggy thicket" is seldom seen by day. But at twilight the nasal "peent" of the male bird issues from the shadows, and soon he spirals up across the fading sunset, his wings making a pleasant twittering sound, which supposedly is much admired by the female of the species. The flight displays, which are given well into May, last for about 40 minutes at dawn and at dusk. Flights can best be observed by looking westward toward the afterglow of sunset across the open meadow beside the community gardens.

As Spril progresses, the numbers of hardy migrants steadily increase. Fox Sparrows scratch beneath the shrubs. Northward-bound Evening Grosbeaks trill overhead. The laughing call of a recently-arrived Common Flicker comes from the woodlot. When the first tiny leaves are emerging from the buds, the floodgates of the main spring migration are about to open.

Spring Migration (Late April - May)

Sometime during the last week of April or the first week of May, the night winds blow dry and clear from the southwest. Riding this wind come the waves of insectivorous migrants: warblers, thrushes, catbirds, orioles - birds who bided their time in a Venezuelan jungle only a few weeks earlier

and are now racing spring northward. The prominent stand of pines in Dunback Meadow must be a welcome sight to a tired and hungry migrant who has been flying all night. After a southerly blow one can count upon finding modest numbers of warblers foraging in the pines and the surrounding deciduous trees. Likely species (in decreasing order of likelihood) are American Redstart, Tennessee Warbler, Blackpoll Warbler, Northern Parula, Black-and-white Warbler, Black-throated Green Warbler, Magnolia Warbler, Nashville Warbler, Ovenbird, and Black-throated Blue Warbler. Red-eyed Vireo, Warbling Vireo, and Ruby-crowned Kinglet are also to be expected. Mourning Warbler should be looked (or listened) for in the undergrowth. A walk along the drainage ditches in the north meadow produces an occasional shorebird such as Lesser Yellowlegs, Common Snipe, or Solitary Sandpiper. Bobolinks and migrating sparrows might also be found in the grass in this area.



American Woodcock.

Nesting Season (Mid-May - Early July)

Nature allows the small songbirds only about six weeks to establish territory, court, build a nest, lay eggs, incubate them, and fledging of young. Hence the nesting season is a time of intense activity for the 27 or so species that breed at Dunback Meadow.

In this season, Dunback Meadow hosts a substantial nesting population of Yellow Warblers, who are much in evidence along Clematis Brook and in the upper meadow. Several Willow Flycatchers can usually be heard giving their "fitz-bew" call in late May and June. Ring-necked Pheasants are plentiful - especially in the vicinity of the gardens. And a scan over the wide north meadow may reveal Barn Swallows in flight or Eastern Kingbirds perched upon shrubs.

I have found nests of Common Flicker, Black-capped Chickadee, American Robin, Northern Oriole, and Cardinal. Other breeders include American Kestrel, House Wren, Gray Catbird, Blue Jay, Common Crow, Wood Thrush, and Rose-breasted Grosbeak. The Wood Thrush is considered to be one of the best singers among North American birds. From the moist deciduous bottomlands on the southern portion of the site, his liquid notes may be heard late into the morning.

Summer (Mid-July - Mid-August)

Birds are more difficult to observe on hot summer days, when they retreat to the shade of the dense foliage. But important events are taking place. Young birds are learning to feed themselves while they grow toward the strength and skill required for total independence. Many birds undergo a "post-nuptial" molt in which the bright spring colors are replaced by the duller plumage of fall. These events take place while "the living is easy" - food is abundant and the weather suits their clothes. But in the life of birds, stability is only a pause between migrations.

Fall Migration (Late August - October)

In late August the birder begins to notice new arrivals - the insectivorous birds who sang their way north in spring now appear again heading south. They sing less now - and their ranks are swollen by numbers of immature birds whose plumages are often dull and cryptic in comparison to the adults. Identification of fall warblers can be a frustrating experience in which your usually trusty field guide seems to be utterly inadequate if not deliberately confusing. At times like these it is sometimes best to relax and simply value each immature warbler as proof that somewhere in the cool coniferous forests of the north, a nest in some fragrant bough accomplished its purpose.

In late August Dunback Meadow is the most reliable site I know for the Ruby-throated Hummingbird. These pugnacious little creatures are undoubtedly attracted to the area by the abundant golden blossoms of the Spotted Jewelweed (also known as Spotted Touch-me-nots), their favorite wildflower.

The Sparrow Migration (October - Early December)

With the first frosts, insect food becomes less available. Later migrants, who depend on plant foods more, begin to dominate the avian population. From early October through mid-November Dunback Meadow offers a splendid opportunity for the birder to become acquainted with our native sparrows. In well-defined flocks these unobtrusive little birds move through the open areas feeding on the seeds of ragweed, smartweed, and foxtail grass. Often it is productive to walk through the garden plots where, much to the sparrows' delight, the broken ground has allowed seed-bearing weeds to establish themselves. The marsh on the east side of Bacon Street may also harbor a foraging flock of sparrows (especially Swamp Sparrows). Figure 1 provides a relative abundance profile for some 797 fall (Sept.-Dec.) sparrow records from my journal. At least 12 species of sparrows have been recorded at Dunback over the past three years. (Chipping Sparrow is present in spring, but has not been recorded in the fall.) Among the less common species, the Grasshopper Sparrow appears to be a rare but

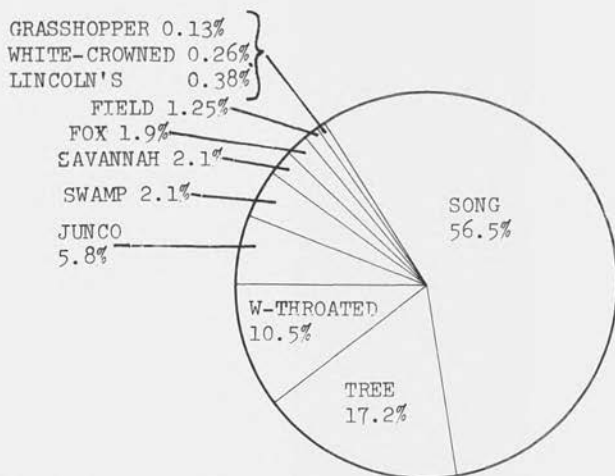


Figure 1. Relative Abundance of Sparrows

regular late fall transient in the garden plots. White-crowned Sparrows (usually immatures) might also appear there. Lincoln's Sparrow can be found in October if you are willing to carefully sort through the throngs of Song Sparrows.

Winter (December - March)

Although the total number of birds in the meadow dwindles during the coldest months of the year, the influx of special cold-weather species can make winter one of the more interesting seasons for bird observation. Winter is a good time of year for observing the birds of prey, for which the open expanses of the field provide excellent hunting territory. Sharp-shinned Hawk and American Kestrel are regular visitors. Red-tailed Hawks are often seen soaring overhead, or waiting patiently on a high perch for a sign of movement in the reeds below.

One winter visitor I find particularly interesting is the Northern Shrike - a robin-sized bird, who, upon casual inspection, looks rather like a very tough mockingbird. He has no strong talons for grasping prey, but his hooked bill is definitely hawk-like. Meadow mice and goldfinches know that he is to be taken seriously. If this bird is not seen from the cart roads, one should walk a short distance along Allen Street and scan the tops of the shrubs from the roadside.

Where hawks hunt by day, owls are almost certain to hunt by night. Three species of owls can be found at Dunback Meadow. The most common is the Screech Owl, a permanent resident in the pine grove or on the wooded hillside below the Trinity Covenant Church. Our largest owl, the Great Horned Owl, may appear in either the pine grove or the deciduous bottomland along the southern portion of the site. The third species, the Long-eared Owl, occurs less commonly in the pines. One year three Long-eared Owls roosted communally in the same tree.

In flight years, winter visitors such as Evening Grosbeak, and Pine Siskin are frequently seen. One year a small flock of Pine Grosbeaks lingered in the meadow, feasting upon spruce cones and crabapple seeds. And you can be sure that no matter how deep the snow or cold the wind, somewhere in the frozen brush a Song Sparrow sits, with a song in his breast just waiting for the first warm day of March!

CONSERVATION HISTORY

To anyone who appreciates the treasures which Dunback Meadow has to offer, it is somewhat sobering to discover how close it all came to being lost only a few years ago. In the 1960s Lexington was in the midst of a building boom. Land prices were skyrocketing, housing developments were springing up like mushrooms, and farms and woodlots were disappearing at a rapid pace. In 1965 the Lexington Conservation Commission, which had been established only two years earlier, found that a large tract of land known as the Swenson Farm had been purchased by a developer who hoped to build apartment buildings on the site. The commission chairman, Jules Sussman, decided that it was time to make a forceful effort to save a part of Lexington's heritage which was about to be lost. After lengthy negotiations with the developer and much hard work within town government, the commission won approval for purchase of the 78-acre site. Additions to the original acquisition over the years have completed the 140-acre parcel of protected open space which we know today as Dunback Meadow.

Preparation of this article was sponsored by Citizens for Lexington Conservations, Inc., a non-profit citizens' organization concerned with issues of environmental quality in the Town of Lexington. For information on other publications, write C.L.C. Inc., P.O. Box 521, Lexington, Ma. 02173.

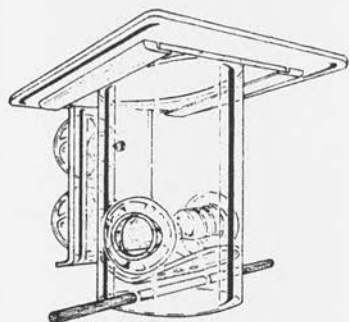


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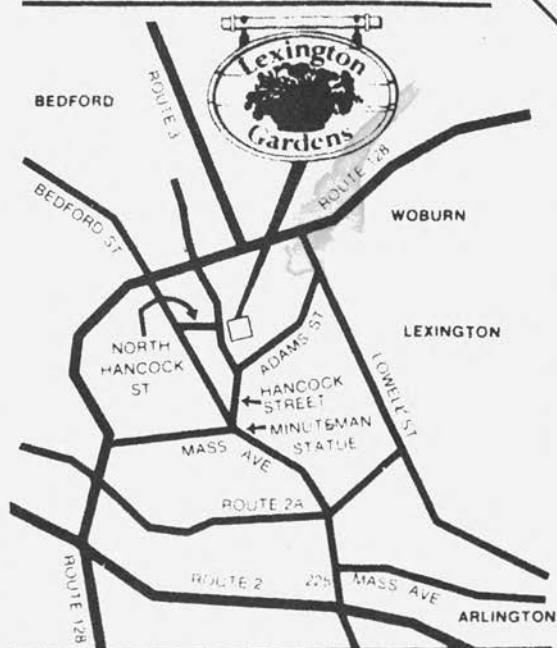
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