

Winter Birds

As winter approaches and the winds howl, tearing away any remaining crisp leaves from our trees, the visual panorama around us changes quite dramatically. The stark landscape offers it own beauty, including the opportunity to more easily spot our year-round resident birds. But what are these birds and what do we feed them to attract the species we really like to see? What kind of bird feeder shall we choose?

All of this depends on various factors, of course, including but not limited to, cats, squirrels, and location for your feeder. Let's first review what birds might be in the Blackstone River Valley. Many of our summer birds varieties, such as warblers, barn swallows, broad winged hawk and robins fly south for more warmth and plentiful seeds or insects. But we do have plenty of sounds and sites to hear and see even during the most treacherous winter months, including the state bird of Massachusetts: the chickadee.

The Chickadee: These ubiquitous birds are easily recognized by their black caps, white bibs and white cheeks. They are often quite friendly and almost appear tame at feeders, especially when filled with peanut butter, suet and sunflower seeds. These birds nest as far north as Alaska and generally feed on insects, seeds, and fruit. Their call is a very distinctive "chick-a-dee".

The Tufted Titmouse: This common bird has rusty flanks, a gray back and white front with a large crest. They live around parks and homes as well as in the woodlands and they also have a distinctive call - a whistling "peter,peter" sound. They feed on acorns, berries, beetles and caterpillars, beechnuts and cherries. They also enjoy suet, bread and sunflower seeds from bird feeders.

The Northern Cardinal: This brilliant scarlet male bird is very picturesque against the stark branches, especially when covered with snow. His female counterpart is less colorful, an olive-gray with a light pink bill and tinges of red on her wings. They usually perch in thickets and low-lying but thick bushes but can also be found in trees. They generally eat beetles, aphids, weed seeds and the like but especially enjoy sunflower seeds at the feeders.

White-Breasted Nuthatch: This bird can often be seen walking down a tree headfirst, searching for bugs. Their tail feathers are short, their breasts are white and their caps and back of their necks are black. They feed on acorns, insects, and are also very attracted to sunflower seeds and peanut butter at a feeder.

The Blue Jay: This feisty bird is the nemesis of many bird feeder enthusiasts.

Buck Hill WMA, Burrilville, RI

Take Rt. 100 south from Douglas MA. Go right on BUCK HILL RD. It is 2.1 miles to the entrance on the right (north), and there is a sign JUST before the entrance dirt road. Drive the dirt road up hill to the parking area by the gate. There is a billboard with a map that is very old and not accurate. STICK TO THE MAIN ROADS, it is easy to get lost in here, as we have been warned by RI birders and locals. The large pond/lake (NOT Lake Wallum) is straight ahead on the main road. When the road forks at a small area of pines (the pines are in the middle of the fork), and the major road swings right and down to a small pond, GO LEFT to see the north end of the human made lake. There is a small trail away from here that I have followed for

awhile that I have not found the end of yet. Eventually it is possible to follow the main road (supposedly) to a trail head in back of the hospital and the south end of Lake Wallum. This areas has been good for migrants and some migrant waterfowl. It is woefully undercovered by RI birders. (submitted by Mark Lynch).

Assabet Conservation Area, Westboro

[Trail Map \(provided by Mark Lynch\)](#)

Take Rt. 30 east out of Grafton towards Westboro Center. About a mile past the Tufts Vet. School, watch for a left onto OLD NOURSE RD. Take this left. Then take your next left (signed ,but a bit obscure) onto ANDREW ST. Follow this past typical suburban houses to the end. Park in the dirt area on the left. You will see a paved pathway on the right that goes down to a pump house. You can skirt around the fence to the water's edge for great views of SuAsCo. Be sure to check trees along edge for migrants. Back at the parking area, you will see a signed pathway past two posts and a chain into the Assabet Conservation Area of the Westboro Land Trust. There is a network of well maintained trails, many now signed. The main trail goes down hill, past a vernal pool on the left, past an open sandy area where Ruffed Grouse sometimes dust bathe and eventually to a point on the water. This is an excellent place to view nesting Osprey and Great Blue Herons and ducks in the SuAsCo water impoundment. The whole area is good for migrant warblers, vireos, thrushes ect. Be sure to check the sumac and other shrubs just as you pass the entrance for migrants. Breeding birds include all the birds of SuAsCo plus Eastern Wood Peewee, Brown Thrasher, various warblers including Pine. The included map is old, but the trails are basically the same. many species of migrant ducks can be found on the water and Barrow' Goldeneye was seen here once. (submitted by Mark Lynch).

Northbridge Sewer Beds

Depending on what is happening in which beds, in mid-summer through fall, there can be numbers of the common shorebirds present: Least, Semipalmated, Spotted and Solitary Sandpipers, yellowlegs and killdeer. The surrounding weeds are good for migrant landbirds. A cattail marsh in back of the small building in the FAR corner of the property stays open through the winter due to outflow water at which time it is possible to find over-wintering ducks, snipe, rails and even Rusty Blackbirds. DO NOT DISTURB these birds by taping them out in winter, they are stressed enough!!!!!! Just stand on the edge in back of the building and carefully look.

directions: From Rt. 122 at the Grafton/Northbridge line, head south 4.2 miles. Turn left at the "Department of Public Works Sewer Office" sign. Park next to the railroad tracks, well off the road. DO NOT PULL PAST THE GATE IN THE CAR. Walk through the gate and explore the areas filter beds. A scope is good, and this requires a bit of walking. (submitted by Mark Lynch).

Fisherville Pond, Grafton

This area consists of a north and south impoundment. The north impoundment (where the shorebirds have been summer 2000) can be accessed by driving south on Rt. 122 from Grafton center. Watch for RIVERVIEW APARTMENTS on the right. Pull in here, to the left of the apartments. This is an fishing/boating access road to the river and becomes dirt. Watch for a spur road on the left before a dirt mound and pull in here. It is a short walk to the water. Try to skirt around the edge and end up under the power lines for the best view. There is a rough trail that will get you there. Another alternative, is to go further down Rt. 122 and pull off right under the power lines where there is a gate and a trail down to the pond. You will have to leave your car on Rt. 122 however. Leave no valuables in the car. Walking down the trail (wide enough for a small car), another trail will eventually come in from the left, a construction pathway to some apartments. Continue down the main trail. When this main trail loops to the right (last brown metal pole# 357/24); take a smaller, more overgrown, but still good trail to the left (as if you were continuing straight). This will continue down for a bit more and eventually swing to the right under the power lines. At this point look for a VERY obscure path to the left that will take you to a great overlook atop a stone embankment. Morning light is great here and you can view a wide area of the pond EXCEPT where you can easily see from the Riverview Apartments. A good scope is a necessity. It is about a 5 minute walk from the car downhill. The brushy areas on either side had interesting landbirds and looks promising for fall migration.

For the south impoundment, which is more difficult to access, drive further down Rt. 122 and take a right on Cross Street. Fran McMenemy has said that there is an apartment complex here. Pull in back and walk across the stone wall to the dam. Apparently (so far at least) the residents don't care. You will be at the dam and locks. A Eurasian subspecies of Green-Winged Teal was seen here (among other ducks) in spring of 2000. (submitted by Mark Lynch)

Blackstone River, Rhode Island section

Sheila and I spent the day birding the Rhode Island stretch of the Blackstone River. This river starts in the city of Worcester and runs almost straight south into Rhode Island, becomes the Pawtucket River briefly, then the Seekonk River and then into Providence Harbor. The history of the river is fascinating. The nation's first textile mill was erected here (and thus the Blackstone has been called the "birthplace of the Industrial Revolution"). Many of the vertical falls were harnessed for mills. Even more bizarre was the construction of the Blackstone Canal in the 1820's to connect landlocked Worcester with the "sea". This was during the era of the canal building craze in the northeast US when it was imagined that a vast complex of canals would connect all major cities. Then the railroads came and suddenly canal building did not seem like such a good idea. In many areas you bird between the old canal and the river. Today the Blackstone River is being developed as a National Heritage Corridor

jointly between Massachusetts, Rhode Island and the National parks Service. This means the establishment of a chain of parks, sanctuaries, historical sites, paths, bike paths from Worcester to Providence through riparian woodlands. Many of these projects are still in the works. Several sections of this Corridor in Worcester County, like River Bend Farm, Rice City Pond ect, are well known to birders. Although the Rhode Island sections are likewise well known to Rhode Island birders, Sheila and I had never visited the areas except decades ago. Two major areas of immediate interest to birders are the Valley Falls Pond marshes accessed by a path off Rt. 122 (see Bird Observer article). This marsh and surrounding woods looks great though unfortunately seems to be being over-run with Purple Loosestrife. Another area that looks good for migrants (though RI birders can correct me) is the long foot/bike path that runs right between the canal and the river north from Rt. 123 (just west of the intersection with 122) all the way to the Rt. 116 bridge (2.5 miles). The trail actually runs beyond this now and will eventually go all the way north to Albion. This park was well maintained and attractive (except for the construction at the Rt. 116 bridge). Ideally stretches of the Blackstone could be birded by canoe, though you would most likely only do sections as there are many falls, locks ect. All in all, it was an interesting place to bird among river, woods and marshes combined with relicts of years past like dams, locks, canals and mill buildings. We started at Swan Point (Providence) on the Swansea River and worked our way north hitting parks, cemeteries ect. that were right on the river. Our trip was a mere sampling of the area to get a sense of the geography of the place. There are many other parks that are part of the Corridor that are set back a bit from the river but are part of the greater watershed. As an example, Broad Meadow Brook MAS in Worcester is considered part of that watershed. Though this is a slow time of the year for some birds, we were interested in checking for the presence of several species that appear yearly in Worcester or have become established here in the city. This would include Black-Crowned Night Heron, Great Egret and Mute Swan (now breeding in the city). We believe the Blackstone River acts as a pathway for some of these species to enter the middle of MA from coastal Rhode Island. (report from Mark Lynch/Sheila Carroll, 7/17/00)