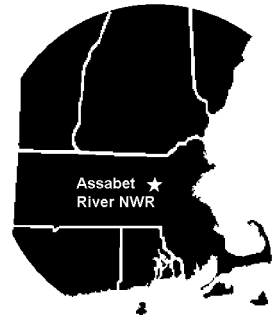


Birding at the Assabet River National Wildlife Refuge

Ron Lockwood

The Assabet River National Wildlife Refuge is one of the newest refuges in the National Wildlife Refuge system, having been established September 28, 2000. It is 2230 acres or about 3.5 square miles in size, with approximately 70 percent upland forest dominated by either white pine or hardwoods. The remaining area has a diverse variety of habitats, including extensive wetlands, a white cedar swamp, eight bogs, historical cranberry bogs, grasslands, and shrublands. The one habitat that is absent from the point of view of bird diversity is wet meadowland or mud flats that would attract shorebirds. Contiguous to the refuge on the south side are the Sudbury State Forest, the Town of Sudbury's Hop Brook Marsh, the City of Marlborough's Desert Conservation Land, and the Sudbury Valley Trustees' Memorial Forest, which collectively contribute an additional 700 or so acres of protected land.

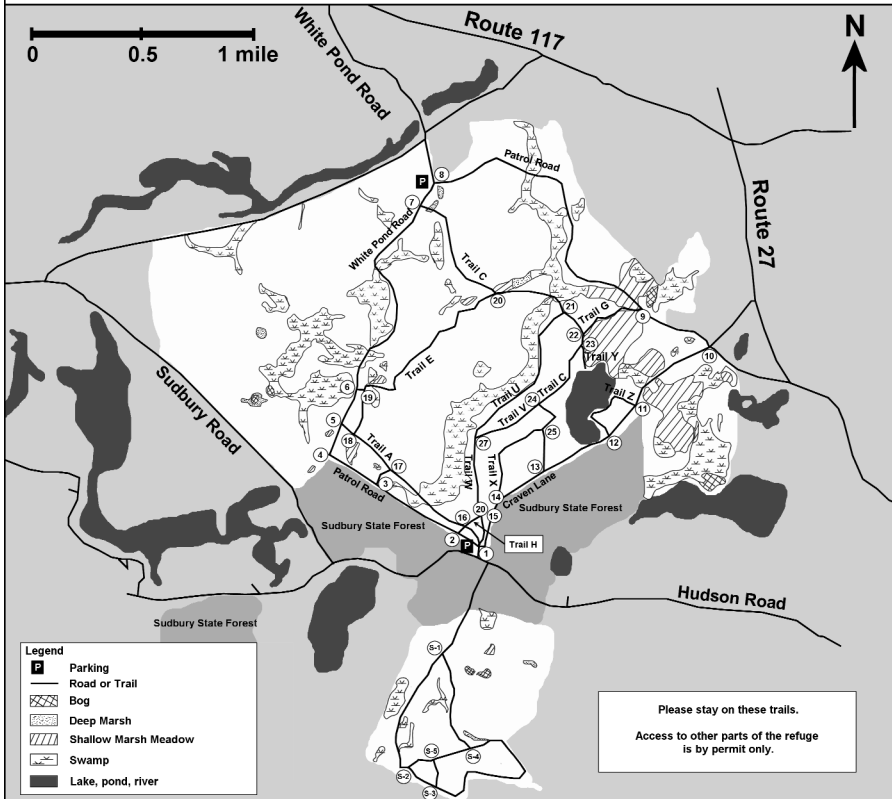


This entire area, with its rich ensemble of habitats, is reflected in an impressive variety of birds and makes up the Assabet River National Wildlife Refuge Important Bird Area. Since 1999, I have observed 155 species on the refuge proper, and the refuge list stands at 173. David Lange and I share this area for the Massachusetts Breeding Bird Atlas 2 project and would welcome reports of bird behavior indicative of breeding.

The refuge is located in Stow, Maynard, Sudbury, and Hudson and was previously the Fort Devens Sudbury Training Annex. The Annex was established in 1942, when the U. S. Army acquired various farms and homesteads through eminent domain. During World War II it was used as an ammunition storage facility, and fifty large bunkers connected by an extensive rail system were constructed. Ammunition was shipped by rail from Boston Harbor for storage and then returned to the harbor to be shipped overseas. Following the war the property was used by the Army as a training and laboratory test facility until its transfer to the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. As a result, the area has remained largely undeveloped.

The refuge can be accessed from both the north and the south sides. The main gate is on the south side of the refuge on Hudson Road in Sudbury. Look for the parking area on the north side of Hudson Road about three miles west of the Sudbury Town Hall, which stands at the intersection of Route 27 and Concord Road. Head west from the Town Hall on Route 27 for about 0.3 mile and continue straight on Hudson Road when Route 27 veers off to the right. The north entrance and parking area can be accessed from Route 62-117 in Stow. Driving east from the intersection where Route 62 (Gleasondale Road) joins Route 117 (Great Road) in Stow center, look for White Pond Road on the right after about 1.2 miles. Or, heading west from Maynard on Route 62-117, look for White Pond Road on the left about 0.8 mile after

Assabet River National Wildlife Refuge



REDRAWN BY D. LARSON FROM USFWS MAP

Route 62 joins 117. Take White Pond Road southeast for about 0.7 miles to the refuge entrance. You will cross the Assabet River immediately before you reach the refuge boundary. The parking area is reached via a road running just west of pine-covered Tuttle Hill and uphill from the river on the right. Maps of the extensive system of trails that pass through most of the refuge habitats are available at kiosks at both parking areas. Please stay on the trails when you bird the refuge. Dogs are not allowed. All the refuge restrictions are listed on the back of the map.

My own preferred entrance is the north one, so we'll start from there. It's worth a stop at the Assabet River to check for ducks. There is usually open water, except in the coldest weather, and quite often Common Goldeneyes and both Common and Hooded mergansers will be present. In spring and fall, a variety of ducks can be found by walking the road that follows the Assabet River. The road is immediately on the right after you cross the bridge and just outside and adjacent to the refuge boundary. People tend to park on the side of the road just west of the river here, but take care to park well to the side. If you decide to walk this road do not enter Crow Island, which

is the private property on the right about a mile from White Pond Road. At this point the road turns into a trail that continues on to Sudbury Road. This last section has had Broad-winged Hawks during the summer. This entire walk can be quite good for songbirds during migration, and a Yellow-throated Vireo, a local species in this part of Massachusetts, sang here during the late spring of 2003.

Once you've finished birding along the river, park in the parking area and pick up a map at the kiosk. The parking lot itself can be quite good for owls, with Great Horned, Barred, and Long-eared owls having been recorded. You will almost certainly hear Eastern Towhees in the parking area during the spring and summer. The refuge is a stronghold for this species, with typical counts on the order of thirty to forty individuals during a morning of birding. Look for family groups with fledglings throughout the refuge during the summer. As shown on the refuge map, the trail intersections are signed with numbered markers making it easy to explore the refuge's sixteen miles of trails and roads. None of the trails are strenuous. White Pond Road continues on the refuge with markers 8 through 4 (in the direction we're going) marking the trail intersections.

Start at marker 8 and bird the road. You will almost immediately pass the remnants of an Army facility on the left that has been dismantled by the Fish and Wildlife Service. The stretch of road from the gate (marker 8) to the point where this open area ends is good for sparrows during spring and fall migration. Dark-eyed Juncos and Savannah, Fox, Song, Swamp, Lincoln's, White-crowned, White-throated, Field, American Tree, and Chipping sparrows are expected or possible. Field Sparrows are often present even into the winter and frequently sing here in the spring and summer. This area is also excellent for other songbirds during migration. During the summer of 2007 an Indigo Bunting was on territory, and a pair of Hairy Woodpeckers nested here in one of the trees on the left. Black-billed Cuckoos have also occurred along the road. This is the one spot on the refuge where Northern Mockingbirds are almost guaranteed, and Baltimore Orioles are particularly obvious here. Other birds to look for during the breeding season are Red-bellied and Downy woodpeckers (year-round), Northern Flickers, Eastern Phoebes, Eastern Kingbirds, House Wrens, Eastern Bluebirds, Wood Thrushes, Gray Catbirds, Blue-winged Warblers, Black-and-white Warblers, American Redstarts, and Common Yellowthroats. Northern Shrikes have also occurred in this area during the winter.



A wetland on the east side of the refuge by Marijke Holtrop

Continue along the road as it enters a pine forest on the right, while the left side has the beginning of one of the major wetland complexes on the refuge. Expect to see Red-winged Blackbirds here in the appropriate season. Rose-breasted Grosbeaks and Scarlet Tanagers can usually be found in this area during the breeding season. After

about 0.2 mile White Pond Road makes a fairly sharp left turn. The area up the hill to the right at this corner has had wintering Northern Saw-whet Owls, and I heard an Eastern Screech-Owl here during the 2007 Concord Christmas Bird Count (CBC). Listen for Eastern Wood-Pewees during the breeding season. The road continues southeast from this corner, crossing the previously mentioned wetland that now dominates the right-hand side of the road. This wetland complex is a shrub swamp and extends almost all the way to marker 4. Listen from here to about marker 5 for Northern Waterthrushes from early May through June. You'll probably hear three or four, but they require x-ray vision to actually see unless you're much luckier than I've ever been!

Not far from where White Pond Road makes the sharp left turn you'll come to about ten acres of open grassland on the left that was called the Taylor Drop Zone by the Army. It was previously planted in Bermuda grass, but the Service has reseeded it with native grasses that now flourish. In spring Wild Turkeys display toward the back of the field in the early morning. This is also a good spot to see Red-tailed Hawks almost any time of the day, and I have seen a Bald Eagle a couple of times flying around the hill at the back in the fall. Bobolinks and Savannah Sparrows are occasionally recorded during migration, and large numbers of American Robins sometimes feed here with a few Northern Flickers mixed in, particularly in the fall. I'm still looking for an Eastern Meadowlark. This is a good spot to listen for American Woodcocks in the early spring, and you should hear Whip-poor-wills about a half hour after dusk during the summer (note that the refuge closes about then, so you'll want to skedaddle right after they start singing). Whip-poor-will surveys have tallied as many as sixteen individuals singing on the refuge in mid-June. During the spring and summer listen for a Blue-winged Warbler singing from the southeast corner of the grassland as you continue down White Pond Road.

From the grassland the road continues roughly south with the shrub swamp on the right and mixed forest dominated by white pine on the left. Listen for Scarlet Tanagers, Veeries, Hermit Thrushs, and Wood Thrushs here. Blue-headed Vireos have occurred on this stretch of the road through the summer and may breed on the refuge in small numbers, although that remains to be confirmed. Yellow-billed Cuckoos have also been found in this area, and you'll have no trouble hearing Ovenbirds. I have also heard Northern Saw-whet Owls in the forest to the left during fall migration. You can go all the way to marker 4 at the Patrol Road junction, where you are guaranteed an Eastern Phoebe during the summer. However, let's take Trail A instead, and go left at marker 5.

Trail A cuts through mature upland forest dominated by white pine. Look for Yellow-rumped Warblers during the spring and summer. They remain to be confirmed as breeders. Black-throated Green Warblers have also been present on territory along this trail during the breeding season. This is another area where Northern Saw-whet Owls have been heard in early spring. Other birds to be expected are Red-breasted Nuthatches, which can be quite common in an invasion year. Twenty-eight individuals were tallied on this trail and Trails U and W on the Concord CBC in 2003. They have also been present during the summers of 1999, 2000, 2001, and 2007, but breeding is

still unconfirmed. Golden-crowned Kinglets are present in reasonable numbers during a typical winter, so you shouldn't have any trouble finding a half-dozen or so. Ruffed Grouse were once fairly common and relatively easy to see here and at other locations within the refuge, but their numbers have dropped so alarmingly that they are almost never encountered anymore. It is hoped the population will rebound. Past marker 17 several vernal pools are visible from the trail, particularly on the right side, where egg masses can be seen in the early spring. Great Horned Owls are frequently heard and occasionally seen near the end of Trail A and from the parking area on Hudson Road.

At marker 16 take a left onto Trail H and after a short distance another left from Trail H onto Trail W. Follow Trail W, then stay left at the fork onto Trail U. These two trails pass between a wetland area on the left and a small, forested hill on the right. At the north end of the trail you will come across some of the World War II-era bunkers on the right that have had the doors welded shut. Winter Wrens have been present and vocal along this trail in the past, but not for the last couple of years. Perhaps they will return in the future. Expect to hear and sometimes see Hermit Thrushes, Veeries, Wood Thrushes, Scarlet Tanagers, and Brown Creepers during the breeding season, with the latter often present through the winter. This is a good area to look for Swainson's Thrushes on migration. During the summer of 2000 a Black-throated Blue Warbler sang on territory here.

Trail U tees into Trail C at marker 21; go right on C. Follow Trail C until Trail Y branches off to the left. Trail Y goes down to Puffer Pond, which is the only large body of open water on the refuge. As you walk down to the pond, listen off to the left for Willow Flycatchers and Yellow Warblers singing from the wetland north of Puffer Pond. In late fall and early spring Ring-necked Ducks are often present on the pond. Additional ducks that have occurred on the pond are Common and Hooded mergansers, Green-winged Teal, Mallards, American Black Ducks, Common Goldeneyes, and, rarely, Ruddy Ducks. Mute Swans are also occasionally present. This low species diversity of ducks may be partially a function of birding coverage. Belted Kingfishers are often present in the area, and two Common Ravens were found here on the 2006 Concord CBC. Common Raven is a species that has occurred several times on the refuge and can be expected anywhere.

Puffer Pond freezes over in the winter, and as I write this (January 2008) there is a Bald Eagle feeding on a deer carcass there. Return to Trail C, and continue to the left until you reach marker 24. During the 2000 Concord CBC our party watched ten flying squirrels glide across this trail in the falling snow. It was a truly magical moment! Take a left onto Trail X, and continue on it until you reach Craven Lane. The trail follows a contour across a small hill. This stretch of trail has breeding species similar to the forested areas described above. It has proven to be an excellent area during migration with the birds moving across the top of the hill. The only refuge record for Cape May Warbler was in this area.

Once you reach Craven Lane, go left or northeast back toward Puffer Pond. Watch for a small lane that goes off to the left up to one of the old residences. The lane is closed so please don't enter it, but there is usually a Chestnut-sided Warbler

here that can often be seen from the road. The Service has proposed building a new Eastern Massachusetts Refuge Complex Visitor Center near marker 13 that would have exhibits and provide environmental education programs. Continue toward Puffer Pond, and keep a lookout for a trail that goes off to the right. This area is part of the Sudbury State Forest, and you can walk a short distance up it until you reach the refuge boundary. This has proven to be a good area for Yellow-bellied Flycatchers in late May. There is also a wetland on the right that is worth checking.

Once you've finished here, return to Craven Lane, turn right, and take a left at marker 12 onto Trail Z. This will take you to a vantage point overlooking Puffer Pond and a wetland just north of the pond. This area has also been productive in migration. Trail Z loops back to Craven Lane where you will turn left and continue to the northeast. Here the trail passes through a wetland area on both sides. Look for Wood Ducks and Mallards. Swamp Sparrows are present in summer and during migration, with some occasionally staying to be recorded on the Concord CBC. An Osprey pair raised two young in an old Great Blue Heron nest to the west of the road in 2004 for a rare inland breeding record. This is a likely spot to look for Olive-sided Flycatchers during migration. The trail continues uphill from the wetland into a wooded area that often has Hairy Woodpeckers and where the only Orchard Oriole for the refuge was recorded.

Craven Lane meets Patrol Road at a closed gate where you must go left. Eastern Bluebirds occur year-round in this area. Continue northwest along Patrol Road past marker 9 until you reach a wetland extending along both sides of the road. Look here for Swamp Sparrows throughout the year; they are common during the breeding season and often present through early winter. Yellow Warblers and Common Yellowthroats are common in summer as well. It is also a good stretch to bird during



Taylor Brook by Marijke Holtrop

migration. If you continue along Patrol Road, it will take you across Taylor Brook, which is always worth a stop, and back to the parking area on the north side. The area just beyond Taylor Brook has Barred Owls that can occasionally be seen during the day, and Pileated Woodpeckers have been seen in the woods to the left of the trail. Instead, we will backtrack to marker 9 and take Trail G.

Trail G goes back toward Puffer Pond and bisects the wetland complex that extends from the northern edge of Puffer Pond all the way to where Taylor Brook intersects with Patrol Road and beyond. This is a particularly good section to bird in all seasons. Warbling Vireos are present along this trail, and Willow Flycatchers can often be heard singing from the left. Tree Swallows and Great Blue Herons breed in the dead trees to the left, and Common Grackles

and Red-winged Blackbirds are abundant. The stand of phragmites to the east has been used as a blackbird roost in spring and fall by those two icterids as well as Brown-headed Cowbirds and Rusty Blackbirds. Eastern Bluebirds frequent the area during the breeding season. Green Herons occur here, and Virginia Rails can be heard calling, particularly early in the morning. Least Bitterns had been annual in the wetland to the left toward Puffer Pond but have been absent for the last couple of years. This has corresponded to an increase in beaver activity that has raised the water level considerably. In winter there is usually a little open water adjacent to the trail so that Song and Swamp sparrows are often present in the wetland on the right, and a Winter Wren was here in December 2006. An Eastern Phoebe was in this area during the 2007 Concord CBC and is still there as of this writing. This is a good area during migration as well and is another likely spot for Olive-sided Flycatchers.

Go right on Trail C when Trail G tees into it not far from Puffer Pond. This trail has been good for Fox Sparrows during migration. The trail goes through a sandy area with short pines where Yellow-rumped Warblers are present in the breeding season. A short distance later you will come to a bridge that crosses Honey Brook just after marker 20. Purple Finches are frequently found year-round in the vicinity of marker 20 and also across the bridge. I suspect they breed close by but have been unable to confirm it. A stop at the bridge for a few minutes is always productive. Swamp Sparrows sing from the area to the northeast, Mallards and Wood Ducks are frequently present, Gray Catbirds and Eastern Towhees are ubiquitous, and there is often a Great Crested Flycatcher, especially during migration. Blue-winged and Chestnut-sided warblers are to be expected, and this is another spot to listen for Whip-poor-wills. Nice flocks of songbirds are often found here as well as farther to the west during migration. Trail C continues on to intersect White Pond Road at marker 7, where you can turn right to the parking area where we started.



A wetland on the east side of the refuge by
Marijke Holtrop

That pretty well covers the north side of the refuge, but there are some interesting spots to bird in the section south of Hudson Road. To reach the southern section, park at the parking area on the north side of Hudson Road and walk back along the road toward the east for a short distance to Trail S. Be careful crossing to the south side of Hudson Road, since traffic can be fairly heavy for a country road. This section of the refuge can be birded rather thoroughly in three or four hours via Trail S, which is a loop with one bisecting trail. The soils here are very sandy, having been deposited as the glaciers retreated northward. The resulting habitat in both the refuge and adjacent conservation land is partially scrub oak and pitch pine forest. The species of forest birds are similar to those observed north of the road. The main additions to the list are

Brown Thrashers and Prairie Warblers. This is another good spot for Field Sparrows, and Veerys are particularly common. The conservation lands to the south of the refuge also have extensive trail systems, but currently there is no connecting trail from the refuge.

The diversity of bird life at the Assabet River National Wildlife Refuge is remarkable given that it is a relatively small area of unspoiled habitat within a largely developed suburban setting. It is fortunate that this rich biological diversity is under the stewardship of the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service and will be protected perpetually. The refuge is supported by the Friends of the Assabet River National Wildlife Refuge, who have been instrumental in helping to clean up the debris and structures that remained after the transfer of the property from the Army, making it possible for the refuge to be opened to the public. Much work still remains to be done. If you are interested in helping, please contact the refuge staff (see <<http://www.fws.gov/northeast/assabetriver>> or call 978-443-4661) or the Friends <<http://www.farnwr.org>>. The Friends will be sponsoring a contest in the near future to rename the trails on the refuge, but the marker numbers should remain unchanged. The Friends also lead trips to the refuge and conduct monthly meetings that include a variety of refuge-related programs. See their website for a schedule of events.

I'd like to acknowledge the support I've received from the refuge staff. Tim Prior, now retired from the Service but still to be found working on the refuge, allowed me access prior to the official opening and has on occasion accompanied me during surveys. We remain friends despite my dumping him out of our canoe during a marsh-bird survey! Stephanie Koch, the Refuge Complex Biologist, has been tireless in conducting an inventory of the biological diversity on this refuge and across the complex, in addition to her other duties. It has been my privilege to work with them both. Libby Herland, the Refuge Complex Manager, has also encouraged and supported this work. 🐦

Ron Lockwood has been birding since he was a teenager in West Texas. Since 1998 he has studied the breeding biology of the Grasshopper Sparrow at the Devens Reserve Forces Training Area. He has also assisted the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service with breeding bird surveys throughout the Eastern Massachusetts National Wildlife Refuge Complex and is currently working on both the Assabet River and the Oxbow National Wildlife Refuges for the Massachusetts Breeding Bird Atlas 2 project. He can be reached at ron.lockwood@comcast.net.



BROWN THRASHER BY DAVID LARSON