

It's always a good day for birding on the . . .

Connecticut River Birding Trail

BY EMILY BRUNKHURST
AND JANE VACHON

If you're a birdwatcher looking for some new areas to explore, you've hit the jackpot with the Connecticut River Birding Trail. This isn't a linked "trail" with connecting paths, but a joint conservation, education and tourism venture that identifies 128 prime places for birding in the Connecticut River watershed. The sites range from local slices of protected land to expansive national refuges and state parks, destinations where visitors and local residents alike can get out and enjoy their natural surroundings.

The New Hampshire/Vermont part of the trail is now complete and is detailed in three separate maps.

The Birding Trail maps contain a bounty of information, with site descriptions, directions and bird species lists. They identify lesser-known birds that experienced birders might seek, but also common species. "You can look for a blue-headed vireo or a Blackburnian warbler, but even song sparrows are exciting for the beginning birder," says Bill Shepard, of Thetford, Vermont, Project Coordinator for the Birding Trail.

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CEDAR WAXWING PHOTO © ROGER IRWIN



Northern parula

Get Out and Explore

The trail is a “great idea because it gets people out there looking at birds, and hopefully that interest will lead to stewardship,” said Pam Hunt, a bird conservation biologist with N.H. Audubon and coordinator of the state’s Important Bird Area Program. “The Birding Trail shows people linkages with the river, which is an important flyway,” Hunt said. The southern stretch of the river from Claremont to the Massachusetts border has recently been identified as an Important Bird Area, largely because it is a major corridor for migrating waterfowl that rest and feed on its impoundments, marshes and setbacks. This stretch of the river also hosts two bald eagle nests.



Sites along the Connecticut River Birding Trail give people a chance to discover a rich diversity of habitats. “We have wonderful forests and wetlands. Why not get outside and explore the natural environment we have in the region?” says Shepard. The Otter Brook Lake site in Keene, for example, owned by the Army Corps of Engineers, features wetlands, old fields, shrub and forest habitats that support many different bird species.

Part of the fun is discovering regional differences along the trail. North Country sites, like the Connecticut Lakes Headwaters Natural Area in Pittsburg (another Important Bird Area), have a unique habitat and ecology that can sustain bird species not often found in southern reaches, including spruce grouse, gray jay and black-backed woodpecker.



How to Order Maps

Connecticut River Birding Trail maps for the Northern, Central and Southern sections (NH/VT) are free, but contributions are welcome. Visit www.ctriverbirdingtrail.org to order maps or make a donation. Maps are also available from N.H. Fish and Game; email info@wildlife.state.nh.us or call (603) 271-3211. Please specify which maps you want to get.

Birding and More

Birds aren’t the only attraction. “It’s called a birding trail, but when you’re going to these beautiful spots, you’ll see lots of different wildlife,” says Shepard. “It’s really a natural history trail. You can also see many different butterflies, dragonflies and mammal tracks.”

Wildlife educator Judy Silverberg, N.H. Fish and Game’s liaison to the project, agrees that the sites serve many users. Since Texas first launched the birding trail idea, “the concept has spread to other states and become a way to identify sites of interest for multiple audiences,” Silverberg said. “Birding sites often coincide with other wildlife viewing opportunities and areas of other natural or cultural interest.”

Saint-Gaudens National Historic Site, in Cornish, is a perfect example. This historic home of a noted American sculptor is also a site on the Birding Trail. Its 150-acre grounds include trails that wind through numerous habitats where visitors can watch for ruby-throated hummingbirds, cedar waxwings and scarlet tanagers.

Hikers and bikers will enjoy the Northern Rail Trail, which stretches 23 miles from Lebanon to Grafton, offering easy birding from the rail bed as it passes through a variety of habitats, including fields, woods and wetlands. More than 100 bird species have been recorded along this trail, including the pied-billed grebe, American woodcock and Baltimore oriole. Further north at Pondicherry Wildlife Refuge in Whitefield, also an identified Important Bird Area, you’ll find a great diversity of birds (234 species, 135 breeding species), but also spectacular mountain scenery, easy walking, isolation and wildlife.

The maps include recommended times for birders to visit the sites, usually from spring through fall. “May stands out as a prime birding month. Many migrating birds are coming and going, setting up nesting territories. Life is exploding. There’s lots of singing and the birds are in their best spring plumage,” said Shepard. “But don’t forget oppor-



Bill Shepard (in green jacket), the driving force behind the development of the Connecticut River Birding Trail, leads a bird walk at one of the trail’s prime viewing sites.

Can You Find These Seldom-seen Birds?

Birding along the Connecticut River Birding Trail may bring you in contact with some of New Hampshire's species of greatest conservation need, as listed in the state's Wildlife Action Plan. Here are a few to look for:

Pied-billed grebes, endangered in New Hampshire, are small, compact birds with a short, thick bill. Look for the distinctive ring



Pied-billed grebe

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around the bill. These birds prefer wetlands with dense stands of emergent plants for hiding, but need open water for

take-offs and landings. They nest on a platform of vegetation in the emergent plants, near the water surface and in shallow areas, making them vulnerable to changes in water level. Fish and Game is considering a management plan for pied-billed grebes for MacDaniel's Marsh in Grafton, one of the Birding Trail sites.

Look for **northern harriers** flying low over open areas. A white patch at the base of the tail is a distinctive field mark. Harriers inhabit grasslands and marshes with open areas for foraging.



Northern harrier

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In New Hampshire, they breed in Coos County and Danbury, nesting on the ground in shrubby areas adjacent to hayfields, pasture, old fields and wetlands. In the winter, they can be seen flying over coastal salt marshes. Northern harriers are endangered in N.H. Several of their nesting sites in New Hampshire are protected, including the Whitefield Airport (a site on the Birding Trail), which manages the grassy habitat cooperatively with Fish and Game.

Warblers are jewels of the forest, with their bright colors, lovely songs and varied habits. In New Hampshire, four species are listed as species of greatest conservation need in the N.H. Wildlife Action Plan. All have been seen in the Connecticut River system, but are rare. The bay-breasted and palm warblers nest in northern New Hampshire in coniferous forests. **Bay-breasted warblers** seek small forest openings so they can forage for insects in the thick conifers at the

edge. **Palm warblers** prefer bogs and fens in boreal forests, a habitat very difficult to access, so birders should

look for them during the spring migration.

Cerulean warblers prefer hardwood and floodplain forests with tall trees. In the southern Connecticut River area, they may be found in the Ashuelot River floodplain and on the steep slopes of Mt. Wantastiquet Natural Area. This species has seen a major decline throughout its range and has been nominated for federal threatened status.

Golden-winged warblers prefer abandoned fields, clearcuts and power lines, where they nest in shrubs, sometimes interbreeding with blue-winged warblers. They are at risk from invasive plant species, such as the autumn olive, and from habitat fragmentation that exposes their ground nests to predators.

As you enjoy your birding, watch for these and other rare species. Learn more in the species appendix of the New Hampshire Wildlife Action Plan at www.WildNH.com.

— Emily Brunkhurst



Palm warbler

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tunities later in the year, like looking for fall warblers or watching for hawks at Pack Monadnock. The excitement is going back to these places again and again."

When enjoying these sites, remember you're a guest. "We want these sites to remain open, so please respect the properties and the wildlife," said Shepard. Tread lightly, stay on trails and park in designated areas. Enjoy, but don't disturb the birds' normal activities. Stick to "pishing" (making squeaking or "kissing" sounds) to attract birds, rather than using recording devices. Leave your dog at home.

Protecting our Future

Birders and other outdoor enthusiasts can use the Connecticut Birding Trail maps to discover properties owned by a wide range of entities — state parks or forests, federal preserves, Fish and Game lands, N.H. Audubon sanctuaries and town lands. These partner organizations — and many volunteers — made the project possible, says Shepard. The successful two-state collaboration reminds us that we are connected by habitat regardless of political boundaries.

While the New Hampshire/Vermont section of the trail is now complete, the Connecticut River Birding Trail has the potential to continue southward. Eventually the vision is to have one trail that covers sites in the entire 400-mile Connecticut River watershed, including segments in Massachusetts and Connecticut. A similar project is in the planning stages for the Merrimack River Valley.

Conservationists and birders created the Connecticut River Birding Trail with hopes that an increased involvement in, and appreciation for, our areas natural landscapes would inspire the public to protect remaining resources. These special places beckon for our involvement, concern and stewardship to ensure the conservation of New England's rich biodiversity. Plus, it's a fun way to find new places to go birding!

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Ruby-throated hummingbird



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