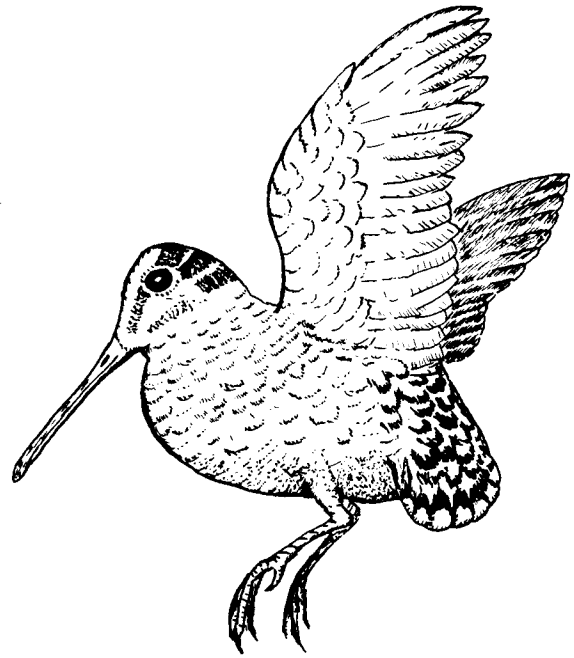


BIRDS OF DUNBACK MEADOW

A Year-round Guide to
the Birdlife of the
Dunback Meadow Conservation
Area in Lexington

by John W. Andrews



American Woodcock

INTRODUCTION

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 which many Lexingtonians pass by each day. 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 bird watching has spread far beyond the borders of the Town. One event which put it on the map, ornithologically speaking, was the discovery of a MacGillivray's Warbler there in November 1977. That western species had never before been recorded in Massachusetts and bird enthusiasts from all over the state came to view the find. Over 113 other species have been recorded at the site over the past three years.

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 and differences of even a couple of weeks can result in dramatic changes in the avian population. Finally, a brief summary of the conservation history of the site is provided.

FEATURES OF THE SITE (SEE MAP)

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 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 (mostly Wild Cherry, Red Oak, and European 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 sidetrail 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 Summac 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

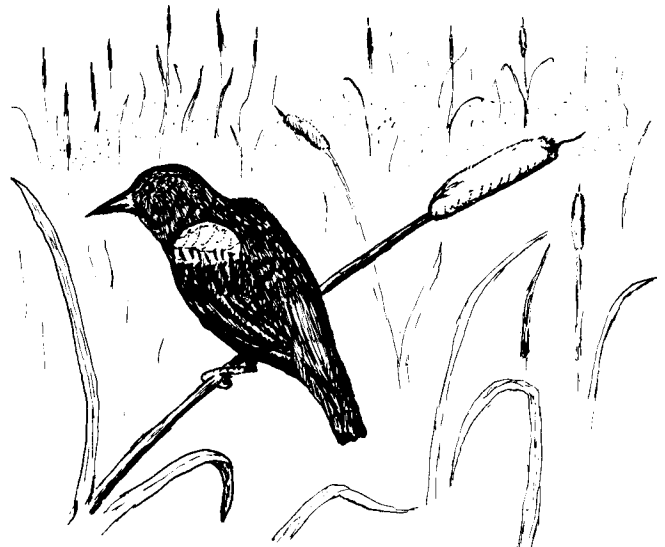
Remember two things: First, birds can fly. Second, they live fast. Today there are warblers in every tree. Tomorrow there may be only the wind. Birds move. And they keep one eye on the calendar.

EARLY SPRING (LATE MARCH - APRIL)

Spring begins with the first Red-winged Blackbird flashing his red epaulets over the shrunken weeds of winter. The first blackbirds to arrive each year are invariably 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 which territoriality entails. Much calling, display, and chasing back and forth ensues until territorial boundaries are gradually settled.

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.



Redwinged Blackbird

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 is supposedly much admired by the female of the species. The flight displays last for about 40 minutes at dawn and at dusk. They continue well into May. Flights can best be observed by looking westward toward the afterglow of sunset across the open meadow beside the community gardens.

As April 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 which 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 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 for (or listened for) in the undergrowth. A walk out into the north meadow along the drainage ditches produces an occasional shorebird such as Lesser Yellowlegs, Common Snipe, or Solitary Sandpiper. Bobolinks and migrating sparrows may also be found in the grass in this area.

NESTING SEASON (MID-MAY TO EARLY JULY)

Nature allows the small songbirds only about six weeks for establishment of territory, courtship, song, nest building, egg laying, incubation, and fledging of young. Hence the nesting season is a time of intense activity for the 27 or so species which breed at Dunback Meadow.

In this season Dunback Meadow hosts a substantial nesting population of Yellow Warblers which 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 House Wren, Grey 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. His liquid notes may be heard late into the morning from the moist deciduous bottomlands on the southern portion of the site.

SUMMER (MID-JULY TO 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 which 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, their favorite wildflower.

THE SPARROW MIGRATION (OCTOBER TO EARLY DECEMBER)

With the first frosts, the availability of insect food begins to decrease. Later migrants which depend more upon plant foods begin to dominate the avian population. From mid-October through mid-November Dunback Meadow offers a splendid opportunity for the birder to make the acquaintance of our native sparrows. These unobtrusive little birds move in well-defined flocks through the open areas as they feed upon the seeds of ragweed, smartweed, and foxtail grass. It is often productive to walk through the garden plots where the broken ground has allowed seed-bearing weeds to establish themselves, much to the sparrow's delight. The marsh

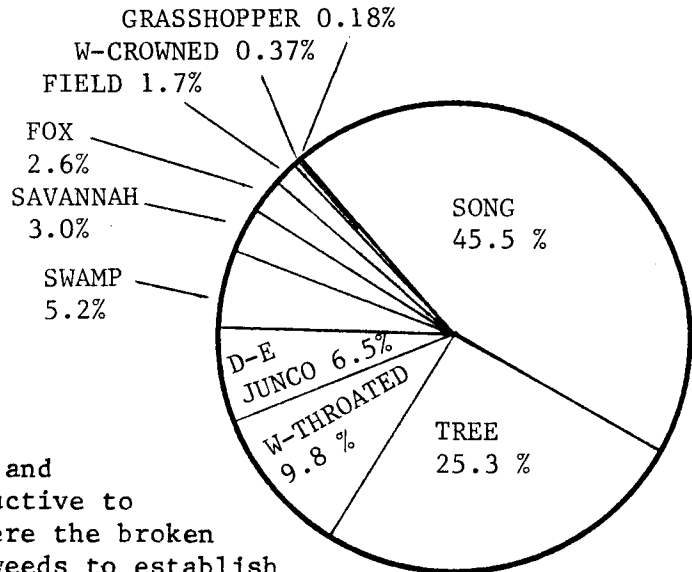


FIGURE 1

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 520 fall (Sept-Dec) sparrow records from my journal. At least eleven species of sparrows have been recorded at Dunback over the past three years (Chipping Sparrow is present earlier in the year, but has not been recorded in the Fall). Among the less common

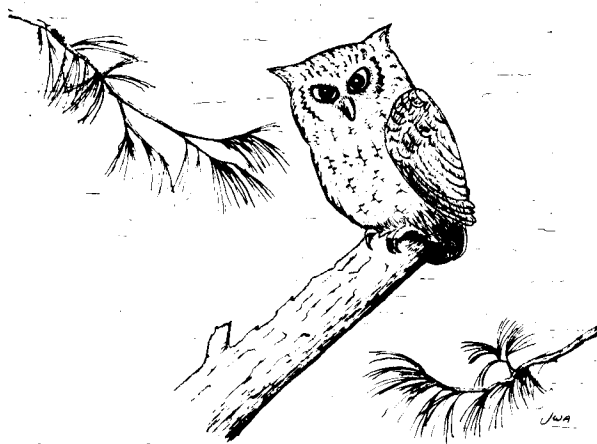
species, the Grasshopper Sparrow appears to be a rare but regular November transient in the garden plots. White-crowned Sparrows (usually immatures) may also appear there.

WINTER (DECEMBER TO 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 the best time of year for observing the birds of prey for which the open expanses of the fields 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 which I find particularly interesting is the Northern Shrike - a robin-sized bird which, 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 goldfinch 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.



Screech Owl

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.

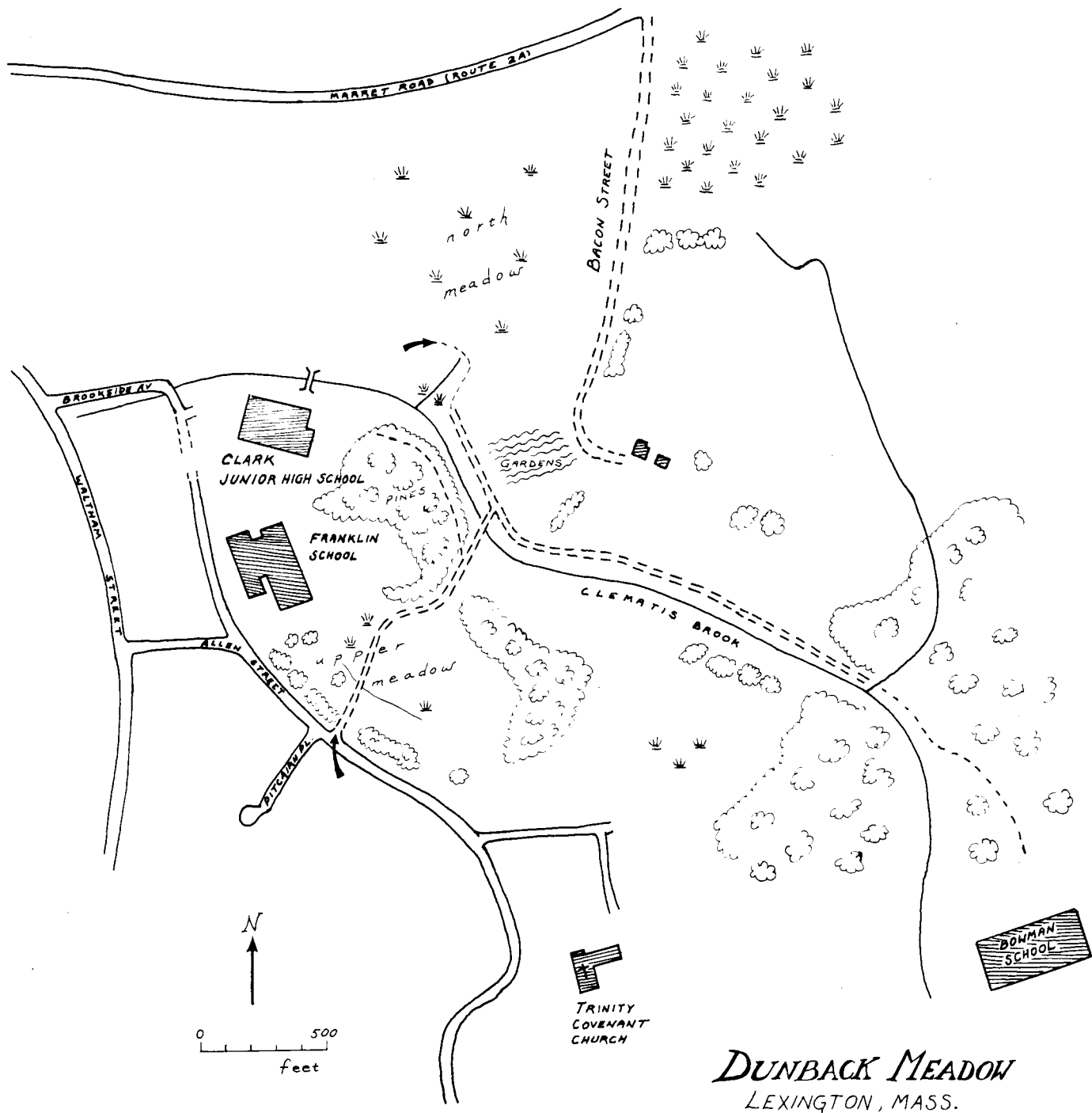
And you can be sure that no matter how deep the snow or cold the wind, somewhere in the frozen brush a Song Sparrow sits, with a song in his breast which is just waiting for the first warm day of March!

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 1960's 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 has created the 140 acre parcel of protected open space which we know today as Dunback Meadow.

Preparation of this guide was sponsored by Citizens for Lexington Conservation, Inc., a non-profit citizen's organization concerned with issues of environmental quality in the Town of Lexington. For information on other publications, write

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 LEXINGTON, MASS.