

# Birding NH Audubon's Dahl Wildlife Sanctuary

by Charlie Nims and Phil Brown



*The winter view of Mt. Washington over the Dahl Wildlife Sanctuary by Phil Brown.*

While the Mount Washington Valley is not often thought of as a birding destination but rather as a destination for families, outlet shoppers, river tubers, hikers and skiers, there is some good birding to be experienced if you do visit the area. The birding crown jewel of the Mt. Washington Valley is NH Audubon's Dahl Wildlife Sanctuary located on the west side of Route 16, just before the LL Bean outlet store as one comes into North Conway from the south.

## History and Description

The Dahl Sanctuary was donated to NH Audubon by sisters, Helen and Ruth Dahl, in 1988. Used as farmland throughout the 1800s and early 1900s, the Dahl Sanctuary is now used primarily for open space, low-impact recreation and wildlife habitat.

The property is a compact 60 acres adjacent to the Saco River with a nice mix of habitats including a coniferous forest adjacent to Route 16, a grassland in a varying degree of succession into shrub land, some small oxbows from the Saco and, of course, a stretch of riverside habitat containing tall Silver Maples and associated floodplain forest species, as well as gravel barrens and sandy banks along the immediate river. This varied set of habitats in a small area results in a high variety of bird species. In addition to birds, the Dahl Sanctuary is an excellent place to observe other wildlife including amphibians and mammals, and it is open for public exploration on a year round basis. Several of the natural community types are rare in the state, and two rare plant species occur. For more information about recreational access and these other aspects of the sanctuary, visit <http://www.nhaidubon.org/dahl-wildlife-sanctuary/>.

Historically, it appears that the area has been under

birded. In the six years since 2013, when several local birders began actively birding the area, the number of species reported to eBird has jumped from 62 to 159. Of course, some of this is a variation on the "Patagonia Roadside Stop" effect as the more an area is birded, the more species tend to be recorded.

## Species Highlights



*Orange-crowned Warbler at the Dahl Wildlife Sanctuary, 10-26-18, by Charlie Nims.*

In recent years, there have been some stellar finds at Dahl including Yellow-breasted Chat, Blue-winged Warbler, Louisiana Waterthrush, Connecticut Warbler, Orange-crowned Warbler, Dickcissel and Golden-winged Warbler. In total, 29 warbler species have been seen, several of which breed in the sanctuary.

While the prime time to bird Dahl is from mid-April through early fall, a surprise can turn up at any time of year. In both January 2017 and 2019, flocks of around 100 Bohemian Waxwings were seen and Pine Grosbeaks have appeared on occasion. A Northern Saw-whet Owl once treated two visitors to a rare look as it roosted in a young pine near the trailhead during late fall.

Some of the more common summer residents include Wood Duck, Great Blue Heron, Common Merganser, Broad-winged Hawk, Spotted Sandpiper, American Woodcock, Belted Kingfisher, Red-eyed Vireo, Warbling Vireo, American Crow, Common Raven, Black-capped Chickadee, White-breasted and Red-breasted Nuthatch, American Robin, Tufted Titmouse, Common Yellowthroat, Yellow Warbler, Pine Warbler, Black-and-white Warbler, Chestnut-sided Warbler, American Redstart, Song Sparrow, Swamp Sparrow, Baltimore Oriole, Rose-breasted Grosbeak and American Goldfinch.

Less common, but regular species include Brown Creeper, Black-billed Cuckoo, Alder Flycatcher, Eastern Kingbird, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Great Crested Flycatcher, Brown Thrasher, Indigo Bunting and Purple Finch.

Among the wide diversity of migratory birds recorded are less common northern warbler species such as Mourning, Tennessee, Bay-breasted and Cape May. In addition to the warblers, Blue-headed and Philadelphia Vireos can be present during migration. A few other specialty species of the floodplain forest may be found during migration or breeding season. These include Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, and Yellow-throated Vireo, all species near the northern edge of their range. More southern species such as Carolina Wren, Northern Mockingbird, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Willow Flycatcher and Fish Crow have also been recorded in recent years.

## How to Bird the Sanctuary

When you park in the lot, pick up a trail map (they are provided in the mailbox) and review the Sanctuary Guidelines posted in the visitor kiosk. You will notice the Pine Trail immediately across the access road from the parking area. It is not usually worthwhile for birding, but a Cooper's Hawk has nested in pines just a little way up this trail.

A good way to bird the sanctuary is to walk from the parking lot down the gravel access trail to the Silver Maple Loop Trail continuing to where it meets the Beach Trail. After parking, you will walk past a gate and the trailhead kiosk following a gravel access path downhill. At the bottom, continue straight through a gap in a small wooden fence on the Silver Maple Loop Trail which heads toward the Beach Trail.

Depending upon the management cycle, there may be a "forest" of sumac on your left and mixed trees and shrubs on your right. This can be a productive area for a wide variety of species. Shortly ahead, at a gravel "bridge" designed to restore floodplain habitat by allowing water passage, there is a small wetland on your right. Depending upon water levels it may appear to be either a small pond or a swampy area. This area is particularly good for Belted Kingfisher, Warbling Vireo, woodpeckers, Common Yellowthroat and several sparrow species.

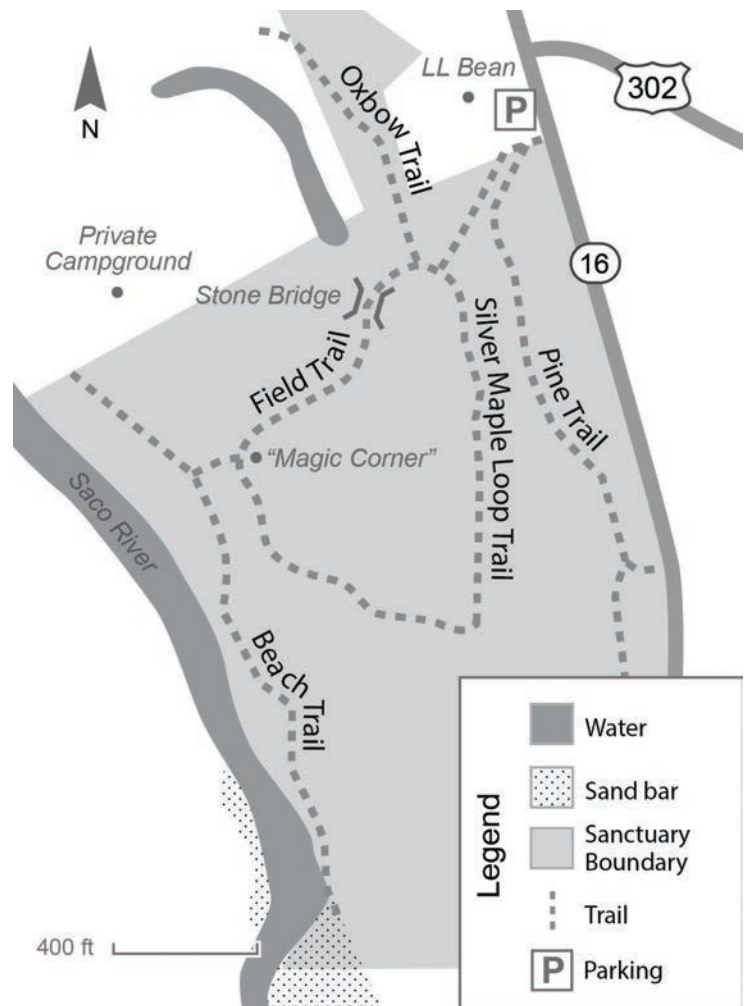
Continuing along the Silver Maple Loop Trail, the habitat becomes more open (patches of regenerating forest are mowed every 8-10 years to maintain shrubland habitat) and is good for House Wren, Chestnut-sided Warbler, American Redstart, sparrows, Indigo Bunting and American Goldfinch. Nest boxes have been maintained in the open areas for Tree Swallows and, less often, Eastern Bluebirds, but are more often homes for Black-capped Chickadees and House Wrens. An American Kestrel nest box located in a Butternut tree has not been used to date.

Approaching the more mature forest ahead, you will come to an intersection where the Silver Maple Loop Trail makes a 90-degree turn to the left (while straight ahead is the intersection with the Beach Trail). This has been the premier Dahl hotspot,

named the "Magic Corner" by Rick Steber and Will Broussard, two regular Dahl birders. It is here that some of the big rarities for Dahl have been seen including both Golden-winged (female seen 5-12-18; posted on eBird with photos) and Blue-winged Warblers. Later in the summer when the Jewelweed is in blossom, this is a haven for Ruby-throated Hummingbirds. Regardless of whether rarities are found, the area around this trail junction always seems to be active with the best strategy being patience.

After birding this spot, a good option is to walk straight ahead on the Beach Trail toward the Saco River. While an alternative is to go left on the Silver Maple Loop Trail (more below) for the sake of habitat diversity, we recommend continuing straight ahead and on the Beach Trail. After crossing a swale where water may accumulate on either side, continue left on the Beach Trail which follows the edge of the Saco River to the "beach" area, an aptly named section along the river used by bathers and tubers during the summer. This cobble barren is also home to rare and sensitive plant species that are tracked by the State of New Hampshire.

Along this trail, keep an eye and ear open for House Wrens, American Redstarts, Chestnut-sided Warblers, Baltimore Orioles, Scarlet Tanager, and cuckoos, among others. The past two years, there has been a lonesome male Louisiana





Waterthrush singing regularly about 50 yards in from the kiosk sign near where the trail enters the “beach.”

Upon reaching the gravel bar, there is usually a nesting colony of Bank Swallows in the eroding bank across the Saco River and it is a good place to wait for a Belted Kingfisher. Bobolinks can be heard, and sometimes seen, in the fields beyond those banks. Spotted Sandpiper, Great Blue Heron and Common Merganser may also put in an appearance as all are regular in this area of the Saco. Keep an eye out for Osprey and Bald Eagle which are regular during migration and may hunt the river during breeding season.



*The Dahl Wildlife Sanctuary “beach” in fall by Phil Brown.*

After visiting the beach, you may choose to return to the Magic Corner and turn right, proceeding onto the remainder of the Silver Maple Loop Trail. Along here breeding Chestnut-sided Warblers and American Redstarts can be numerous. This section is also a good place for thrushes with Veery being the most common. Keep your eyes peeled for a Barred or Great Horned Owl, both of which have been documented in the mature silver maples of this forest. In addition, nest boxes in the floodplain forest may attract Hooded Merganser and Wood Duck, as well as an occasional Northern Saw-whet Owl.

When you complete the Silver Maple Loop Trail and return to the gravel access path where you began, instead of heading up hill to the parking area, you may choose to proceed straight ahead on a well marked path. Shortly, you will pass a small retention pond on the left before entering a wooded area. Immediately upon entering that section, there is a short stub trail on the left that leads in about 20 yards to an oxbow pond where there can be duck species; Wood Duck have nested there, as well as herons and Belted Kingfisher. This trail continues into a private campground, so where that is indicated, please turn around and retrace your steps back to the access path leading to the parking area. This section of path can harbor a variety of birds such as breeding Ovenbird and several woodpecker species including Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, and Pileated, Hairy and Downy Woodpeckers. In the fall, this can be a great spot for migrating passerines, especially warblers, as there is a nice stand of birch. In the fall of 2018, just before the entry into the birch

section, an Orange-crowned Warbler was spotted on at least two occasions.

Of course, there are lots more birding opportunities in the Mt. Washington Valley (stay tuned for a future issue to learn about several other less-birded locations in this region), but we hope that this gives you a flavor for the birding to be discovered at NH Audubon’s Dahl Wildlife Sanctuary. If you are in the area or headed north of the notches, stop to explore and discover . . . who knows what you might find?!!

## Directions to Dahl Wildlife Sanctuary

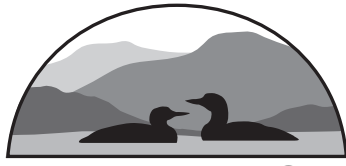
Coming from the south via Rt. 16, as one enters North Conway, just before Rt. 302 comes in from the right (east), the sanctuary parking is on the west side of Route 16, but holds only 3-4 vehicles. If it is full, some people park in the LL Bean store parking lot, but please be careful not to impact LL Bean clients, especially in the summer. If coming from the south via Rt. 93 you can take the Kancamagus Highway east (Rt. 112) to Rt. 16 and follow the directions above or take Rt. 3 to Rt. 302 east and follow the directions below.

Coming from the north on Rt. 3, at the traffic lights in Twin Mountain, take Rt. 302 (southeast) over Crawford Notch towards North Conway. Rt. 302 will merge with Rt. 16. Go all the way through the Village of North Conway and then keep an eye out for the LL Bean outlet store on your right. The parking lot is just beyond the light on the right. Alternatively you can take Rt. 16 south from Gorham and merge with Rt. 302 south.

*Charlie Nims is an experienced birder living in the Mt. Washington Valley and a NH Audubon member who volunteers for the Common Nighthawk Project and contributed to the Olive-sided Flycatcher Survey. He avidly birds the Dahl Sanctuary year round.*

*Phil Brown is the Director of Land Management for NH Audubon and has been stewarding the Dahl Wildlife Sanctuary since 2004. On his first visit, he discovered a Northern Saw-whet Owl roosting in a pine and he has been in love with this sanctuary ever since.*

*Please feel free to contact Charlie at [charlie.nims@gmail.com](mailto:charlie.nims@gmail.com) for more birding information, or Phil at [pbrown@nhaudubon.org](mailto:pbrown@nhaudubon.org) for more information about the Dahl Wildlife Sanctuary. Considerable bird data was garnered from eBird.org for this article. We would also like to thank Rick Steber and Will Broussard for their contributions.*



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IN MEMORY OF

# Chandler S. Robbins

The 2018 issues of *New Hampshire Bird Records* are sponsored by George C. Robbins in memory and honor of his father, Chan Robbins. Each issue has an article by George about his father, highlighting his father's phenomenal accomplishments in the field of ornithology and connections to New Hampshire.



## In This Issue

Photo Quiz ..... see the color photo on the Back Cover

Chandler S. Robbins: His Third 25 Years – 1968-1993 by *George C. Robbins* ..... 1

Photo Gallery – New Hampshire’s First Wood Stork ..... 3

Fall Season: August 1 through November 30, 2018 by *Ben Griffith* ..... 4

Fall 2018 New Hampshire Raptor Migration Report by *Iain MacLeod* ..... 29

Fall 2018 Field Notes compiled by *Diana Stephens* ..... 32

    Purple Finch Lost (and Found!) at Sea by *Steve Mirick* ..... 32

    Banded Birds ..... 33

    Sleeping Downy Woodpecker ..... 33

    Red Bat vs. Merlin ..... 34

    Fun Watching Chimney Swifts by *Rebecca Suomala* ..... 34

    Screech-Owl Flies Into Car ..... 34

Cold Plunge for a Seaside Sparrow by *Steve Bennett* ..... 35

Field Trip Report ..... 35

    SKUA!! NH Audubon’s Fall 2018 Pelagic Birding Trip Report by *Jon Woolf* ..... 35

    Two Red Heads in One Day by *Katherine Towler* ..... 36

It’s Squirrel-maggedon! by *Diana Stephens* ..... 37

A Barnacle Goose Story ..... 39

    Duck, Duck, Goose by *Jim Sparrell* ..... 39

    Amazing Circumstances – Fun with Birds (and Birders)! by *Bob Quinn* ..... 40

Common Nighthawk Migration in Concord, Fall 2018 by *Zeke Cornell* ..... 40

Birding NH Audubon’s Dahl Wildlife Sanctuary by *Charlie Nims and Phil Brown* ..... 42

Falling in Love with Fall Warblers by *Diana Stephens* ..... 45

Backyard Birder – Evening Grosbeaks! by *Rebecca Suomala* ..... 46

Answer to the Photo Quiz by *David B. Donsker* ..... 47

Cover Photos: Three first state records. Wood Stork by *Debra Powers*, 8-10-18, Pickering Ponds, Rochester, NH. South Polar Skua by *Leo McKillop*, 9-4-18, offshore waters, NH. Neotropical Cormorant by *Jason Lambert*, 8-9-18, Androscoggin River, Gorham, NH.

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