
Backyard Birder

Great Blue Heron Hunting Methods

by Brenda Sens



Great Blue Heron with Yellow Perch, by Duane Cross, 9/17/13, Streeter Pond, Sugar Hill, NH.

On Monday June 9, Sylvia Miskoe sent the following e-mail to the NH Birds e-mail list:

“Yesterday afternoon a blue heron flew down to my pond to fish. He waded along the edge in the grassy side and shortly grabbed a horn pout. He took it onto the short grass and spent some time flinging it to the ground and snapping it up. I could hear the clack of his beak as he grabbed the pout. Finally he positioned it, repositioned it a couple of times, and gulped it down. He followed the swallow with a bit of water. Back to fishing and soon had a 2nd pout. Same process. He continued fishing but disappeared in the brush.”

Many of us have had the privilege of seeing a Great Blue Heron grab a fish in its beak crosswise and then proceed to position it so that it can be swallowed head first. Spending time throwing the fish onto the ground seems highly unusual. It turns out that this type of behavior depends on the type of fish the bird has caught. Hornpouts, also known as Brown Bullheads, are a smooth fish with no scales on their skin. Their dorsal and pectoral fins, however, have sharp sawtooth spines at their base that can be locked in an upright position. According to the Aquarium of the Pacific Online Learning Center, if a fish has dangerous spines or is too large for the heron to swallow, the bird uses its beak to toss the fish violently into the water or onto the ground until the spines break off and/or it breaks into smaller portions thus rendering it safe and possible to swallow. Hats and spines off to a clever adaptation.

Birding NH Audubon's dePierrefeu-Willard Pond Wildlife Sanctuary

by Phil Brown



Sundown over Willard Pond, by Phil Brown.

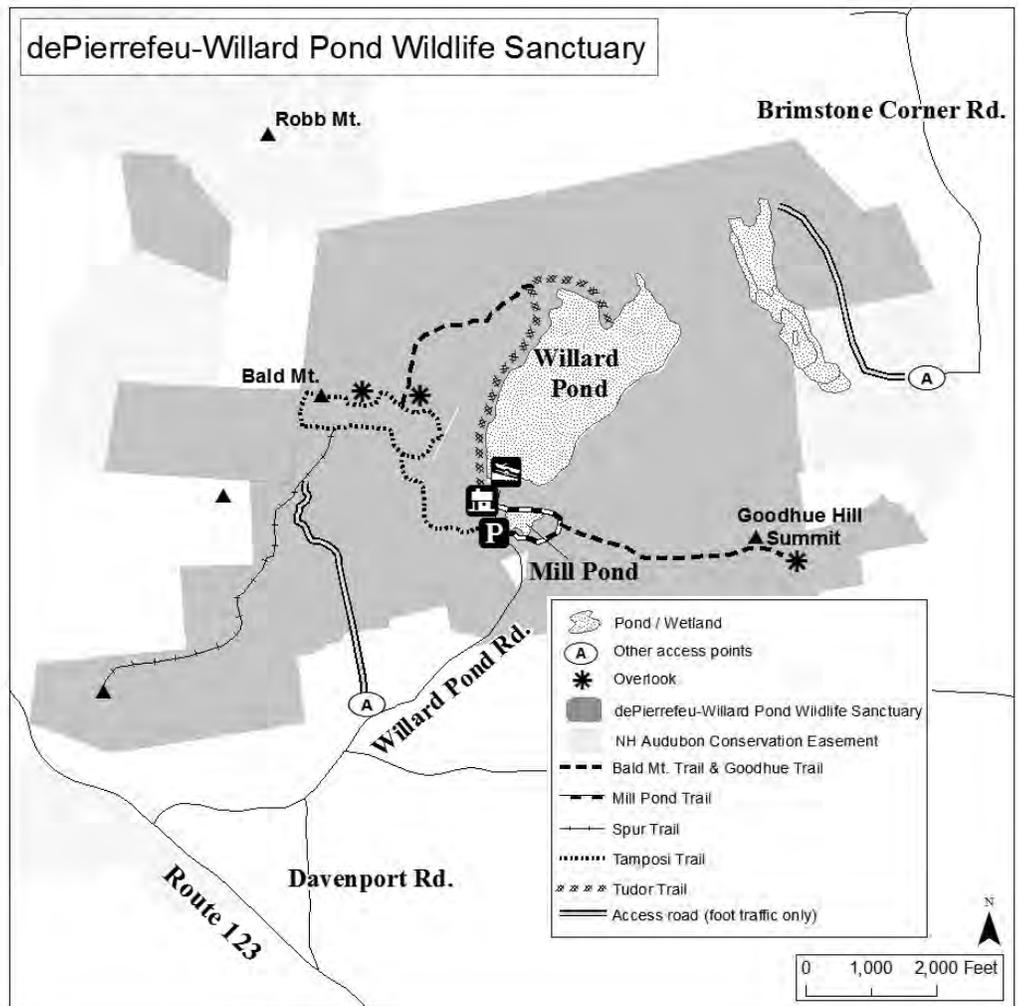
The dePierrefeu-Willard Pond Wildlife Sanctuary located in Antrim and Hancock of rural, northwestern Hillsborough County is New Hampshire Audubon's largest land holding. At 1,700 acres in size and surrounded by another 1,100 acres of conservation easements held by the organization, these conservation lands lie at the heart of an even larger “Supersanctuary” – a matrix of protected landscapes that covers over 20,000 contiguous acres. Not all conserved lands are created, or managed, equally, however. Willard Pond Wildlife Sanctuary (known as “the Sanctuary” hereafter) to the adventurous birder has an ideal configuration of habitat types, management scenarios, and access points that permit exploration by both foot and float. Over seven miles of official trails on the property permit access to several distinct summits which are fine hiking destinations in their own right, but which are also excellent birding locations. Active habitat management with an emphasis on improving bird and wildlife habitat is a theme in parts of the Sanctuary while a hands-off approach is embraced in other areas. Recent “patch cuts” (clearcuts for wildlife) have been installed to add a younger vegetated component to the otherwise forested landscape. A multitude of wetland types dot the drainages emanating from spruce-topped summits, providing an additional landscape feature and additional habitat for wetland bird species. The central feature of the Sanctuary is 108-acre Willard Pond, a pristine gem of the region, with its undeveloped shoreline fully owned by NH Audubon, clear waters, and beautiful hilltop surroundings.

History

Originally protected in part as a gift from donor Elsa Tudor dePierrefeu to National Audubon, the property was transferred to NH Audubon in 1971 and has been managed as a wildlife sanctuary ever since. A series of naturalists have resided at an onsite cottage for 40 years, beginning with Meade Cadot, longtime director of the Harris Center for Conservation Education in nearby Hancock and continuing most recently with Henry Walters, founder of the NH Young Birders Club. Many of the resident naturalists were also birders and maintained adequate records or detailed monthly bird lists. In full disclosure, I write as a former resident naturalist/caretaker myself, living at the cottage during 2010 and 2011, when I recorded over 100 species of birds at the Sanctuary.

Planning Your Visit

This article focuses mainly on the breeding season (late May through July), as this is the most exciting time on the Sanctuary. Other seasons, too, receive some mention where notable numbers and/or species have been recorded. Exploration of the Sanctuary is not for the faint of heart, but there are some easier alternatives. It is a rugged and rocky landscape, with the only level terrain generally being along the access road or on the pond. At the height of black fly season in May, the Sanctuary may not seem like a friendly place for hikers; however, that season is short-lived and with the proper clothing, one can enjoy the birds in comfort. The Sanctuary is home to a healthy population of wide-ranging mammal species such as moose, black bear, and bobcat, all of which can be tracked, with some luck, along the trails. This is part of the reason that dogs are limited; visitors are instructed to bring dogs only on the trails on the west (left) side of the road and to keep them on a short leash at all times. Public visitation to Willard Pond is slow throughout the winter months. It spikes, however, in late April-early May with the stocking of trout for fishing season, and then again in July and August when a hot summer weekend can see over 30 cars packed into the



parking lot, with most of the visitors either swimming at the boat launch or in kayaks on the pond. For best birding and crowd avoidance, arrive early in the morning during breeding season.

One of the best ways to explore the Sanctuary is by water. One can launch a kayak or canoe (no gas-powered engines on Willard Pond – another added charm) and set off across the pond to explore by sight and sound. Otherwise, grab your hiking boots and pack, and read on!

Birding Locations

A) Willard Pond

Begin your trip with a scan of Willard Pond. Parking for the pond, and for all of the other official trails on the Sanctuary, is located a few hundred yards from the launch in a large lot on the left side of the road. Upon arriving in the *parking area*, you should see and/or hear some of the more typical breeding species of the northern hardwood forest that dominates the roadside environment. Purple Finch, Winter Wren, Red-eyed Vireo, and Hermit Thrush may all be singing their melodious songs, and a duet of Black-throated Blue and Black-throated Green Warblers may be sounding

off. In spring and early summer, listen for a Louisiana Waterthrush which often sings from the brook across the road, or an occasional Northern Waterthrush from around the Mill Pond. Pick up a trail guide at the kiosk and look for any notices displayed, and continue down the dirt road past the *NH Audubon cottage* on the left. The Mill Pond will be in view on your right directly across from the cottage. A nest box visible across the pond has attracted prospecting Hooded Mergansers in the past, and Wood Ducks also frequent the pond spring through fall. Check any feeders at the cottage for resident Ruby-throated Hummingbirds, and listen for a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, which may be tapping on the metal flashing of the chimney. Chestnut-sided and Magnolia Warblers, Common Yellowthroat, Song Sparrow, Gray Catbird, and Rose-breasted Grosbeak can also be found during the breeding season in the small clearing around the cottage. Continuing on, you will see Willard Pond and the NH Fish & Game *boat launch* at the end of the road.



Common Loon and chick by Debra La Valley.

Home to a breeding pair of Common Loons most years, *Willard Pond* has become one of the most popular water bodies in the region for nature photographers. A small cove on the left before arriving on the shoreline was a nest site for loons in 2014 (they failed after sitting on eggs for over 60 days, possibly due to disturbance from humans and dogs – a chronic issue at lakes with high human visitation). View loons quietly from the road if they are present. Other species to be watched for here include Great Blue Heron, Spotted and Solitary (in migration) Sandpipers on the rocks or shoreline, American Black Duck, and Belted Kingfisher, which has been found nesting not far away in a sandpit. From the boat launch, you can view most of the pond's shoreline for waterbirds and scan for raptors over Bald Mountain which looms above to the left. The boat launch is one of the best hawkwatching locations on the property in both spring and fall. Merlin, Northern Goshawk, and Northern Harrier have been seen here with some regularity, and Turkey Vultures and Common Ravens can be seen soaring near Bald Mountain where they nest. Scan the

pond for Bald Eagles visiting from nearby Nubanusit Lake (sightings can be daily in tall pines at Pine Point straight across the pond where the Tudor Trail ends). Osprey can also be seen regularly in migration season as they seek out the fish that Willard Pond is famous for among trout fishermen. I once counted seven Ospreys perched around the pond's perimeter in late April. The birds were downed during poor weather, which can also result in dozens or more swallows, predominantly Tree Swallow, skimming over the pond. Common and Hooded Merganser, Canada Goose, Wood Duck, and Mallard are the other likely waterbirds one can find periodically during the breeding season. However, spring and fall migrations are better for diversity and can yield Bufflehead, Ring-necked Duck, Common Goldeneye, Black Scoter, and Double-crested Cormorant. Surprises have included Northern Pintail, Ruddy Duck, Great Cormorant, and once, in April 1985, a flock of 500 Snow Geese!

B) Mill Pond Trail/Goodhue Hill

The tiny (Hatch) *Mill Pond* was home to a sawmill in the 1830s, the stonework of which is still magnificently preserved. A short, but moderate 0.5 mile loop trail (marked in yellow) is accessed across Willard Pond Road from the Tudor Trail just beyond the cottage. The trail crosses the Mill Pond's inlet from the Willard Pond dam just upstream, as well as its outlet into Willard Pond Brook on the trail's far side. Use caution in crossing bridges and rock fords when conditions are wet. The fast-flowing water maintains some open water below the Mill Pond late into the winter, allowing a Belted Kingfisher to spend a cold January here a few years back. In summer, this trail is a quick and quiet escape from the busyness of the boat ramp. Its main functions for birders, however, are for watching waterfowl and accessing the Goodhue Hill Trail (marked in red), that departs the Mill Pond Trail after it crosses the outlet and dam from the Mill Pond Trail's southern access point just before it returns to the large parking area.

Goodhue Hill, at 1,610' in elevation, reflects the age of sheep grazing and succeeding pasture abandonment. The mile long Goodhue Hill Trail (moderate and all uphill, marked in red) is a transect of decreasing forest age as evidenced by the composition of forest species and overall tree canopy height. Brown Creeper, Red-breasted Nuthatch, and Pine Warbler are a few of the more common species using large pines along the lower portions of the trail. Red Crossbill has been found feeding on pine cones in late summer and fall. (Both crossbills are possible anywhere on the Sanctuary at any time of year with most of the reports of White-winged coming from November through January.) Farther along, listen for Red-eyed Vireo and Ovenbird (both abundant here), both Least and Great Crested Flycatchers, Wood Thrush, Veery, and other species typical of the

deciduous forest. Bird activity diminishes farther up, but then picks up considerably where a different suite of species utilizes a recent 15-acre clearcut near the summit. The goal of this opening was to enhance wildlife habitat for species of fields and young forests. After crossing a break in the stone wall that divides the forest from the clearing, you will likely notice that regeneration is underway and that the birds are responding accordingly. Follow a path lined by downed branches through the clearing, weaving between nest boxes that are used by Eastern Bluebird, Black-capped Chickadee, and Tree Swallow, making sure to admire the views of surrounding hills from Mt. Monadnock to Mt. Kearsarge and much in between. In just a few years of tree and shrub regeneration, there has been a marked increase in the presence of bird species typical of younger forests. Black-billed Cuckoo, Indigo Bunting, and White-throated Sparrow (rare prior to the clearing) can now be heard with regularity in early summer, and warblers like Common Yellowthroat and Chestnut-sided Warbler are now present in ample numbers. A male Mourning Warbler spent almost two weeks singing from a dense part of the clearcut through early June of 2014. This typically more northern species is attracted by large regenerating patches of forest in the southern highlands of this part of the state, and it may breed nearby. Other breeding species such as Scarlet Tanager, Ruffed Grouse, Nashville Warbler, and Evening Grosbeak (a species that is increasingly difficult to find) all seem to benefit from the increased forest edge. A rocky outcrop with a fine southeastern view can be reached by following the trail a few hundred yards farther to its end. Here, one can watch a stunning sunrise and have a chance to see one of the bobcats that frequents this warm location.

Later in the day, it can make a good spring hawkwatching lookout. The easiest return trip is to retrace your steps and follow the Goodhue Hill Trail back down, but plans to mark a forestry access road as an alternate trail are underway. Allow a few hours for a full exploration of this portion of the Sanctuary.

C) Tudor Trail

The one-mile long *Tudor Trail* (marked in yellow) is ranked as easy to moderate as it wraps around Willard Pond's immediate western edge. Access it from the west (left) side of the road between the cottage and the boat launch, just across from the northern entrance to the Mill Pond Trail. The Tudor Trail traverses a mainly hardwood forest, but it ends in pine and hemlock, adding bird diversity to this walk. Wooded rocky outcrops above the trail on the lower slopes

of Bald Mountain are home to numerous Winter Wrens, and one might be able to hear a Dark-eyed Junco singing above. A wooden bench on the shoreline a little ways along the trail provides a fine vantage point of the pond. At 0.65 miles, on the left, is the junction for the Bald Mountain Trail (marked in red) which climbs steeply for about 0.75 mile to its intersection with the Tamposi Trail on Bald Mountain (see Bald Mountain below). Continuing past this junction, and passing some of the huge glacial boulders that the property is known for, you will reach a spectacular scenic destination known as Pine Point. This can be a productive area for observing foraging loons and spotting overhead raptors like Broad-winged and Red-shouldered Hawks, and Bald Eagle. Pine and Yellow-rumped Warblers, Brown Creeper, and Blue-headed Vireo can be added here easily, and forest birds (as well as human visitors) come to feed on the abundant

blueberry that grows along the shoreline. Watch for Eastern Kingbirds vigorously defending their nests in low-hanging branches of pines that overhang the pond. To return, follow the Tudor Trail back to Willard Pond Road, or return by making a loop via the Bald Mountain Trail (red, difficult) to the Tamposi Trail (yellow, difficult).

D) Bald Mountain

Bald Mountain, at 2,037 feet in elevation, is one of the highest summits in Hillsborough County and the highest feature of the Sanctuary. A 900 foot elevation gain from the parking area is necessary to reach the summit, but an overlook with excellent views can be reached by gaining a mere 650 feet. From the parking area, hike the steadily climbing two-mile long Tamposi Trail (marked in yellow, difficult) past large boulders and through a maturing northern hardwood forest. Take caution during wet/icy weather, and note that there are some

steep sections of trail. Listen for Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Scarlet Tanager, and several warbler species along this path as you traverse stone walls and hop across streams. At 0.75 mile is a trail junction where the Tamposi Trail splits into a large, terminal loop. To continue towards the overlook of Willard Pond and the intersecting Bald Mountain Trail, stay to the right. For the quickest ascent to the summit of Bald Mountain, or to continue onto the remote Spur Trail, stay left. Staying right towards the overlook, the trail climbs steeply in sections and passes under some impressive rock overhangs complete with large, hanging icicles in winter. The overlook is obvious as there is a stunning vantage point of Willard Pond and the surrounding landscape. It is also where the Bald Mountain Trail intersects. (A loop can be made by taking this junction



Winter Wren by Steve Mirick.

and following this trail to the Tudor Trail, and back to the parking lot.) Upon reaching *the overlook*, you might see and hear Dark-eyed Juncos, which breed in vegetated areas under rocky slabs, and several other typical woodland bird species should be found. This may also be the premier hawkwatching location on the property as migratory raptors cruise by, gaining lift off thermals, often at eye level, and the view is mainly east and south. Mid to late-April, and late-September to mid-October are the best for raptor diversity, but March may prove rewarding to the adventurous birder with certain promises of Golden Eagles and Northern Goshawks. A flyover American Golden-Plover was the highlight of a late September hawkwatching trip here in 2011, and 56 Sharp-shinned Hawks were counted on the same day. Common Raven and Turkey Vulture soar using thermals created by the bare rocky ledges where they both nest. In fact, Turkey Vulture was first documented as a breeding species for New Hampshire at this location in 1981 by Meade Cadot and then caretaker, Ted Levin.

Continuing toward the viewless Bald Mountain summit, the birding attraction becomes the high-elevation red spruce forest. First, you will pass by several ledges that provide additional views south towards Mt. Monadnock and the more distant Wapack Ridge. Where juniper shrubs dominate, Eastern Towhee is a likely breeder, and additional hawkwatching possibilities occur. As the trail climbs to its highest point, a canopy of older red spruce dominates and shades out the understory. Listen and look for the bright Blackburnian Warbler, which occurs in excellent numbers. Golden-crowned Kinglet, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Magnolia Warbler, and Brown Creeper also prefer this forest type. Northern Saw-whet Owl has been documented here during breeding season. Pause to acknowledge the large rocky slab and trail cairn which mark the highest point of the trail on Bald Mountain. The Tamposi Trail continues back to the intersection of its loop, and the section between the summit and the Spur Trail (see Other Areas) junction are best for birds, with Nashville and Magnolia Warblers being most notable. Allow four or more hours for a leisurely birding pace with stops along the way.

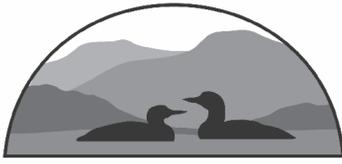
E) Other Areas

Some of the most intriguing birding locations on the Sanctuary occur in places with limited access; however, these areas are best left to the individual to fully explore at one's own pace. The most accessible of these areas might be the "*Tamposi parcel*," a 376-acre acquisition that NH Audubon added to the Sanctuary in 2005. The Spur Trail (marked in blue) provides access, but the path is currently in need of significant maintenance due to storms and recent forest management scenarios that have created additional openings for wildlife. This trail begins along the southern side of

the Tamposi Trail loop about one mile from the parking area. It traverses areas that were formerly heavily logged including the remote southern summits of Bald Mountain where the trail ends in a small loop. Notable features of this trail include an old apple orchard which has recently been "released" (a forest management technique that provides more sunlight to shaded trees), another 15-acre clearcut, wetlands, and abundant younger forests. A pair of Olive-sided Flycatchers (rare in southern New Hampshire during summer) was present near the trail's end into July of 2005, and Mourning Warbler has been recorded here in mid-June using similar early successional forest habitat. An alternate access point to the Spur Trail and the heart of the Tamposi parcel can be reached via a large, *unmarked parking area* along Willard Pond Road on the right just before its junction with Weston Road (on the left) as you leave the main parking area. A series of forest access roads in varying degrees of regeneration permits ample exploration of recent forest openings where Northern Goshawk (year-round, but especially in winter) and Ruffed Grouse can be found with regularity. It is among the few reliable places for American Woodcock on the Sanctuary, and Northern Shrike has occurred here.

The final place I will mention in this article is the similarly remote *northeastern portion* of the Sanctuary, to the north and east of Goodhue Hill. Access is from Gregg Lake Road in Antrim which turns into Brimstone Corner Road (gravel), which becomes rough after the Price Farm on the right. From here, follow this road carefully (high-clearance vehicle required) for 0.5 mile to a junction on the right where you can park out of the way of other vehicles. Access is then possible by foot only following this intersecting woods road through a privately-held NH Audubon conservation easement. Eventually, a short distance after the woods road bends 90 degrees to the right at an old cellar hole, you will cross onto NH Audubon land. From here, you can follow the main trail to the northernmost section of a large, linear, beaver-influenced wetland that is dominated by cattail and emergent marsh vegetation. Mountain laurel is a notable plant feature of the understory, and a large American chestnut tree still survives as of 2014. The birding potential of this area is largely untapped, but the wetland has hosted breeding Marsh Wrens, and American Bittern and Virginia Rail are likely.

Phil Brown works as Director of Land Management for NH Audubon and has spent considerable time managing, recreating, and guiding at the Willard Pond Sanctuary over the past 10 years. He and his wife, Julie, resided at the Audubon cottage as caretaker/naturalists during 2010 and 2011, and they now live in nearby Hancock with two young children.



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Cover Photos: White Ibis, 7/11/14, Rye, NH. Hybrid Tricolored Heron x Snowy Egret, 7/19/14, Meadow Pond, Hampton, NH [inset]. Both by Steve Mirick.

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