

Birding the Pondicherry National Wildlife Refuge

The Pondicherry National Wildlife Refuge (hereafter referred to as Pondicherry) is located in the towns of Jefferson, Whitefield and Carroll, NH. The rich variety of habitat, including boreal forests, bogs, fens, swamps, marshes, ponds, and grasslands, supports an abundant variety of bird life. This article describes the bird life and provides suggestions for birding the refuge and vicinity. The *Pondicherry Wildlife Refuge Map & Guide* shows all of the locations mentioned in this article (See References).

The refuge and adjacent Mount Washington Regional Airport have long been favorite destinations for birders. This location has a greater diversity of breeding birds (129) than probably any other similar-sized area in New Hampshire. Pondicherry is also one of the best inland migration spots in the state. Over the years 238 species have been seen here including over 50 species of water birds. Pondicherry was the first designated Important Bird Area in New Hampshire. Besides the birding, it has several features that make it a wonderful destination: spectacular mountain scenery, relatively easy walking, and isolation. It is a small enough area that it can be covered in a day, but it has enough variety to keep you coming back for years.

The US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), NH Fish and Game Department, NH Trails Bureau and New Hampshire Audubon (NHA) jointly manage Pondicherry. The history of the refuge dates back to 1963 when NHA acquired 312 acres for a waterfowl sanctuary on Cherry and Little Cherry Ponds. In 2000, the USFWS acquired 670 acres of wetlands that brought the refuge total up to 982 acres. The refuge in 2016 was nearly 6,500 acres or over 10 square miles in size. A dedicated public-access route called the Presidential Range Rail Trail was acquired in 2000 by the State of NH and NHA on the abandoned Maine Central and Boston and Maine Railroad grades. Pondicherry is a unit of the Silvio Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge headquartered in Sunderland, MA.

The human history of the area dates back 11,800 years when Paleoindian hunters used the Israel River valley for hunting, trade, and the manufacture of lithic tools from a type of Rhyolite that is found in the area. A large glacial lake existed in the valley for over a hundred years and caribou migrated along the shore of this glacial lake where Paleoindian hunters awaited them. Cherry Pond is all that remains of this ancient glacial lake. Evidence has been found indicating that native people used the Pondicherry area to hunt and fish until sometime after the arrival of European settlers.

The first scientific work started in 1829 and consisted of botanical studies by J. W. Robbins, who found two aquatic plants new to science. Horace Wright conducted ornithological studies in the area from 1899-1911 and later published a book on his findings, *The Birds of the Jefferson Region in the White Mountains*, updated by Tudor Richards in 2000. In 1906 Arthur Stanley Pease conducted botanical studies and found over 40 species of aquatic plants in Cherry Pond. His publication, *A Flora of Northern New Hampshire*, published in 1924 and revised in 1964, is now out of print. Tudor Richards, working first for the NH Fish and Game Department and then for NH Audubon,

conducted bird studies from 1947 for nearly fifty years. Tudor was the driving force behind the 1963 acquisition of the refuge from the Brown Paper Company by NH Audubon. A plaque honoring Tudor's work is on a rock at the start of the Tudor Richards Viewing Platform on the edge of Cherry Pond.

The origin of the Pondicherry name is likely to have come from French explorers early in the 18th century from a French colony in India. Pondicherry was labeled on a locally produced 1791 Jeremy Belknap map of northern New Hampshire. Both Cherry Pond and Cherry Mountain were originally named Pondicherry and these names were shortened in 1830. Tudor Richards, the father of the refuge, renamed the area Pondicherry in 1963.

Birding Locations

Cherry Pond is the centerpiece of the refuge and is a designated National Natural Landmark. The views from this 100-acre natural pond are considered to be among the finest in the White Mountains, given the spectacular view of the Presidential Range to the southeast. Cherry Pond is a favorite migration stopover for many water birds and is famous for its migrants in general. It is also the home of a Common Loon family that nests on one of the floating islands that dot the pond. One large floating island became hung up on a rock outcrop during a hurricane and is now firmly anchored. The bog mat on this island rises and falls with changes in water level but the loons remain the same distance from the edge of the water, helping to ensure successful nesting.

Cherry Pond is now only 6 feet deep but 12,000 years ago it was 48 feet deep. Scientists have studied several core samples of the pond's bottom for pollen and micro-invertebrate fossils to help reconstruct the region's environmental history. That study is part of an ongoing research effort in nearby Jefferson at the Israel River Archaeological Complex.

Cherry Pond is a warm-water pond and home to Horned Pout, Chain Pickerel, Pumpkinseed, Yellow Perch, and Golden Shiners. Osprey and Bald Eagles often fish at Cherry Pond but as of yet have not nested on the dark forested shores. Other fish-eating birds seen or heard around the pond include the Great Blue Heron, American Bittern, and Belted Kingfisher. Dragonflies are numerous in summer and 58 species have been recorded. A spotting scope is recommended here because of the distances involved.

John's River connects Little Cherry Pond to Cherry Pond. This little stream is passable by canoe or kayak for about three miles below Cherry Pond; that is, both above and below Little Cherry Pond. A short portage trail a hundred feet downstream of the railroad bridge is where you put in. (See the trail descriptions below.) The John's River is a narrow and slow-moving stream at this point. Expect to cross a dozen beaver dams, paddle through shallow water in thick oozing muck, and be host to swarms of biting insects on the flat journey to Little Cherry Pond. The rewards and wilderness experience make persistence worthwhile. Moose, Beaver, and Muskrat are often seen. Ring-necked

Ducks, Green-winged Teal, Palm Warblers, Rusty Blackbirds, Olive-sided Flycatcher and Lincoln's Sparrows reside along the streams and adjacent forests. Black-backed Woodpeckers, Boreal Chickadees, and Gray Jays live and nest in the Black Spruce and Larch stands that line the John's River. Spruce Grouse are seen on occasion in the black spruce near Little Cherry Pond.

Little Cherry Pond is a 20-acre shallow pond surrounded by a bog mat and a stunted Black Spruce and Larch forest. A viewing platform on the east shore is accessed by a loop trail from Cherry Pond. Long stretches of boardwalk make walking the trail easier but there are still areas of uneven footing. Carnivorous Pitcher Plants and Sundews are found along the boggy edge of Little Cherry Pond. Beaver, Otter, and even Moose are often seen at Little Cherry Pond in the summer.

The Deadwater is the name given for a flat two-mile stretch of the John's River below Little Cherry Pond. The direction of flow is west towards the Connecticut River. The John's River is 30 feet wide at this point and up to 3 feet deep. The flow is imperceptible though, hence the name Deadwater. The Deadwater has a big beaver dam at the end called Button Dam and from that point is narrow and tree-lined and unsuitable for canoeing. The beautiful purple Rhodora lines the stream as it flowers in May. Wood and Black Ducks, Green-winged Teal, and Hooded Mergansers are often seen along the Deadwater.

Airport Grassland: The Mount Washington Regional Airport (locally called the Whitefield Airport) provides excellent birding for raptors and grassland bird species. Parking is available in pullouts along Airport Road by the marsh. This is major grassland and has Bobolinks, Northern Harriers, Savannah Sparrows and Killdeer. The airport area is excellent for migrants in spring and fall including horned lark and snow bunting. A spotting scope is handy here.

Airport Marsh: Across the road from the airport is the NH Fish and Game Department's Airport Marsh. This pond and marsh have a good variety of waterbirds such as American Bittern, Great Blue Heron, Virginia Rail, Hooded Merganser, Wood Duck, and Belted Kingfisher. Brown Thrashers and Yellow Warblers nest along the west side of the marsh. Osprey are often seen fishing in the pond in the summer. The best birding is from an overlook above the pond that you can drive to opposite the airport.

Hazen's Pond in Whitefield is a slow moving section of the John's River near the junction of Airport, Hazen and Colby Roads. The pond is really a marsh and runs parallel to the railroad tracks. It is possible to canoe or kayak upstream from Hazen's Road for almost a mile. Scan the tree line around Hazen's Pond and look for Merlin and other raptors known to have nested in the general area in past years. At the actual Hazen's Railroad Junction there is a triangle of woods bounded by Hazen's Pond and Airport Marsh that offer excellent birding in a compact area.

Pondicherry Birder Trails

Pondicherry Rail Trail (Airport Road in Whitefield to Cherry Pond): This is a part of the Presidential Range Rail Trail. This pleasant, flat trail follows the abandoned Maine Central Railroad grade for 1.6 miles into Cherry Pond. The Rail Trail starts at a trailhead parking lot along Airport Road in Whitefield that is 1.5 miles from Route 115. The beginning of the trail is opposite a large wood-to-energy plant (you cannot miss it). A kiosk at the parking lot has maps and other information about the refuge.

Right at the trailhead parking lot are some huge white spruce and balsam fir trees that almost always harbor something of interest. The walking is easy but there may be some wet spots in spring. Motorized vehicles are not allowed during the snow-free season but bicycles are popular. The habitat varies from fragrant stands of balsam fir to pungent balsam poplar and other young hardwood stands that have nesting Chestnut-sided and Canada Warblers. You pass several small brooks and a power line that provide even more variety before arriving at Waumbek Junction. The railroad line is active at this point so use care in crossing the tracks. The birding at Waumbek Junction near Cherry Pond is often some of the best in the entire refuge.

Presidential Range Rail Trail (Route 115A in Jefferson Meadows to Cherry Pond): From a small trailhead on Route 115A in Jefferson Meadows, the Presidential Range Rail Trail heads west for 2.6 miles along the abandoned Boston and Maine Railroad grade. This section of trail gets less use than the shorter route from Airport Road in Whitefield but has a greater diversity of habitats. At 0.7 miles you will cross the Giant Trestle over Stanley Slide Brook where you should look for raptors and shorebirds in the mud flat below. The next mile of easy trail is through a spruce fir forest until you arrive at Cedar Marsh, named for northern white cedars that grow along its shore. In another half mile you will come across Moorhen Marsh; both marshes have excellent habitat for Virginia Rail, American Bittern and Marsh Wren. A quarter mile beyond Moorhen Marsh is the Tudor Richards Viewing Platform on your right, an excellent place to scope out Cherry Pond.

Little Cherry Pond Trail: This 1.2 mile loop trail includes 500 feet of boardwalk that take you across Black Spruce and Tamarack stands to remote Little Cherry Pond. The trail was designated a National Recreation Trail in 2006 and is well maintained by volunteers. The Little Cherry Pond Trail starts a quarter-mile north of the railroad bridge over the John's River. Listen carefully along the way for the light tapping of Black-backed Woodpeckers. A final stretch of bog bridges over the bog mat takes you to a small viewing platform at Little Cherry Pond. Beaver, muskrat, otter, and moose are sometimes seen here. Ring-necked ducks nest on small floating islands around this twenty-acre pond and can often be seen at the far side. Large stands of Rhodora bloom in May and carnivorous Pitcher Plants dot the bog mat.

Shore Path: This short trail on the west side of Cherry Pond has a bench with great views and the Pondicherry National Natural Landmark plaque beneath a towering white pine. In the spring, it is a good location for spotting warblers and waterfowl.

Rampart Path: This quarter-mile path starts at the northwest corner of Cherry Pond, just before the trail to Little Cherry Pond. Look for a small trail to the right, leading to Cherry Pond. After a hundred feet of walking you arrive at West Point, a fine spot to watch for loons and eagles. The path continues along the shore on an Ice Push Rampart, a postglacial geological feature found along the north and west shores of Cherry Pond. The path on this rampart looks man-made but is natural, formed by the action of Cherry Pond freezing and expanding. The ice pushes sand, gravel, and even boulders a few inches every year to create this geological oddity. The views of the Presidential and Franconia Mountain Ranges are spectacular from this lightly used path. All three kinds of Scoters, Long-tailed Ducks, and Buffleheads can often be viewed here in October and early November. Mountain Holly grows in profusion along this path.

Slide Brook Trail in Jefferson: This is a 0.6-mile connection between the Owl's Head Trailhead on Route 115 and the Presidential Range Rail Trail at the Giant Trestle crossing of Slide Brook. The trail is part of the long distance Cohos Trail and is notable for a unique crossing on a 350-foot long beaver dam. Wetland birds are found in the beaver pond and adjacent swamp. The first part of the trail is a field that was the terminus of the historic Cherry Mountain Landslide. Several bog bridges will keep your feet dry on this trail.

Colonel Whipple Trail in Jefferson: Colonel Whipple was the leader of European settlers in this region. The trail starts at a small trailhead off of the Whipple Road in Jefferson and has a gate marking the start of the trail. This is a young forest for much of the route and was cut over in 1998 before being purchased by the USFWS. Early successional species can be found along the first part of the trail including Mourning and Chestnut-sided Warblers. This is an excellent place to listen for Whip-poor-wills and Northern Saw-whet Owls on moonlit nights.

Mud Pond Trail off of Route 116 in Jefferson: This is a 0.6 mile wheelchair accessible trail with a 950-foot long boardwalk. The trail starts at a well-marked trailhead off of Route 116 and drops down to a beautiful gem of a pond known as Mud Pond. A viewing platform allows you to keep your feet dry and is atop a quaking bog mat. The black spruce and northern white cedar seepage swamp that the boardwalk passes through is a rare habitat type in New Hampshire. Nashville and Palm Warblers and Yellow-bellied Flycatcher are found here in the breeding season. Look for black-backed woodpeckers in the black spruce swamp. Stay on the boardwalk to protect rare plants and habitat.

Mooseway Cross-Country Ski Trail: This is a winter trail because portions of it traverse black spruce swamps that are wet at other times of the year. It is a pleasant cross-country ski or snowshoe route with abundant wildlife sign. The trail takes off from the Mud Pond Trail and is marked by blue plastic diamonds. The terminus is the Little Cherry Pond Trail. White-winged Crossbill and Black-backed Woodpeckers are sometimes found in the black spruce swamp about a quarter mile in from the trailhead on Route 116. The trail passes through an extensive cutover forest until it enters an older spruce fir forest near the Little Cherry Pond Trail. This section is a good place to look and listen for Black-backed Woodpeckers.

Birding through the Seasons

The best time to visit Pondicherry is normally between ice-out in April and freeze-up in November. The two potentially optimum dates for peak birding would be a few days on either side of 12 May for neotropical migrants and 3 October for waterfowl. It is convenient to break that time span down into segments.

Ice-out through April: Early spring can vary from wintry to quite pleasant. The water birds and a few land migrants are the first to arrive. Loons, grebes, herons and just about any species of waterfowl are possible. Unusual spring birds have included Black and Arctic Tern, Dunlin, Common Gallinule, and Orange-crowned Warbler.

May: With warm weather, south winds and the unfurling of leaves, a rush of landbird migrants arrive with the peak being a few days on either side of 12 May. Under the right conditions you can tally 100 or more bird species including 20 warbler species. A birding event known as International Migratory Bird Day is held annually on the second Saturday of May and local experts lead trips from dawn to dusk.

June and July: Breeding birds become less vocal by the end of May. Whip-poor-wills are heard on moonlit nights. Insect activity picks up considerably providing a major source of food for birds while annoying the birders. Territorial birds are easier to track down than migrants, so if you have the time and patience you should be able to see such unusual or hard-to-see nesting species as Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Northern Waterthrush, and Canada Warbler. Northern finches are possible almost any time and any place. A visit to the wetlands at dawn or dusk should result in a chorus of wetland species like Wilson's Snipe, Sora, Virginia Rail, American Bittern, Marsh Wren and Barred Owl.

August through freeze-up: By early August the land birds are starting to wander and the shorebirds are migrating. Both Yellowlegs and Solitary and Least Sandpipers are common. More unusual mid-summer visitors have included Pectoral Sandpiper, Northern Shoveler, Bonaparte's Gull, and Common Tern. By August the warblers are moving in significant numbers and Pondicherry can be a fantastic place in late summer for a large concentration of neotropical migrants. In September and October a wide variety of waterfowl can be found on Cherry Pond. All three scoters and grebes are regular and some inland rarities have included Great Cormorant, Rough-legged Hawk, and Red Phalarope. The optimum weather to see migrating waterfowl on Cherry Pond is when the Presidential Range is covered in clouds and the birds sit down in large numbers on the pond.

Year-round residents: Some interesting species can be found at any time of the year. White-winged Crossbills and Black-backed Woodpeckers are often the highlights; Gray Jay and Spruce Grouse have been seen but can't be expected. Winter is usually the slowest time of year at Pondicherry but the trails make for good cross-country skiing and snowshoeing. Great-horned and Barred Owls are often heard during moonlit winter nights. The Mooseway Cross-Country Ski Trail is the best bet for winter access to Little Cherry

Pond. The Mooseway starts at the plowed Mud Pond Trailhead off of Route 116 in Jefferson.

Irruptive Species: The presence of a wide variety of habitats including low-elevation boreal forest makes the Pondicherry National Wildlife Refuge an attractive location for many irruptive species. Small numbers of resident Evening Grosbeaks are joined in good cone-crop years by large numbers of their cousins. Bohemian Waxwings can be found feeding on Winterberry Holly. Pine Grosbeak numbers vary from year to year as do Redpolls and Pine Siskins. A Northern Hawk Owl was present at the adjacent airport for 79 days in the winter of 2000-2001.

Conclusions

Birding the Pondicherry National Wildlife Refuge can be a very satisfying experience. New access trails and National Wildlife Refuge status have improved opportunities for visiting birders. You can also learn what to expect at Pondicherry by reading *New Hampshire Bird Records*, checking out recent bird hotspot reports on eBird and downloading the Pondicherry Bird Checklist from the Birding Page on the Friends of Pondicherry Website (<http://www.friendsofpondicherry.org/birding>). You can help increase our knowledge of the bird life by submitting your records on eBird.

Make the effort to visit Pondicherry and you will be rewarded. Few days in the field can be better than a day in this marvelous refuge with its wealth of bird life, botany, and scenery. Watching the pink alpenglow of sunset on the Presidential Range reflecting off the waters of Big Cherry Pond while a loon calls is a wonderful way to end a day of birding.

References

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David Govatski
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