

Winging It

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Downeast Maine (Part II)

Birding on Department of Defense Lands

BY NORM FAMOUS

(Editor's note: The first part of this two-part article on birding on Department of Defense lands in Downeast Maine appeared in the October 2004 issue of Winging It and described Cutler Naval Station.)

Naval Security Group Activity Winter Harbor (now decommissioned) and the Columbia Falls Air Force Station (currently inactive) conducted communication missions during the Cold War. Both facilities feature regionally important ecosystems. And both offer superlative habitat for birds, Winter Harbor primarily for Boreal species and waterbirds, Columbia Falls for grassland birds.

Commissioned during the 1950s, the **Winter Harbor** facility consists of three separate units. The two of these are of particular interest to birders: a support site located on Big Moose Island in the Schoodic Point section of Acadian National Park (east of the better-known Mt. Desert Island unit), and an operational area in the village of Corea. (The third site, a satellite operational area in the town of Prospect Harbor, has little to offer birders on its own, but its environs, especially a sardine cannery in the village, offer splendid opportunities for winter gull and waterbird-watching.) Farther east, the **Columbia Falls** facility, built the late 1980s, consists of three mile-long antenna arrays located in vast low-bush blueberry fields, which function as a grassland ecosystem.



Winter Harbor

Predominant natural habitats of the Winter Harbor Facility include rocky coasts and barren headlands, tall Boreal forests, stunted Jack Pine woodlands, bogs, and stony intertidal bars and flats. Habitat types at the support site on Big Moose Island include spruce/fir forests, mixed coniferous and deciduous forests, and Jack Pine woodlands. Similar woodland containing Mountain Ash trees and stunted Jack Pine can be found at the operational area in Corea.

The Winter Harbor facility is an important area for bird study, especially of Neotropical migrants. Funded by the DOD's Legacy Program, base closure appropriations, the Eastern Maine Conservation Initiative, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, eight years of Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship (MAPS) bird banding, nine years of breeding-season point counts, five years of fall migration area-search counts, and three years of Breeding Bird Surveys have been conducted at Winter Harbor. The Winter Harbor facility has also allowed access for the Schoodic Point Christmas Bird Count.

These studies reveal the impressive avian diversity of this area and form the basis for this article. On a Breeding Bird Survey route sampling the Winter Harbor facility and areas between its three units, 113 species were detected, including Black-backed Woodpecker, Boreal Chickadee, Gray Jay, Willet, 22 species of warblers, and nine species of flycatchers

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BRUNTON

Partners In Birding

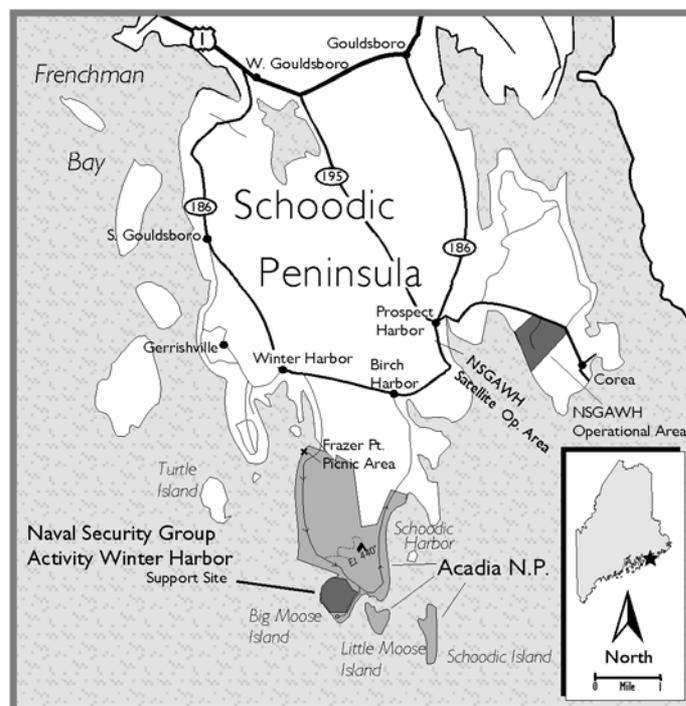
BRUNTON IS THE SOLE OPTICS SPONSOR OF WINGING IT

(including Yellow-bellied). Nine years of breeding season point counts and MAPS banding confirmed 83 species breeding on Big Moose Island and 88 species at the operational area in Corea. Five years of fall migration area-search counts documented another 74 species at the support site and 77 species at the Corea. Seventy-five species of waterbirds were documented at the support site.

The Department of Defense (DOD) provided nearly 50 years of protection for erosion-prone, organic shoreline soils, coastal maritime forests, and bog-like wetlands on both DOD land and embedded portions of Acadia National Park (ANP). The park is continuing this long-term legacy of habitat protection by discouraging access to these sensitive and fragile ecosystems. But this proactive policy does not much diminish the birding potential of Big Moose Island, because many of the Boreal forest birding spots are readily accessible from the ANP loop road where it adjoins the former base.

The support site on **Big Moose Island** and adjacent areas of Schoodic Point have year-round birding potential. During the nesting season, birders visiting the support site can expect breeding populations of 20 warbler species, Swainson's and Hermit Thrushes, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Red-breasted Nuthatch, White-throated Sparrow, and Dark-eyed Junco. Less common but regular breeders here include Yellow-bellied, Alder, and Olive-sided Flycatchers, Winter Wren, and Boreal Chickadee. Abundant spruce attracts White-winged Crossbills most years (and sometimes Red Crossbills, as well). Hard-to-find nesters include Spruce Grouse, Black-backed Woodpecker, and Blackpoll Warbler.

During late May and early June, don't be surprised to encounter a migrating Bicknell's Thrush or Mourning Warbler. Birding during late summer and fall is productive for raptors, migrating landbirds, and waterbirds. Fall migration point counts have detected Painted Bunting (a startling regional rarity), Orange-crowned Warbler, many falcons and accipiters, and 21 species of warblers. Winter finches, Snow Bunting, and Northern Shrike are possible along Arey Cove and at the ANP's Schoodic Point parking area, which also offer exceptional waterbirding from early fall through spring. Rafts of Common Eider, often numbering over 10,000 birds, mass in late Septem-



ber and early October, when thousands of Double-crested Cormorants also pass through. Northern Gannets (sometimes more than 150), Black-legged Kittiwakes, and all the East Coast alcids are possible, especially during and after northeast storms. Red-necked and Horned Grebes, Great Cormorants, scoters, Harlequin Ducks, Common and a few King Eiders, Purple Sandpipers, Black-legged Kittiwakes, Iceland and Glaucous Gulls, and alcids all overwinter. Black Guillemots are present throughout the year.

The rocky headlands of Schoodic Point feature expanses of Black Crowberry interspersed with stunted trees and shrubs. I call crowberry "Whimbrel-berry" because it is a favorite food for migrating Whimbrels that stage in summer along coastal headlands from Labrador to eastern Maine. If the opportunity arises, observe Whimbrel feeding behavior and food selection, and examine their scat, to confirm for yourself this dietary choice, a surprising one indeed in a shorebird.

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- The ABA encourages birders to apply their skills to help conserve birds and their habitats, and we represent the interests of birders in planning and legislative arenas.
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We welcome all birders as members.

You'll want to visit several birding spots along the Acadia National Park loop route on the way to Big Moose Island. The Frazer Point picnic area is a good location for Common and Roseate Terns and other waterbirds. Frazer Point is also a surprisingly good site for nesting and migrating warblers, flycatchers, and sparrows (spring migration persists into early June). Birds are much easier to observe in the open picnic area than in surrounding dense coniferous forests. Early morning birding is best. Several roadside pull-offs along the one-way section of the loop road beyond Frazer Point are also productive: the Red Spruce forest supports numerous warblers (including Magnolia, Bay-breasted, and Cape May); Swainson's and Hermit Thrushes, Winter Wrens, and Boreal Chickadee. Many other Boreal species can be heard or seen.

Also worth birding is Schoodic Head Road, a gravel road on the left 2.3 miles after the Frazer Point turn-off. Bird the first quarter-mile for Boreal species, some of which nest at high densities here. Black-backed Woodpecker, Spruce Grouse, and Tennessee Warbler have nested along this section of road. Listen for the high-pitched song of Blackburnian Warblers along this stretch of road (and elsewhere on the Schoodic Peninsula).



When you're finished at Schoodic Head Road, return to the Acadia loop road and continue for 0.9 mile; where the road splits, bear right and take the right turn to the former naval facility. The road terminates in about a half-mile at the ANP Schoodic Point parking area. Mosquitoes may be present, but black fly populations are typically low here—a rare delight when you're birding in Maine.

To reach Big Moose Island at Schoodic Point, travel about 15 miles north from Ellsworth on U.S. Route 1. Turn right onto Route 186 to the village of Winter Harbor; turn left at the stop sign, and proceed for less than a mile until you see signs to Schoodic Point and Acadia National Park. Turn right and drive 1.6 miles to the Frazer Point Picnic area, where the Acadia loop route becomes one-way.

Botanically fascinating **Corea Heath** is one of North America's largest and most southerly coastal raised, or plateau, bogs. Raised bogs occur in northern climates where wetland plant decomposition is slow and partially decayed *Sphagnum*

mosses accumulate above the level of the surrounding landscape. These are specialized, low-nutrient ecosystems: nutrients and moisture reach raised bogs only through atmospheric deposition. Even more specialized, coastal plateau bogs have a unique flora that is restricted to a maritime zone extending inland about a half-mile from the shore. These unique bogs are dominated by "Whimbrel-berry", appleberry (*Rubus chamaemorus*), and deer's hair (*Trichophorum cespitosum*). Corea Heath and surrounding wetlands support New England's largest population of Pickering's Bent-grass (*Calamagrostis pickeringii*) and three populations of Screw-stem (*Bartonia paniculata*), both listed as "threatened" in Maine. In addition, one of the largest known populations of Dragon's Mouth Orchid (*Arethusa bulbosa*) occurs here (more than 40,000 flowering stems).

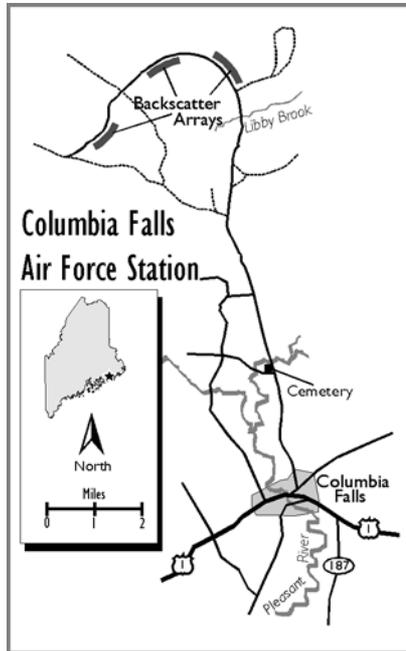
The operational area at Corea Heath, off of Route 195 just west of the village of Corea, is noteworthy for nesting Boreal birds, migrating landbirds, and wintering finches, Snowy Owls, and Northern Shrikes (often perched on Osprey nest platforms). Regional rarities seen here include Long-billed Dowitcher, Dickcissel, Sedge Wren, Grasshopper Sparrow, and Clay-colored Sparrow. The Navy declared Corea Heath an Ecological Reserve, a DOD designation made to prevent ecological damage to sensitive ecosystems. The reserve status protects large populations of Lincoln's Sparrow and Palm Warbler, plus a disjunct population of Willet; seven state-listed plant species occur here. Undeveloped portions of the operational area are in the final stages of transfer to Petit Manan National Wildlife Refuge, which will ensure continued stewardship.

At present, birding at Corea Heath is best done from Route 195 and the site's access road. Visibility into the woodland canopy and adjacent shrub communities is excellent; once the transfer of this site to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has been completed, access to the interior of the site should be possible. Contact Petit Manan National Wildlife Refuge, (207) 546-2124, to inquire about access and the status of the Corea operational area.

Nesting hawks include Northern Harrier, Merlin, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Goshawk, Osprey, and Broad-winged Hawk. Breeding owls include Saw-whet, Great Horned and Barred. Short-eared and Snowy Owls occur as migrants and sometimes overwinter. The former antenna area and surrounding gravel areas provide excellent habitat for migrant sparrows (as many as 13 species), Snow Buntings, American Pipits, and Lapland Longspurs. The band of forest located between the bog and the ocean represents a migration corridor for passerines. The abundance of berry-laden plants such as Mountain Ash, huckleberry, and Winterberry attracts many frugivorous birds to the shrubs and woodland surrounding the bog.

Birding along all roads and trails for shrub-loving species is productive during both the nesting season and fall migration. Birds breeding on the bog include (in order of abundance) Savannah Sparrow, Common Yellowthroat, Palm Warbler, Lincoln's Sparrow, and White-throated Sparrow. Fairly common nesters in taller shrubs include Alder Flycatcher and Wilson's, Magnolia, and Yellow-rumped Warblers. In all, nine species of flycatchers and 20 species of warblers have been documented

nesting here. Willets nest in the most open sections of peatland but leave the bog for nearby intertidal areas soon after their young have hatched.



Columbia Falls Air Force Station

Currently inactive, the Columbia Falls Air Force Station consists of a three-unit radar antenna system known as an “over-the-horizon backscatter”. Surrounded by extensive commercial lowbush blueberry barrens, the facility is located 10 miles north of the village of Columbia Falls. The site and the surrounding barrens support internationally significant populations of Upland Sandpipers

(more than 400 nesting pairs, by far the largest population in the eastern U.S. and eastern Canada) and Vesper Sparrows (an even greater number). The Downeast barrens constitute one of the most compelling Important Bird Area candidates in Maine.

The blueberry barrens are located on old glacial deltas, outwash from the retreating Laurentide Ice Sheet about 12,000 years ago. These sandy deposits are relatively infertile and well-drained, soil conditions that favor grassland vegetation. Native lowbush blueberries, an economically vital crop in Downeast Maine, are encouraged through biennial burning, mowing, and herbicide application, factors that maintain the barrens in the early successional state required by Upland Sandpipers and Vesper Sparrows. Ironically, then, commercial agriculture is responsible for the maintenance of important bird populations on the barrens. Through protection and habitat management, the Department of Defense has piggy-backed with local agriculture to encourage this unusual artificial ecosystem composed of native plants.

The first antenna field is the best for finding Vesper Sparrows and Upland Sandpipers. Portions of about ten sandpiper territories are found on lands managed by the DOD, and another 20 pairs nest within about a half-mile of this backscatter array. Uppies can generally be found from mid-May into August. Listen for the distinctive “wolf-whistle” vocalization given by males. Uppies become harder to find later in the nesting season; they are easiest to detect mid-June through mid-July, when young have fledged but are still dependant on adults. Females often give alarm calls that attract other adults from neighboring territories: because Upland Sandpipers appear to be loosely colonial, four to six adults may be visible

at once. Do not spend long periods of time with individual family groups, because disturbance can stress the birds, especially under hot or wet conditions (including heavy dew).

Other species using the barrens include Savannah Sparrow (the most common species), Eastern Meadowlark, Brown Thrasher, Northern Harrier, Common Raven, American Crow, Chipping Sparrow, and Eastern Bluebird. Eastern Towhee and Field Sparrow occasionally nest near the backscatters. Along the forest edge, look for Chestnut-sided, Nashville, Palm, and Yellow Warblers, Common Yellowthroat, Gray Catbird, White-throated Sparrow, and Whip-poor-will (common). A short foray onto the gravel roads may be necessary to detect Uppies, especially late in the day. To prevent damage to blueberry plants and their fruits, do not drive or walk in the active production fields (those with berries, which the bushes produce only every other year as a result of the biennial burning). Beware of bees and pesticide spraying in June and early July.

The road to the backscatters crosses Libby Brook about 0.6 mile before the first array. Stop to look for warblers, Swamp Sparrow, and Alder and Willow Flycatchers. Five years of point counts suggest that nesting densities around the Libby Brook crossing are exceptionally high. A small pond on the north side of the road near the center of the second backscatter is also a productive stop. Whip-poor-wills can be heard in the evening. Nesting warblers include Chestnut-sided, Wilson’s, Ovenbird, American Redstart, Black-throated Green, and Nashville, among others; you can expect Eastern Kingbird, Eastern Phoebe, Eastern Wood-Pewee, and Alder and Least Flycatchers. Wood Ducks are often present in the nesting boxes. Note the Snapping Turtle excavations on the gravel slope to the pond.

To reach Columbia Falls Air Force Station, start in Columbia Falls at the junction of U.S. Route 1 and Route 187 (a blueberry-colored geodesic dome and a roadside row of giant blueberries stand near this intersection) and travel 1.2 miles south on Route 1 to a right-hand turn. Within 100 yards you will cross a set of old railroad tracks; turn left immediately after crossing the tracks. There should be a sign (sometimes missing or shot full of holes) directing you to the radar station after you cross the tracks. Follow this road for 4.9 miles until it turns sharply left at the Tibbitstown Cemetery; bear slightly to the right here and continue for 1.6 miles until you ascend a rise (actually a glacial delta). The buildings on your left support a Cliff Swallow colony. Stay on the hardtop road, passing Libby Brook 9.4 miles from Route 1 and reaching the first backscatter at 10 miles. Continue along the hardtop road to bird the rest of the facility, all of which can be productive.

Norman Famous is a consulting wildlife and wetlands ecologist who formerly led natural history expeditions in eastern Maine and the Canadian Maritimes. He received an MS in Plant Systematics from the University of Maine in Orono and has worked in natural resources for 35 years. Thanks to Chris Eberly, Program Manager of the Department of Defense Partners in Flight program and the series editor for “Birding on DOD Lands”, for his assistance with this article.