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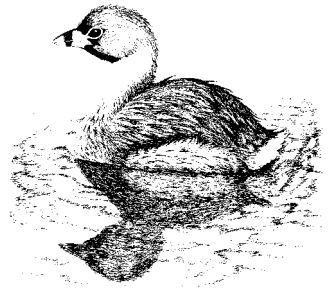
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## Birding the Brentwood Mitigation Area

by Terry Bronson

The Brentwood Mitigation (or Reclamation) Area (also called the Deer Hill Wildlife Management Area, although that name is not publicized) is currently the Pied-billed Grebe capital of New Hampshire. In 2006, five pairs produced 18 young, almost the entire state total. This Brentwood area also hosts a sizable Great Blue Heron rookery, about 30 species of breeding birds, and about 90 other species. See the Web page <http://nhbirds.wikispaces.com/Brentwood+Mitigation+Area+Bird+List> for a species list.

Birding is best here from mid-April through mid-May, when spring migration is in full swing and the shrubs and trees have not yet fully leafed out. Good birding opportunities are also present in summer and fall. New Hampshire Fish and Game releases Ring-



Pied-billed Grebe  
by Andrea E. Robbins

necked Pheasants at Brentwood just prior to October 1, so birding there during October is not recommended as hunters (up to dozens on weekends) may be present.

### Brentwood Basics

The mitigation area, administered by the New Hampshire Department of Transportation, consists of 100 acres of constructed ponds, marshes, and fields from which gravel was removed during the building of the Route 101 freeway from 1994 to 1997. It also has a large swamp and surrounding wooded areas.

Located in the northeast corner of the town of Brentwood, this area is easily accessible from Route 101 (Figure 1). If you approach from the west, take Exit 8 from Route 101, go north 0.3 miles to Route 27, then turn right and go 1.1 miles to Pine Road. From the east, take Exit 9 and go west 1.8 miles on Route 27 to Pine Road. On Pine Road go south 0.4 miles, passing under Route 101 and just beyond Seacoast Mills Building Supply lumber yard turn into the gated entrance and small unsigned parking area on the right.

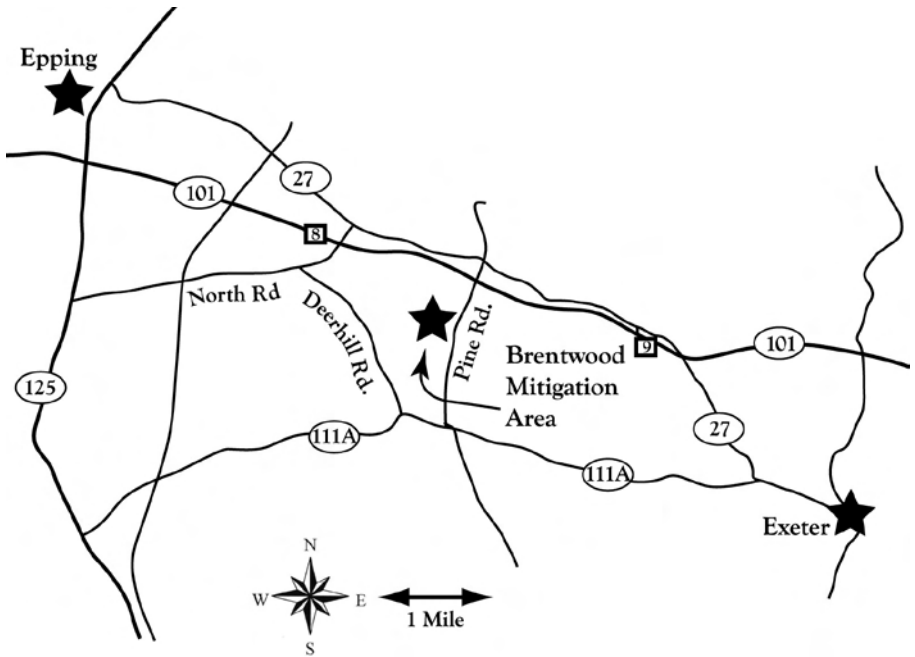


Figure 1 – Location of Brentwood Mitigation Area, NH.

The terrain is basically flat with three to four miles of old roads replanted with grass and now serving as trails. The grass is not mowed and can get over seven feet high in spots late in the summer (and get quite wet after heavy dew and rains). There is no official trail map but Figure 2 will help guide you through the area. It takes over four hours to traverse all the trails but if you're short of time, you can do it in less than two hours by skipping some of the ponds. Binoculars will suffice for most of the ponds, but the swamp and the larger ponds can best be appreciated with a scope.

The area lacks “creature comforts.” There are no restrooms. Ticks, mosquitoes, and flies are common, and there is virtually no shade, so insect repellent and sunscreen are necessities. Long trousers, a long-sleeved shirt or jacket, and a hat are highly recommended. Wear old socks and sneakers that can get wet or knee-high waterproof boots as about 100 feet of a low spot in the trail is regularly flooded up to eight inches deep. Other areas, especially the field near Route 101, can also flood periodically after very heavy rains.

Brentwood also has noise distractions. Route 101 traffic, an industrial operation south of the power line, an occasional jet flying over, the shooting range of a firearms manufacturer across Route 101, the roar from the New England Dragway at Exit 8 on Friday afternoons and weekends during warm weather, and practice sessions of the marching band of nearby Exeter High School all contribute to the ambiance!

### **Birding Highlights**

Regardless of where you are, check the sky from time to time. Raptor, heron, and gull flyovers occur occasionally with Red-tailed, Broad-winged, and Sharp-shinned Hawk; Turkey Vulture; Great Blue Heron; and Herring and Ring-billed Gull being the most common.

During the warmer months Tree Swallow, Red-winged Blackbird, Common Grackle, Song Sparrow, American Goldfinch, Eastern Kingbird, Cedar Waxwing, Yellow Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, and Gray Catbird can be found in most areas of Brentwood.

If you have four hours, the following route will guide you through the entire area. If you have less time, skip Ponds 4, 5 and 6, and only go partway around Ponds 2 and 8 (Figure 2). On mornings when the grass is wet from rain or heavy dew, you can keep drier by skipping Pond 2 and the power line loop, leaving this area until the end of your tour.

**Pond 1:** Pied-billed Grebes breed in this pond and can sometimes be seen from just inside the entrance, but a better view is from the last thin spot in the vegetation about 100 feet before the first trail junction. Green Herons also breed here. The trail from the entrance is bordered mostly by small pine trees and can flood briefly after heavy rains. This area can be hopping with small birds such as American Robin, sparrows, Dark-eyed Junco, Gray Catbird, kinglets, and warblers. Where the pine trees are replaced by low shrubs on the left and medium-sized trees on the right, be alert for American Goldfinch, Purple Finch, Blue-winged and Palm Warbler, Warbling Vireo, and other passerines.

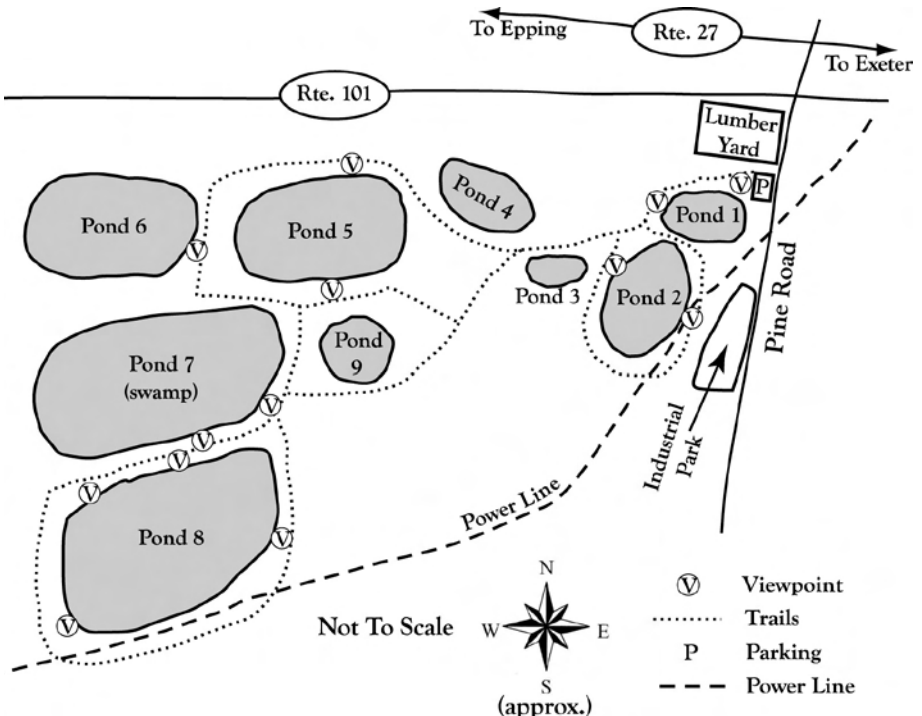
**Pond 2 and power line:** At the first trail junction, go left between Ponds 1 and 2. The trail completely loops around Pond 2 and rejoins the main trail less than 100 feet beyond where you first turned off. Check the shrubs along this trail and under the power line between Pond 2 and Pine Road, where Prairie Warbler, Field Sparrow, and Common Yellowthroat are often found. Look down the power line for perching American Kestrel, Belted Kingfisher, Mourning Dove, and others. You cannot walk under the power line beyond the point where the trail veers right around the backside of the pond because it gets very wet. Pond 2 is the easiest place to see Pied-billed Grebes because of the good views from under the power line. Hooded Merganser during migration and Mallard have also been seen in this pond, and the dead trees in the small

island in the middle are good places to check for Northern Flicker. As you make your way around the pond, check the tall trees on the left as well as the shrubs on the right for Brown Thrasher, Eastern Towhee, and other forest-edge birds.

**Pond 3:** Return to the main trail, turn left and follow it past a small pond on the left (which appears to be two small ponds separated by shrubs) and trees on the right. Look especially for Yellow and Prairie Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, Song and White-throated Sparrow, House Wren, Baltimore Oriole, and Red-eyed Vireo. The trail is almost permanently flooded several inches deep at this pond because beaver activity and debris have created an artificial dam that prevents rapid draining after heavy rains. You can often skirt through the small shrubs and trees on the right side, but you may just have to wade through.

**Pond 4:** You will soon come to a split in the trail. The trail to the left goes to Ponds 7, 8, and 9, which is the way to go if you are short on time. The trail to the right leads past a small pond with a lot of marshy area, but relatively few birds. Most of the birds—generally sparrows, Gray Catbird, and warblers—will be in the shrubs and small trees bordering the trail.

**Pond 5:** After you pass Pond 4, the next pond you will see on the left, Pond 5, is quite large. Pied-billed Grebe, Mallard, and Ring-necked Duck may be seen there. In 2005 a female Scaup (species undetermined) summered over, and Spotted Sandpiper might also be there. As you walk along, a small field will open up on the right between the pond and Route 101. (This is another area that can flood almost a foot deep after heavy rains and take weeks to dry up.) The trees on the far side of this field may



**Figure 2.** Locations of ponds, trails and viewpoints in Brentwood Mitigation Area, NH.

reward you with Least Flycatcher and Baltimore Oriole. Yellow Warbler, Song Sparrow, and Eastern Kingbird will probably be in the shrubs along the pond. American Woodcock have been flushed from those shrubs, and Orchard Oriole has also been seen. Look on the snags and overhead for American Kestrel, Red-tailed Hawk, and Turkey Vulture.

**Pond 6:** The trail will curve left and pass between Ponds 5 (shrubby at that end) and 6. Pied-billed Grebe and Canada Geese have bred there. Ring-necked Duck, Bufflehead, Common Goldeneye, and Mallard are also possible. Orchard Oriole and Willow Flycatcher have been seen on the Pond 5 side of the trail, and Spotted Sandpiper and Herring Gull on the rocks in the pond.

As you leave Pond 6 behind, the shrubs on the left can yield warblers (Canada and Nashville), Eastern Phoebe, Indigo Bunting, and other small birds. Check the trees on the right for birds such as Black-and-white Warbler and Baltimore Oriole. When you come to a trail junction, bear left and continue for about 100 yards to get a view from the backside of Pond 5; then retrace your steps and turn left at the junction.

**Pond 7 (the swamp):** As you follow the trail, check the shrubs and trees on both sides for passerines. You will come to an open gate and see a large swamp on the right with many tall dead trees.

This swamp contains a Great Blue Heron rookery (16 nests in 2006); by summer up to five young herons can be seen per nest. Ospreys and a Great Horned Owl have been seen in this swamp, but no nesting has been noted. Canada Goose, Wood Duck, Mallard, Ring-necked Duck, and Hooded and Common Merganser have been present. You might hear and see a Belted Kingfisher, Green Heron, or Double-crested Cormorant as well.

Shortly after you pass the gate take the trail to the right, which follows the edge of the swamp. This path offers several more places where you can get good views of parts of the rookery.

**Pond 8:** To the left of this trail behind the small pine trees and shrubs is Pond 8, the largest pond in Brentwood, where you can find more nesting Pied-billed Grebes and Mallards and sometimes Canada Goose and Ring-necked Duck. The trees and shrubs on both sides of the trail can be a good place for passerines—Warbling Vireo; Nashville, Palm, and Yellow-rumped Warbler; White-throated Sparrow; Baltimore and Orchard Oriole; Cedar Waxwing; and Willow Flycatcher. This is also a good place to find Barn and occasionally Bank and Northern Rough-winged Swallow, and also Chimney Swift.

Just before the trail bears left, there is a tiny pond on the right (not shown on map) that is connected to the swamp. It is worthwhile to check for Green Heron, American Kestrel, and Veery in the trees bordering this pond.

Continue along the trail, looking for woodpeckers (Pileated and Hairy) and Blue Jays in the trees and small passerines in the understory. Eventually, the trail will go under the power line and turn left, following the pond, and returning to the gate where the heron nests were first visible. A short distance after you leave the power line, there is a good open spot to view Pied-billed Grebe and Mallard. Veery, Willow Flycatcher, Cedar Waxwing, and other passerines may be in the trees on the right or the shrubs alongside the pond. This stretch is an especially good place to find warblers – a Connecticut Warbler has even been seen here.

**Pond 9:** To reach this pond, take the trail that goes off to the right just past the gate. You'll pass a small pond on the left that is more of a marsh than a pond. Look for Red-winged Blackbird and Common Yellowthroat and check the trees for Great Crested Flycatcher. Just past that pond is a small dirt and grass area where you might see Mourning Dove and sparrows. The trail to the left, just past the dirt area and through the shrubs, would bring you to the spot on the south edge of Pond 5 that you visited earlier. Instead, bear right, which brings you back to the split before Pond 4; bear right again to go through the flood area at Pond 3, then bear left to return to the parking area. Pond 1 will be on your right, and you can check it again as you exit.

Brentwood is a place you can go back to again and again during the year to enjoy the ever-changing cast of avian species. All serious birders should put it on their lists of places to visit.

*Terry Bronson is an avid birder living in Fremont, NH, about four miles from Brentwood. He is a volunteer for New Hampshire Bird Records, conducts bird surveys and leads field trips for New Hampshire Audubon and its chapters, is an officer of the Seacoast Chapter, and serves as Secretary to the New Hampshire Rare Birds Committee.*