

The Lake Umbagog Important Bird Area

The New Hampshire Important Bird Area Program is part of a national and international effort to identify areas that provide critical habitat to birds during some stage of their annual cycle. In New Hampshire the program is a partnership of the Audubon Society of New Hampshire, the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department, and the University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension. IBAs are identified based on strict scientific criteria, including 1) the presence of threatened or endangered species, 2) other species and habitats of conservation concern, and 3) areas where birds congregate during breeding, migration, or winter. It is hoped that recognition of IBAs can help guide future conservation and research efforts at areas that meet these criteria.

The Lake Umbagog area meets categories 1-3 of the IBA criteria, as follows:

1) Endangered and threatened species

Bald Eagle (state threatened) – Starting in 1988, 1-3 pairs of Bald Eagles have nested (not always successfully) on Lake Umbagog. Over this period, over 80% of the eagle chicks reared in the state have hatched at Umbagog. The lake and other wetlands also serve as an important migration and sometimes wintering area for this species

Osprey (state special concern) – Historically, some 50% of the state's Osprey nests have been near Lake Umbagog. Currently, the combination of statewide increases and local decreases has lowered that figure to less than 20%, but Umbagog remains a critical breeding area for this species.

Northern Harrier (state endangered) – A few pairs of harriers breed in the area. At present there is no good estimate of the statewide population of this species, although some evidence suggests it is declining. In light of this, the Umbagog population may represent a significant one.

Common Loon (state threatened) – Through the 1990s, an average of over 15 loon pairs nested on the NH portion of the lake, representing 10-13% of the state population. As in the case of Osprey, numbers and productivity have been declining in recent years, with only 6.5% of the state nesting pairs being on Umbagog in 2002.

Pied-billed Grebe (state threatened) – At least one pair has probably bred in the Umbagog wetlands since the late 1990s, although data are limited and somewhat inconsistent in terms of coverage.

2) Other species and habitats of conservation concern

The Lake Umbagog area encompasses a large number of different habitats, all of which support bird species of conservation concern. In general, the important habitats can be grouped into two categories: wet and dry, and these are listed below along with their associated species.

Northern Bog: These scattered wetlands are most famous for Palm Warbler, Spruce Grouse, Olive-sided Flycatcher, and Rusty Blackbird. The latter two species are showing regional population declines, and the blackbird is listed by the State as a "species of management concern." Rusties are not restricted to bogs, but do require fairly extensive areas of shrubby wetland. In areas of Umbagog that have been surveyed extensively, biologists estimate the population at 5-10 pairs.

Emergent Wetlands: In addition to Pied-billed Grebe, several other priority species occur in the area's marshes. These are American Black Duck (common), Sora (5-10 pairs in surveyed area), and Marsh Wren (fairly common). Other typical marsh species include American Bittern and Virginia Rail.



Early-successional Habitats: The long history of logging in the North Country has resulted in a patchwork of forests of different sizes. Both American Woodcock and Olive-sided Flycatcher often use relatively young cuts during the breeding season, the woodcock for a display ground and the flycatcher – if there are large snags left behind, for nesting.

Extensive Hardwood Forests: These forests support large numbers of Black-throated Blue Warblers, Veeries, Canada Warblers, and Scarlet Tanagers. All these species are either declining or are important parts of the regional avifauna. Common species of lower priority include Red-eyed Vireo, Ovenbird, and numerous other forest songbirds.



Lowland Spruce/Fir Forests: Priority species in this habitat include Spruce Grouse; Cape May, Blackburnian, and Bay-breasted Warblers; and Purple Finch. With the exception of the latter, these species are not as common as those in hardwoods, especially here at the southern edge of many of their ranges. Other species of note in this habitat are Northern Parula, Black-backed Woodpecker, and Merlin. The latter has only recently colonized the state as a breeding species, and the Umbagog area was home to the first known nest in New Hampshire.

3) Congregatory species

Waterfowl – Umbagog probably has the highest breeding waterfowl species richness in the state, and also hosts significant numbers of ducks during migration. The following species breed here: Canada Goose, Wood Duck, American Black Duck, Mallard, Green-winged Teal (rare and irregular), Ring-necked Duck, Common Goldeneye (primary area in state), Hooded Merganser, and Common Merganser. In addition to these species, several others are regular migrants, including Blue-winged Teal, Greater Scaup, Black Scoter, Bufflehead, and Barrow’s Goldeneye. In November, counts of 1000 or more Common Mergansers suggest that the lake is an important staging area for this species.

At times, the lake and its surrounding wetlands have hosted small numbers of migrating shorebirds in both spring and late summer. These birds occurrence may depend a lot on water levels, and thus their presence cannot be guaranteed. Data are limited however, and the area may represent one of the more important inland stopover locations for shorebirds in the state.

For the purposes of the NH IBA Program, the Lake Umbagog IBA is defined as the lake and associated wetlands and a buffer of upland habitats around the lake. Areas within the buffer are those within one mile of the 1300’ contour interval around the lake. This definition includes part of Maine, which has not recognized Umbagog as an IBA. Nonetheless, the Maine portions are part of the same ecosystem and are thus included in the New Hampshire designation. Much of this area, at least on the New Hampshire side, has already been protected by the Lake Umbagog National Wildlife Refuge, with a few other conservation parcels owned by other entities. Because the area is both remote and well-protected, Umbagog faces fewer conservation challenges than many other IBAs in New Hampshire. Perhaps foremost among these is increased recreational activity on the lake and rivers, which has the potential to disturb nesting birds.

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More details on the IBA Program are also available on the N.H. Audubon web site.