

The Merrimack River Floodplain 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 Merrimack River Floodplain meets all three IBA criteria, as follows:

1) Endangered and threatened species

Bald Eagle (state endangered, federally threatened) – Between 1994 and 2002, from 8 to 26 eagles have spent all or part of the winter along New Hampshire's portion of the Merrimack River: primarily between Bow and the Massachusetts state line. Depending on the year, this represents 15-30% of the state's wintering population. In addition, a pair of eagles built a nest in Bedford in 2001, and has returned to the site every year since, although breeding has yet to be attempted.

Osprey (state threatened) – Although there are no known Osprey nests in the immediate vicinity of the Merrimack, an increasing number have been found nesting along tributaries, and the Merrimack remains an important migratory path for the species.



2) Other species and habitats of conservation concern

Bank Swallow – This species nests in many of the exposed banks along the river. Data are limited, but include a colony of between 20 and 40 nests in Merrimack and over 100 nests in Canterbury. Large concentrations of this species have also been recorded in May and August during migration.

By far the most critical habitat along the Merrimack is floodplain forest. This forest type once lined the banks of the river for its entire length, but has been mostly lost to development and agriculture. Today there are very few large tracts left, with most of them in Boscawen, Canterbury, and Concord. Floodplain forests support many bird species that are less common in other forest types, including Warbling Vireo, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Veery, American Redstart, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, and Baltimore Oriole.



3) Congregatory species

Waterfowl – The open water and nearby agricultural areas can support large numbers of ducks and geese, particularly in winter and during spring migration. Data from Christmas Bird Counts indicate that roughly 28% of New Hampshire’s Canada Geese, 9% of American Black Ducks, 39% of Mallards, 8% of Common Goldeneyes, 12% of Hooded Mergansers, and 20% of Common Mergansers winter on or near the river. In spring, fields and oxbows, especially in the Concord area, can contain hundreds of ducks and geese. Regularly occurring species – in addition to those that winter – include Wood Duck, American Wigeon, Green-winged Teal, Ring-necked Duck, and Bufflehead. Snow Geese, Northern Pintails, Blue-winged Teal, and both scaup species are less common in spring, while Barrow’s Goldeneye is a rare winter visitor.



Swallows – Both Tree and Bank Swallows often congregate along the river in spring and fall. High counts include 1000 Tree Swallows in Manchester in May, 200 Tree Swallows in Concord in late April, 300 Bank Swallows in Concord in early August, 150 Bank Swallows in Canterbury in July, and 50 Bank Swallows in Merrimack in May.

Other Landbirds – Depending on the crop, agricultural fields can provide a valuable food supply to southward migrants in fall, especially sparrows and blackbirds. In October 2002, literally hundreds of sparrows of a dozen species frequented the fields behind the Concord Post Office. These birds were joined by smaller numbers of Indigo Buntings, Red-winged Blackbirds, Bobolinks, Palm Warblers, American Pipits, and even Dickcissels. Other fields throughout the area regularly host small flocks of most of these species, in addition to Horned Larks.

For the purposes of the NH IBA Program, the Merrimack River Floodplain IBA is defined as the river and immediate floodplain between Franklin and Massachusetts. The floodplain corresponds roughly to the first terrace of glacial Lake Merrimack.

For more information on the New Hampshire Important Bird Area Program, contact:

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