

## **The Pondicherry Basin 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 Pondicherry Basin area meets categories 1-3 of the IBA criteria, as follows:

### 1) Endangered and threatened species

Northern Harrier (state endangered) – At least one pair of harriers has breed regularly near the Whitefield Airport, and this pair’s foraging territory extends to the wetlands around Cherry Pond. 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, even a single pair may be important, especially if future conservation and management facilitate population increases in the area.

Pied-billed Grebe (state threatened) – Grebes have been reported from Cherry Pond in four years since 1995. Breeding may occur occasionally, but the site is not one of the reliable areas for the species in NH.

Common Loon (state threatened) – A single pair of loons has bred at Cherry Pond since at least (year?). Although not a significant portion of the state population, the presence of this species simply adds to the overall wildlife value of the Pondicherry Basin.

### 2) Other species and habitats of conservation concern

Perhaps the major reason Pondicherry has been recognized as an Important Bird Area is its diversity of habitats. The basin contains good examples of the following habitats, here listed with their associated bird species of concern. Species marked with an asterisk (\*), while not conservation priorities, are included because they are representative of the area and/or habitat.



Hardwood forests: Black-throated Blue Warbler (uncommon), Veery (uncommon), Canada Warbler (uncommon), American Redstart (uncommon)

Lowland conifer forests: Spruce Grouse (rare), Black-backed Woodpecker\* (rare), Northern Parula\* (uncommon), Cape May Warbler (rare), Blackburnian Warbler (uncommon), Bay-breasted Warbler (rare), Purple Finch (uncommon)

Bogs and shrub-swamps: Olive-sided Flycatcher (rare), Palm Warbler (uncommon, southernmost breeding area in state), Rusty Blackbird (uncommon, 5+ pairs).

Emergent wetlands: American Black Duck (uncommon), Pied-billed Grebe (rare), American Bittern (uncommon), Virginia Rail\* (uncommon), Sora (5-10 pairs in surveyed area), Marsh Wren (uncommon but irregular), Common Moorhen (rare, only 1-2 records).

Early successional habitats: American Woodcock (common), Chestnut-sided Warbler (uncommon).

Extensive grasslands: Bobolink (common), Eastern Meadowlark (rare), Upland Sandpiper (single record)

### 3) Congregatory species

Waterfowl – Pondicherry supports a diverse assemblage of breeding waterfowl for an area its size. The following species breed here: Canada Goose, Wood Duck, American Black Duck, Mallard, Green-winged Teal (rare and irregular), Ring-necked Duck, and Hooded Merganser. In addition to these species, several others are regular migrants, including Blue-winged Teal, Bufflehead, Common Goldeneye, and Common Merganser.

Shorebirds – A few shorebirds pass through the area in spring and fall, although numbers are generally very low. Species encountered with some regularity include Least Sandpiper, Greater Yellowlegs, Solitary Sandpiper, and Killdeer.

For the purposes of the NH IBA Program, the Pondicherry Basin IBA is defined as most of the wetlands in the Johns River watershed upstream from the outflow of Hazen Pond. The upper elevation limit of the IBA within this watershed has been set at 360 meters, with further delineation at the saddles to the east of Cherry Pond. The IBA thus includes both Cherry Ponds and their associated wetlands, Mud Pond, Hazen Pond, Airport Marsh, and the Whitefield Airport, in addition to surrounding forested areas. Much of this area has already been protected by the Silvio E. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge, with a few other conservation parcels owned by other entities. It should be noted that not all the current refuge is within the IBA boundary. Because the area is both remote and well-protected, Pondicherry faces fewer conservation challenges than many other IBAs in New Hampshire. However, increasing development pressure in the North Country is starting to be felt in the Whitefield/Jefferson area, making Pondicherry a valuable core parcel of conservation land.

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.