

The Pontook Reservoir 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.

Pontook Reservoir meets all three categories of the IBA criteria, as follows:

1) Endangered and threatened species

The Pontook area is most famous for its nesting Ospreys (state special concern). Between 8 and 12 pairs have nested regularly in the area encompassed by the IBA, representing roughly 25% of the state population. Other state-listed species that regularly breed here include Common Loon (2 pairs), Pied-billed Grebe (1 pair), Bald Eagle (1 pair) and Northern Harrier (1 pair).



2) Other species and habitats of conservation concern

The emergent marshes used by grebes and harriers also support a variety of other wetland species that are more widely distributed in the state. Included in this category are American Bittern, American Black Duck, Virginia Rail, Wilson's Snipe, and Marsh Wren. Although the area is surrounded by largely forested terrain, the IBA is focused on the above wetlands and their associated species.

3) Congregatory species

Although Pontook Reservoir does not attract waterfowl in numbers as high as Lake Umbagog to the north, there can be large concentrations of several species, especially Ring-necked Ducks and mergansers. Shorebirds have also been known to stop over at the site, although again in relatively low numbers – even for inland sites. A variety of other waterbirds, including herons, terns, and grebes, have been documented using the area during migration, and while their numbers are low, the Pontook wetlands may represent an important habitat for these species when they do occur in the Androscoggin Valley. During fall and early winter, Pontook and adjacent areas of the Androscoggin River may host multiple Bald Eagles before the water freezes. Up to 12 have been seen at one time, which is among the higher single-location counts in the northern half of the state.

For the purposes of the NH IBA Program, the Pontook Reservoir IBA is defined as areas upstream of the Pontook dam and within the 1200 foot contour interval. The upstream end of the IBA is truncated just east of Sessions Brook, which marks the approximate limit of regular Osprey activity. Extensive wetlands along Bog Brook farther east bear future investigation for species such as Palm Warbler, Spruce Grouse, and Rusty Blackbird, but in the absence of data were not included in the IBA at this time. Conservation issues facing this IBA are poorly documented, but include invasive plants, changes in water level, recreational disturbance, and pollution. Given the high concentration of Ospreys, plus one of only a handful of Bald Eagle nests in the state, it would be valuable to know more about concentrations of Mercury and other toxins in the Pontook ecosystem.

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

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More details are also available on the NH IBA web site.