

## **Birding and Breakfast locations in Long Hill Township**

This article is for those among you looking to explore some new areas in Long Hill Township. It covers many of the locations in Long Hill which seem most promising for birding and other wildlife observations, while also offering suggestions for those seeking somewhere to stop for food. To help us build up a record of your bird sightings in the town we ask that you use Ebird.org to log your bird observations.

Of the Great Swamp's 7,800 acres approximately 2,485 acres lie within the Township boundary. This is probably one of the least explored areas of the great Swamp and yet records show that it is a rewarding area for wildlife observations.

### **Whitebridge Rd - from west to east.**

Whitebridge Road runs for approximately 2 ½ miles from the white bridge on the Passaic River eastward to the Orange Trailhead, and is a designated scenic highway. The road passes through a mix of private properties and the Great Swamp NWR. Traffic is quiet and the whole road makes for pleasant walking and cycling, and excellent birding. From the author's house on this road 132 bird species have been recorded, including rufous hummingbird, whip-poor-will and Mississippi kite.

Just north of the white bridge, and accessible from the nearby fisherman's parking lot, is the best place in the area to see Red-headed woodpeckers and prothonotary warblers, both of which breed here. The prothonotary warbler is one of only two hole nesting warbler species in the U.S. The white bridge area is also good for dragonflies and damselflies throughout summer. Further east, the old field systems near the Raptor Trust host nesting eastern bluebirds, and attract savannah and other sparrows. Barred owls are regularly heard along this road, and there is a 2004 record of barn owl in one of the old buildings. The wet woodlands along certain stretches often attract rusty blackbirds in winter, and red-shouldered hawks are regular at any season.

The Raptor Trust is well worth a stop over, both to see the birds in care up close, but also because these caged birds attract others. Great horned owl and common ravens are regular, and red-headed woodpecker, yellow-bellied sapsucker, white-crowned sparrows and pine siskins have all been seen at the street-side feeder. The nearby Black Brook has regular hooded mergansers, solitary sandpiper and belted kingfisher.

Continuing east, the fields and woods on either side of Whitebridge are good for woodcock on spring evenings, as well as for the amazing frog chorus to be heard. The section of Pleasant Plains road between Whitebridge and the Refuge south gate is usually excellent in spring for migrant warblers, while the southern section of Pleasant Plains has recorded yellow-breasted chat and brown thrasher. Keep looking overhead in spring and fall for common nighthawks too- the author recorded more than 130 nighthawks migrating overhead on one August evening.

As you cross over New Vernon Rd and approach the orange trail head parking area, you will pass two small ponds which sometimes host green herons. Whip-poor-wills have also been heard here. There is a large gray heron rookery in tall trees to the south-east of the ponds. Yellow-crowned night herons are also regular along New Vernon Rd between Whitebridge and the Meyersville Circle. The Orange Trail is usually particularly wet and buggy, but can be an excellent place for migrants. Blackburnian and Tennessee warblers are regular in spring, both barred and eastern screech owl nest locally, and pileated woodpeckers breed locally. The orange trail also has some good ferns and clubmosses.

Mammal-wise, Whitebridge Rd is regularly crossed by black bears; foxes, racoons, opossum and skunk all breed at a number of sites and the author has seen flying squirrels at three locations.

Just north of Whitebridge Rd on New Vernon is the **Great Swamp Greenhouse** which carries a good selection of native plants. About a half-mile south from Whitebridge Rd is the **Casa Maya** Mexican restaurant, a popular local eatery with a great lunch and dinner selection. Across the road from this is the 19<sup>th</sup> century Meyersville Presbyterian church, an attractive wooden structure more reminiscent of a New England village. A half mile east along Meyersville Road is **The Grange**, a small building which hosts an antiques and collectibles market on Sundays from November to March, and offers great value breakfasts at its **Downstairs Cafe**.

Driving west on Long Hill Rd, between Meyersville Rd and Pleasant Plains Rd is the **Shrine of St Joseph**. Behind the parking lot is an area of quiet grottos, woodland edge and short trails. You are now also at the highest accessible point on the southern edge of the Great Swamp catchment area. The forest area hosts wood thrush, scarlet tanager and indigo bunting, and the car park should make a good vantage point for larger migrants in spring and fall. Black tern was one such flyover seen in 2011.

Heading west on Long Hill Rd, you will pass a number of historic homes, details of which can be found elsewhere on the town website. You will reach the junction of Old Forge Rd/Basking Ridge Rd. The stone-built All Saints' Episcopal Church stands facing you. Turn left down Long Hill Rd, left again onto Northfield Rd, then immediately left onto Knollanddale Rd. About 100 yards ahead is a barrier with parking for two or three cars on the side of the road.

Ahead of you lies a township-owned wooded area known as **Hicks Tract**. This covers 59 acres, and has a paved track running through it between Millington and Stirling, with small unmarked footpaths through the wood. There are signs of active pileated woodpeckers, and northern flickers breed here. Yellow-bellied sapsucker, white-eyed vireo, broad-winged hawk, red-breasted nuthatch and a variety of warbler species have been recorded here. Any walk in the woods 2 days after a heavy rain from July through September is good for the widest variety of fungi.

Head west to the **Millington Station Cafe** and enjoy a great breakfast or lunch in an historic setting. You can walk from here parallel to the nearby Millington gorge following the Passaic river upstream. This area can be good for warblers and other migrants.

Further east there are a number of excellent eateries in Stirling. **Dorsi's Deli & Pharmacy** stands just above Stirling train station on Central Ave. and offers fresh deli foods including gluten-free and low fat options. Traveling south on Main St. takes you past the popular **Stirling Hotel** which has very extensive menus and many craft beers. **Biagio's Bakery** offers great food all day, and also has an excellent selection of pastries and cookies. Continuing south, **Gluten Free Gloriously** offers an extensive range of gluten and nut free baked products, while across the street is the **All American Pizza** store.

### **Passaic River park and its flood plain.**

Continue south along Main Ave. and cross over Valley Rd. Ahead of you lies a large area of undeveloped land which is mainly owned by Morris County, Long Hill Township and the State of New Jersey. This open space contains extensive wet woodlands and environmentally sensitive natural features such as vernal ponds. It also provides valuable flood control benefits for the Township. The well known birding area of Glenhurst Meadows in Warren lies on the opposite side of the river, but involves a drive of some miles to get there.

This extensive wet woodland is crossed by deep drains which are dangerous to traverse when flooded. During dry spells one can walk a lot of the river side, which can be pleasant and bird rich depending on the time of year if you don't mind the muddy smell. The two principal access points are at the Valley Road/River Rd junction in Millington, where there is parking for two cars, and the lower end of Main St. In Stirling, where there is parking for one car. The area below the utility lines which bisect the area can be good for sparrows, warblers and BOP- birds of prey.

The Passaic river woodlands host a small population of red-headed woodpeckers most winters, and yellow-bellied sapsuckers are regular too. Red-shouldered hawks breed locally, and barred owls are heard occasionally. In winter the patches of low scrub can be good for sparrows, including Lincoln's and savannah. The area is rarely visited so bird records are few, but it could well repay a birder to visit it regularly.

Traveling east along Valley takes you through Long Hill's commercial district, where one has a wide choice of good eateries. These include **12 Islands Greek Taverna, Stirling Diner, Panera Bread, Thai Thai Cuisine, the A&S Italian foodstore, a Blimpie, Dunkin Donuts, Burger King, the Cilento Bar and O'Bagel Bagelry and Deli.** The latter opens as early as 5:30 Monday-Saturday.

At the eastern edge of the commercial district is Long Hill's municipal building, public library and the Matthew G. Kantor Memorial Park. This small park gives further access

to the river, but also has paved trails along woodland edges. Common raven, a range of warblers, orioles and grosbeaks have been recorded.

On the north side of Valley Rd, from Morristown Rd. west to the Walgreens store, is the latest township acquisition called **Central Park**. This a 71 acre lot of wet woodlands with some drier ground near Valley Rd and on the north side near the railway line. A utility right of way runs through it diagonally. Slogging through the area in spring of 2020 revealed orioles, grosbeaks, a few warblers and two BOP species - about 30 species in total. There are plans to create some raised trails through the area but currently you need rubber boots to explore most of it.

East of Mountain Ave. in Gillette lie the **Clay Pits**, aka the Cornish Tract. This is accessible from the southern end of Homestead Rd. (off of Cottage Pl.) in Gillette. There is a small parking area opposite the last house. The trail is a little overgrown but opens up to the power line. Going west along the power line brings you towards the old clay pits. Going east eventually skirts the Passaic River. The area hosts the usual wet woodland birds and can be good for sparrows in the winter. The ponds host a diversity of dragonflies and damselflies, but can be difficult to get close to in summer.

**Marcy's Kitchen** on the corner of Mountain Ave. and Valley Rd. in Gillette specializes in tacos and other home-cooked Mexican favorites. On the eastern edge of Long Hill is the **Chimney Rock Inn**, a popular dining facility with an extensive menu. Lastly, check out the Passaic river where it passes under Vally Rd just east of Chimney Rock - red-headed woodpeckers occur regularly here.

Credits: My thanks to the following for their encouragement, advice and comments:

Judy Schmidt  
Jonathan Klizas  
Susan Garretson Friedman  
Dorothy Smullen