

NEW YORK STATE WILDLIFE PRESERVES

5. The Wilson M. Powell Wildlife Sanctuary

EDGAR M. REILLY, JR.

This sanctuary is situated just one quarter of a mile south of Columbia County highway 13 which makes it exactly one and one quarter miles from the hamlet of Old Chatham. The county road runs south from New York State highway 20 at Brainerd and, after passing through Old Chatham, joins State highway 66 at Chatham Center. It is less than one half mile from the Shaker Museum and the Powell House (a country retreat of the Society of Friends, otherwise known as the Quakers, which adjoins the sanctuary) so the sanctuary thus has fine neighbors as well as added attractions for visitors. Columbia County is just south-east of Albany on the eastern side of the Hudson River with its eastern boundary on the Massachusetts border edging the beautiful Berkshires.

The lowest point on the sanctuary of 665 feet altitude is just at the outlet of the recently impounded 6-7 acre pond and the highest point is 924 feet above sea level. From Dawson's Bluff, immediately adjoining the refuge and open to our visitors by courtesy of Miss Elsie Powell, one can view much of the Hudson River Valley including the Shawangunks, Catskills, Helderberg Plateau and north past Albany and thus encompass lessons in geology. The bedrock underfoot is tortured and twisted slates and shales dating back to Cambrian-Ordovician times and the bluffs were scraped clean by the glaciers of only 20,000 years ago.

The Alan Devoe Bird Club acquired the land in October of 1958 as a gift from Mrs. Wilson M. Powell in memory of her husband, a well-known conservationist during the governorship of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Wilson Powell had been very active in reforestation efforts and planted thousands of Larch, Scotch Pine, and Norway Spruce on his property and several fine stands of these trees were included in the 100 acre gift. A small intermittent stream elbows its way between some of the hills and contributes its waters to the impounded pond and Dusky, Alleghany, and Two-lined Salamanders live and breed especially in the permanent seeps of the creek. When the club decided to build a dam to create the pond, it was found necessary to acquire about two acres from another neighboring property which was generously donated to us by the owner Mr. Bert Rosenthal. Funds for building the dam were raised by donations, profits from Audubon Wildlife Films, and trading stamps. Since many school classes use the sanctuary for lessons and it is open all year around to the public, the Chatham Township does not require the club to pay taxes.

Continued support by the public as well as club members permitted the ADBC to build adequate, if primitive, "his and her" structures and only last year a pole-shed was erected near the center of a 4-5 acre open

field. The shed will, funds and volunteer labor permitting, eventually be completely enclosed as well as equipped with a fireplace and electricity.

Mr. Edward Thompson, a semi-retired nurseryman of Kinderhook, is the present chairman of the Sanctuary Committee and, as one might suspect, has already been very active in planting activities as well as donating various ornamentals attractive to wildlife to embellish the area about the entrance and parking lot. Present plans include the establishment of a wildflower garden and, hopefully, the drilling of a well.

In return for the tax exemption status of the land the sanctuary is open at all times of the year to one and all. The land is posted as a wildlife preserve by the New York State Environmental Conservation Department. A small parking lot at the entrance is large enough for three school buses and a program of tours for school pupils has been very successful especially in winter when an active feeding program adjacent to the parking lot draws fifteen to twenty bird species to where the children can learn and identify without necessity of field glasses. The Chickadees and Nuthatches have run a campaign of their own by perching on outstretched young hands for the offerings of sunflower seeds thereby making many children bird friends for life. During walks in spring new birds are learned through resemblance to these winter acquaintances even though they might not come so close to the pupils.

The natural forest cover is dominated by Hemlock, White Pine, White Ash, Red Maple, Shagbark Hickory, White Oak, and Chestnut Oak. Occasionally an American Chestnut springing from the roots of a long dead forest giant gives hopes, so far always disappointed, of new generations, by reaching a girth of twenty inches and bearing tiny sterile nuts before succumbing to the blight. Dr. Richard B. Fischer of Cornell has referred to the sanctuary as a botanists paradise because of the great variety of shrubs and herbs growing there. Deer, raccoon, flying squirrels, foxes, muskrats, weasels and smaller mammals are common and may be seen by using a little patience; and birds aplenty.

Over two hundred species have been recorded on the sanctuary proper. The second year after the completion of the dam the impounded waters attracted flocks of Wood Ducks of over five hundred individuals accompanied by Mallards, Blacks, Blue-winged Teal, Green Herons, Great Blue Herons, Coots, American Bitterns, Pied-billed Grebes, and Canada Geese. A country road runs close to the dike and, from a small parking area, one can walk onto the dam behind a special log blind from which to observe the water animals without scaring them out of sight. From the heights of Dawson's Bluff one may observe migrating, and resident hawks soaring down Hudson's valley and over nearby fields and glens.

The Alan Devoe Bird Club feels that it has helped create a fine conservation education tool as well as an excellent varied wildlife sanctuary
Old Chatham. New York 12136