

THE BIRDS OF THE CONNETQUOT

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It is hard to convince those who do not know Long Island (and some who do) that there could be anything naturally perfect left of our once-upon-a-time "garden of wildflowers." Would you believe a pristine river, a corridor of birds, deer, and flowers in timeless tranquility half-way across this frenetic island?

Birders who rush to New England or New Jersey do not always realize the fine field-trips offered by the Metropolitan Area. "Things have changed since Kieran," they say. Still from Montauk Point to Jamaica Bay, all the pelagic and shorebirds—auks to oystercatchers—may be seen in their season, many overwintering. Alley Pond Park in western Long Island is the place to go in spring for the passerines. But nothing (except offshore and off-limits Gardiner's Island) provides bird or birder year-'round occupation—the bird by tenancy, the birder by tendency—more rewarding than the marshes, ponds, and forest of the Connetquot River in Islip Town.

When a river is so unpolluted as to be drinkable as it flows from headwaters to estuary; when it has been protected by sportsmen, owners, government, and conservationists for three hundred years; when its drainage pattern is an ecotone—why should an abundance of wildlife, floral as well as avian, be surprising?

The variety of habitat welcomes a heterogeneous population. Canada warbler nests beside Carolina wren and white-eyed vireo. To Long Islanders, the cardinal and the mockingbird are dooryard commoners, but visitors to whom these seem exotic southerners may be startled at the brilliance of the one and the heraldic wingbars of the other across the snow.

In the six miles of Connetquot sweet water (the estuary, as Kipling would say, is another story), 75 species breed, with 225 transients recorded. These include the bald eagle.

For some time a stranger to Long Island, the eastern bluebird is established at the Connetquot. This author has crouched in a blackberry patch, with other recompense than comfort, to watch bluebirds feed their young. Shivering Christmas-counters are warmed by the sight of bluebirds feeding on the inkberry.

Among nest builders, nothing stirs the imagination more than the brown creepers. Under a flap of loose bark, these little fellows pack rough grasses and leaves, then install a lining that feel like foam-rubber, the brown casing from stems of young cinnamon fern. To discover such a nest is a minor birding triumph, but the finder must return circumspectly, lest an inquisitive raccoon wonder what this trail is all about and destroy eggs or nestlings.

Beloved Connetquot natives include the hermit thrush (Long Island's poet's 'shy singer') and the whip-poor-will. Driven from many of his former haunts by pesticides and bulldozers, the "nightjar" of the nostalgic call has sanctuary here.

The Connetquot was spared the aerial pesticide-dousing that so much of Long Island has had to endure. In winter, the mosaic bark of pitch-pines is studded with gypsy-moth egg-cases, but the summer woods seem none the worse. Yellowthroats have been observed feeding the larvae to their young.

The most common birds are the Eastern towhee and the Maryland yellowthroat (we stick to old ways at the Connetquot, including venerable nomenclature). Graduate studies recently done here of these two species prove that each bird has an individual voice as well as an extensive "vocabulary."

Wood ducks, surely painted by the Creator in a moment of fantasy, hug the shadowed shores of backwater pools, but nest in hollow trees. The gray gadwall, considered a rare breeder in the East, may be seen with its young at the Connetquot.

Yearly other species join the citizenry. Two years ago, a prothonotary warbler, the little golden bird, was first heard singing; last spring, he may have found a suitable companion. Sometimes these things take time! Enough Acadian flycatchers have been heard to indicate that they, too, are now residents.

An osprey nest was found in the summer of '73, a bitter-sweet discovery; sweet, that this wonderful creature has returned; bitter, both because he was 'til very recently common on Long Island, and because the nest was empty.

Contrary to the authority on wild turkeys who in a recent issue of *THE CONSERVATIONIST* listed Long Island as having "No Potential" for this bird, the Connetquot's flock has been established for well over a decade. In springtime magnificence, the wild turkey promenades not only through these woods but also at the Quogue Wildlife Refuge and Gardiner's Island.

Among visiting species, the most intriguing may well have been the Richardson's goose (or Hutchins', if you prefer) that appeared once among a flock of Canadas. A photo taken of the geese feeding on a lake-side path clearly displays the difference. Widely disseminated, the picture should settle (or rekindle) the old debate.

The headwaters of the Connetquot are woodcock country. Spring and summer reveal the full diapason of Connetquot vegetation here: sun-dew and Labrador tea to swamp-azalea and wild sweet-pepper to arbutus and sweetfern. Yet one November day, we found gerardia as well as groundsel in bloom. We intruded upon what must have been

swamp-sparrow headquarters. Rusty caps popped up to reconnoiter our passage and bulletins were trilled all along the bog. A little mixed flock of chickadees and both kinds of kinglet accompanied us a while. When we left off sloshing and trudged over barrens, a hermit thrush crossed our path. I cannot be sure I saw a grouse scuttling into the underbrush, although grouse and ring-necked pheasant are familiar sights in the Connetquot area.

At Honeysuckle Pond (part of the headwaters), a small rosy cloud of crossbills lifted from a tall pine; a kingfisher protested our interference with his occupational pursuit: flickers flashed golden wings. A winter wren wanted to know what we were about, and would not be intimidated.

Continuing this trail a week later, Dennis Puleston and Robert Griffen (for eight years foreman of the Connetquot) sighted a goshawk. They also discovered a rare stand of white cedar on a forgotten aisle of brook. Bob has steadfastly averred that pockets of secret wilderness remain along the Connetquot.

A river-person for half a century, I have known the Hudson of my ancestors, the St. Lawrence of my childhood, and the Schroon of our second home. All these beautiful rivers have been despoiled in varying degrees. Only the Connetquot is "unchanged from what it was when I was young" — or this Island was young.

Access having always been limited, I have been among the fortunate few able to explore intensively, doing volunteer work for the Department of Environmental Conservation or trailing at the heels of expert Long Island naturalists. Every excursion has added at least one cherished memory to my hoard. The most enduring will probably be the episode of the great horned owls.

How the two nestlings came to be orphaned is a mystery. What enemy could have brought down their mighty parent? Howsoever it happened, a foster-parent was found in Carl Helm of the Quogue Wildlife Refuge. He raised them, taking care not to domesticate them in any way, until he judged they were able to fend for themselves. Then he brought them to the Connetquot, one summer day. They were approximately five months old, already huge, chunky, and fierce. Carl moved swiftly when he opened the crates.

For a moment the owlets perched on the top, then off they flew into the trees. Jays and crows uttered the first horrified protest. After that, it was easy for us to follow the newcomers. Every bird in the Connetquot rose or at least sounded an alarm. Long after the owls were lost in the forest, the cries of Canada geese and fish crows on the upper brooks marked the trail of the predator. Literally, the woods resounded.

In all that placidity of river and blossom, it was a moment of primitive confrontation. Something of the birds' panic atavistically imparted itself

to the human beings, and we felt the awe of the wild woods, where our great "sightings" — owl, red-tailed hawk, peregrine — are the enemy.

They were gone at last, absorbed into the Connetquot community. The woods quieted, and the only intruders were in the clearing, where naturalists and photographers gathered their impedimenta and drove away.

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