

BIRDING THE WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREAS OF SOUTHWESTERN JEFFERSON CO., NEW YORK

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Much of the east end of Lake Ontario is bordered by low sandy soils with extensive embayments isolated from Lake Ontario by sand dunes. Stream and river deltas that drain the Tug Hill Plateau also provide important wetlands. Several of these wetlands in southwestern Jefferson County in *Kingbird* Reporting Region 6 are maintained as Wildlife Management Areas by the New York Department of Environmental Conservation. These wetlands are important both as nesting and feeding areas for summer resident species and as staging areas for migratory water birds. A variety of species unusual both in Region 6 as well as in New York State have been recorded in them. This paper provides an overview of the bird life of these areas as well as tips for observing birds in them.

Perch River Wildlife Management Area

The Perch River Wildlife Management Area protects the Perch River marshes. It is located about 7 miles northwest of Watertown in the Towns of Brownville, Orleans and Pamela and is about 7804 acres in size. It is primarily managed for waterfowl production and as an area for migrating waterfowl to rest and feed in the spring and fall. The area is divided into units which will be discussed separately as to their bird life and how best to visit them. The area is open to hunting for waterfowl during the season, but the waterfowl hunting hours are restricted from sunrise to noon. Waterfowl hunters must leave the area by 2:00 PM.

Please note that much of the area is posted against entry and will be posted as **WETLAND CONTROLLED AREA** or **POSTED NO ENTRY**. The purpose of this posting is to protect nesting and resting waterfowl from any interference. If an area can be traversed, it will be posted as **Fishing Allowed** or **Public Hunting Lands**. Also note that Perch Lake on the north end of the area is closed to the public as a Refuge Area and trespass is strictly forbidden at all times.

The following rare or unusual species for this part of New York have been seen at Perch River Wildlife Management Area: American White

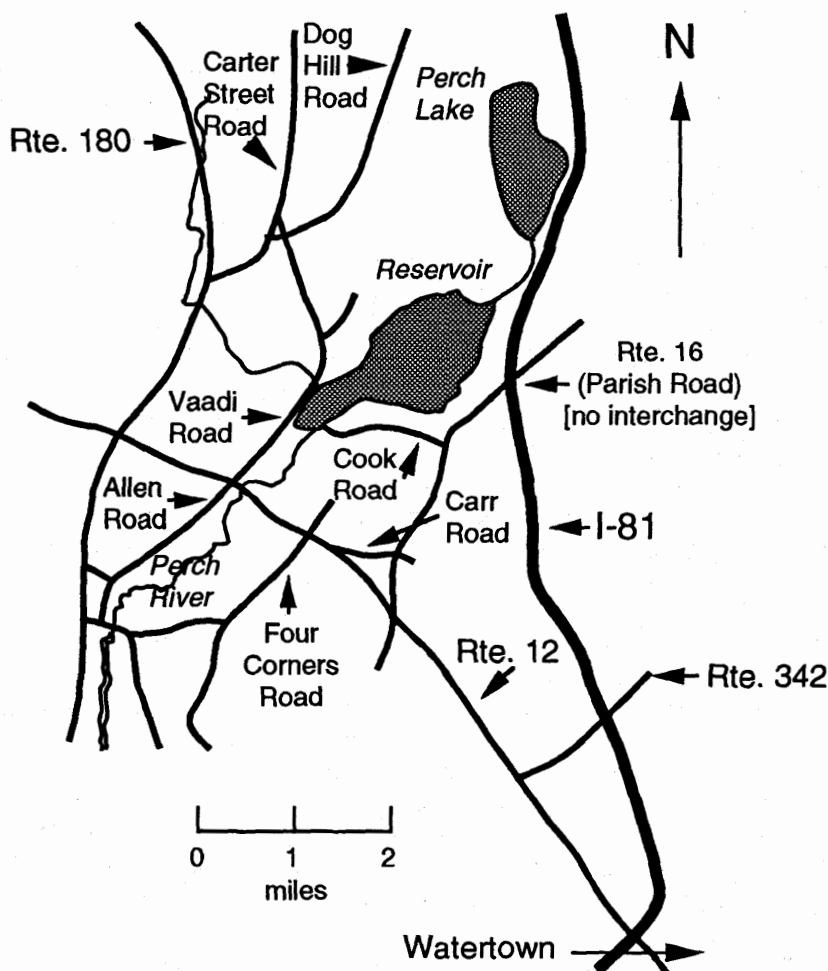


Figure 1. Road map of the Perch River Wildlife Management Area. Some secondary roads, especially away from the Wildlife Management Area, have been omitted. See text for further details.

Pelican, Least Bittern, Great Egret, Glossy Ibis, Tundra Swan, Mute Swan, Greater White-fronted Goose, Eurasian Wigeon, Fulvous Whistling-Duck, Ruddy Duck, Bald Eagle, Merlin, Peregrine Falcon, Gray Partridge, Upland Sandpiper, Common Black-headed Gull, White-winged Tern, Black Tern, Barn Owl, Short-eared Owl, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Gray Jay, Stilt Sandpiper, Pine Warbler, Sedge Wren, Northern Mockingbird, Grasshopper Sparrow and Henslow's Sparrow.

Perch River Wildlife Management Area is easiest to reach from I-81 (Fig. 1). From the south or east consider an approach cutting across the Tug Hill Plateau on New York Route 177 to I-81 at Adams Center rather than going into Watertown via New York Route 12 from Utica. Route 177 will provide you with a view of Tug Hill Plateau and bypasses downtown Watertown. Take I-81 north to Exit 47 (Bradley Street and NY Route 12), and follow Route 12 northwest toward Clayton about 6.6 miles to an area called Seven Bridges (now only two bridges exist). Look for the Area Signs as you drop down into the Perch River drainage. From the north you may leave I-81 at Exit 48 (New York Route 342, Fort Drum - Black River) and follow route 342 west to NY Route 12, where you turn right and continue on Route 12 to the Seven Bridges about 4.6 miles beyond this intersection.

LOWER POOL: This area is the portion south of Route 12 and is best viewed from Allen Road, which parallels the area and has two parking facilities with good overlooks. A spotting scope is a must for these locations, as you will be a considerable distance from the marsh. The first parking area is about 0.4 miles from Route 12 and will be on your left. It is a good location to look for large waders and waterfowl as well as nesting Osprey. The second parking area is about 1.1 miles from this lot and is again on your left. This area overlooks the lower control dam, which is closed to hunting and trespassing. Closer to the marsh itself and at a lower elevation, it is an excellent location to view the nesting Mute Swan and Canada Goose. The resident Bald Eagle as well as Greater White-fronted Goose, Double-crested Cormorant, Caspian Tern, Black Tern and Osprey have been seen feeding at this location. In the late fall migrating Tundra Swans and rafts of puddle and diving ducks are present.

From this location return to Route 12 and stop at the large parking facility on Route 12. Many and varied aquatic plants of the marsh, such as wild rice, bur-reeds (*Sparangium* sp.), Arrow Arum (*Peltandra virginica*) and bladderworts (*Utricularia* sp.), grow here. The vegetation is thick since you are almost at water level but in summer nesting Black Tern, Marsh Wren, Swamp Sparrow, and Common Moorhen can be seen here. Black Tern nests in this area of the marsh, and they will fly by very close and have been known to mob an observer. Great Blue Heron can be seen out in the marsh. Spend at least 20 minutes to make sure you haven't missed an American Bittern in the cattails. This location is an excellent area to see migrating blackbirds and many kinds of waterfowl

in the fall. Fish and other reptiles may also be seen here. On warm days very large, but nonpoisonous, Northern Water Snakes (*Natrix sipedon*) often bask on the limestone riprap.

VAAADI ROAD: From this location go back toward Allen Road and turn right onto Vaadi Road at the red barn which is just before Allen Road. Be careful, as this is a heavily traveled road year round. Proceed down the Vaadi Road about 0.2 miles until you see the Waterfowl Check Station and a large red barn on the left. You may park here and examine the canals and dikes of the Middle Pool for waterfowl, long-legged waders and Northern Harrier. At or before sunrise, it is possible to hear four to five Great Horned Owl calling from all sections of the marsh at this stop. You will also notice in the fall and spring the movement of waterfowl back and forth the length of the marsh. In late October flocks of Brant sometimes follow the Perch River down through the marsh from Perch Lake, a resting area, en route to Lake Ontario and points south.

From the Check Station continue down the Vaadi Road to the Bill Mosenteen Memorial Stone and parking lot, about 0.6 of a mile, for a view of the Upper Pool and the dike system. You will also be able to see into the Stone Mills Pool, the most recently developed portion of the wetland complex from the main road at this point. Walking along the marsh edge on Vaadi Road here can produce both American and Least Bitterns, young Canada Geese grazing on the dam, Northern Harrier, and Black Terns, Marsh Wren and Swamp Sparrow. Double-crested Cormorant and Caspian and Common Tern, which nest on islands in Lake Ontario, frequently feed here. In season watch for swans coming off Stone Mills Pool. In April look for migrating raptors overhead if there are strong southeast or south winds. Red-tailed and Red-shouldered Hawks, American Kestrel, Peregrine Falcon, Merlin, and Osprey have been observed in fairly high numbers from this site. A White-winged Tern nested unsuccessfully and did most of its feeding in Stone Mills Pool in 1992.

After returning to your car continue about 0.9 miles on Vaadi Road to the other end of the Stone Mills Dike past the house on the right and park on the road side for an overview of the Stone Mills Pool. You should see an Osprey nesting platform at this point and be able to view a good portion of the pool. Waterfowl, Osprey, Black Tern, and Mute Swan can be seen here, especially at the edge of the marsh. Check the dead tree stumps and nesting islands for Double-crested Cormorant, Ring-billed Gull, Pied-billed Grebe, American Bittern, Osprey and resting and

feeding ducks. When Black Tern is present, you will have an excellent view of their feeding activities and can follow their return to their nest sites in the cattails below. As many as four Osprey can be seen hunting the Stone Mills Pool at one time.

After finishing here move on about 0.3 of a mile beyond the gated access road, which may or may not be open, to the wet meadow where Sedge Wren, Henslow's and Grasshopper Sparrows can be found. If the access road gate is open, drive in and park, then walk to the dirt pile and viewing platform, where you can get a good overall view of the marsh. Least and American Bittern, Pied-billed Grebe, Common Moorhen, Black Tern nest in this area, and various waterfowl species and shorebirds may be found. In the fall various species of warblers move along the hedgerow just behind the dirt pile.

ANTHONY FLATS: To get to the other side of the marsh at the Anthony Flats (Cook Road), return to Route 12, turn left toward Watertown, and continue about 1.1 miles to Carr Road, the second road on the left. Take Carr Road to Parish Road (County Route 16), turn left, and travel about 1.3 miles to the Wildlife Management Area Sign and Cook Road, which is unpaved. Turn left onto the Cook Road. About a mile down this road you will come to the marsh and again be at almost water level. Park in the large lot here away from the marsh and walk down to the marsh's edge. If the cattails are not too high, as they are by late summer, you can scan a large section of the marsh for Great Blue Heron, Northern Harrier, Common Moorhen, Caspian Tern, Tree Swallow, Marsh Wren, and Swamp Sparrow. In the spring large numbers of migrant waterfowl, such as Canada Geese, Wood Duck, Green-winged Teal, Mallard, Blue-winged Teal, Northern Shoveler, Gadwall, American Wigeon, and Ring-necked Duck, may be present. After viewing the marsh, stop at the old Spring House and walk along Cook Road. This section can provide good land birding. The Spring House was for the Anthony Farmstead, which was located in this hollow. The barn for the farm was between the two hills above and to the left of the Spring House. It was very large for its day and at one time was the largest barn in Jefferson County, and perhaps the entire North Country. You may also be interested in seeing the Hackberry (*Celtis occidentalis*) and Black Maple (*Acer nigrum*) trees that line the cow pasture fence along this road. They are both tree species commonly found where limestone outcrops occur.

Lakeview Wildlife Management Area

The Lakeview Wildlife Management Area is located on the Lake Ontario shoreline in the southwest corner of Jefferson County in the Town of Ellisburg. It is a large lake shore marsh complex separated from

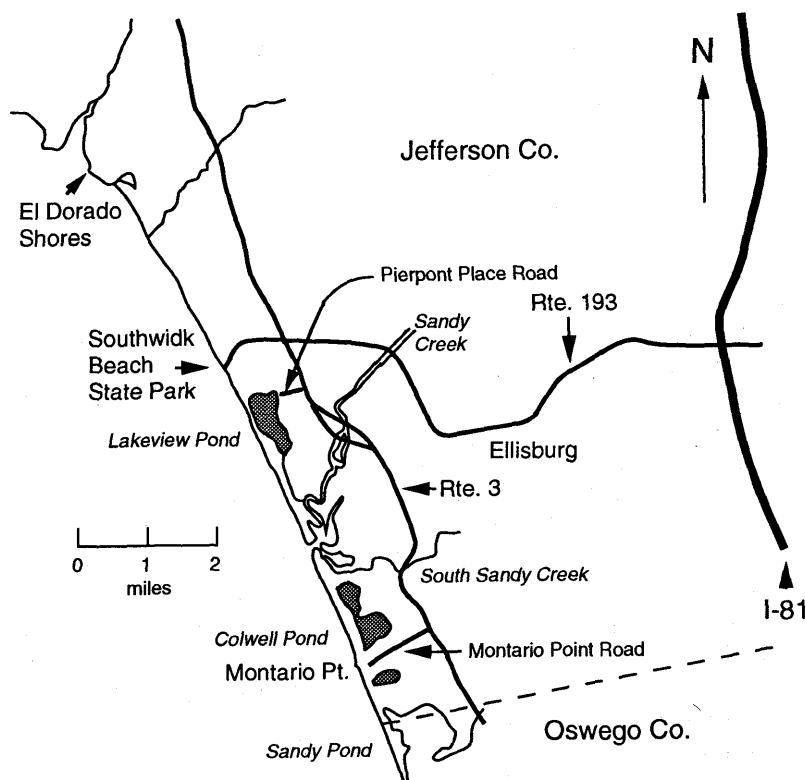


Figure 2. Road map of the Lakeview Wildlife Management Area. Some secondary roads, especially east of Rte 3, have been omitted. See text for further details.

Lake Ontario by a 2 1/2 mile freshwater barrier beach dune system. The area is about 3460 acres in size, with 2,400 acres of wetlands habitat. It is managed for waterfowl production and as a spring and fall feeding and resting habitat for waterfowl. A great variety of water birds occur here and many migrant land birds from hawks to swallows to warblers occur in spring and fall. Many times the first spring and early fall migrants are seen here, since the area lies in a major flight path along the Lake Ontario shoreline. This area is about four miles south of the Nature Conservancy's El Dorado Shores Preserve and both areas are readily visited on a single trip.

The marsh complex here supports nesting Least Bittern, Northern Harrier, Black Tern, and both Marsh and Sedge Wrens. Common and

Caspian Terns feed along the Lake Ontario shoreline all summer. Unusual birds seen here include Great Egret, Tundra Swan, Mute Swan, Eurasian Wigeon, early arriving or late departing Rough-legged Hawk, Golden Eagle, Peregrine Falcon, Merlin, Sandhill Crane, Whimbrel (usually heard overhead), Buff-breasted Sandpiper, Little Gull, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Common Raven, and Eastern Bluebird. The only Upstate record of White-tailed Tropicbird was obtained here.

To reach this area take I-81 to Exit 40 (Pierrepont Manor) then follow New York Route 193 west through the village of Ellisburg to New York Route 3 (The Seaway Trail) at the road leading to Southwick Beach State Park (Fig. 2). The Wildlife Management Area extends south from the park between Route 3 and Lake Ontario. Access to the wildlife management area is possible at several lateral roads off Route 3, and the barrier beach itself is reached either via the Southwick Beach State Park or via a walking trail at Lakeview Pond. The canoe enthusiast may access the area at Colwell Pond on Montario Point Road, at the South Sandy Creek Fisherman Access Launch on New York Route 3, or from Lakeview Pond on Pierrepont Place road off Route 3.

LAKE ONTARIO BEACHES: To access the beach from the north end of the Wildlife management area, continue west into Southwick Beach State Park (a parking fee is enforced from Memorial Day to Labor Day) and park at the beach area. A Dune Trail Interpretive Guide is available at the entrance station to Southwick Beach State Park. The public beach area generally is crowded on warm summer days, but walking south past the lakeside terminus of the Lakeview Pond trail will take you to less populated areas frequented by a variety of shorebird species during the spring and fall migration periods. Migrating land and water birds frequently are present in this area as well, especially early in the morning and on northwest winds. You should keep off the dune system itself and walk along the edge of Lake Ontario, where water in the sand increases its firmness. This dune system is a very fragile and rare ecosystem. Even one step can cause damage to the American Beach Grass (*Ammophila breviligulata*), a plant necessary to hold the system together. Many rare plants, such as Heartleaf Willow (*Salix cordata*) and Tall Wormwood (*Artemisia* sp.), are found on the barrier beach system and this ecological community itself is very rare in New York State. Special regulations apply to the barrier beach area, and fires, picnics, taking plants and other natural materials, hunting, loud music and camping are prohibited there. Please also be forewarned that the area

has acquired a reputation for nude bathing due to its remoteness, and swimming is not allowed away from the state park.

MARSH AND POND HABITATS: To reach Lakeview Pond, take Route 3 about 1 mile south from the entrance to Southwick Beach State Park and look for Pierrepont Place Road on the right, at the beginning of a sweeping left curve in Route 3. At the west end of Pierrepont Place Road both Lakeview Pond and the barrier beach system across the pond are visible. The walking trail to the barrier beach leaves the parking lot at the front of the old white boathouse. Birding on the trail can be very productive at all times of year. Warblers can be very numerous in the small woodlot beyond the parking area. It is about 1 mile to the barrier beach from here. Poison ivy abounds along the trail and on the barrier dunes. A foot bridge and dune crossover structure at the end of this trail provide access to the beach proper.

The South Sandy Access site is about 3.5 miles beyond (south) on New York Route 3, again on a curve in the road just before the second metal bridge which crosses the South Sandy Creek. This is another dangerous curve, so be cautious when entering and exiting this parking facility. In the fall many salmon fisherman will be at this location and there is a toilet facility at this site. South Sandy Creek is the location of the Battle of Big Sandy, fought during the War of 1812 and which was to influence the British plan to attack Sackets Harbor and the American forces stationed there.

Colwell Pond is about 4.5 miles further south along Route 3 on the right (west) at Montario Point Road. A parking lot and the Colwell Hill Observation Tower are about 0.4 mile from Route 3 at the top of the hill. This tower gives you a panoramic overview of the total area and is an excellent area to see raptors in migration during the fall and spring periods. Looking north you will see Colwell Pond, which may be reached by traveling down Montario Point Road about another 0.5 mile to a parking area and small boat launch site for cartop and smaller boats. Visible south from the Tower are South Colwell Pond, North Colwell Pond, Goose Pond, Floodwood Pond and Lakeview Pond. The creek between North Colwell and Goose Ponds is called The Big Sandy as it exits the marsh through the barrier beach dunes, since the Sandy and South Sandy Creeks merge in the marsh at this point. You should plan to spend at least an hour at this location and a chair is recommended rather than observing from the tower. If the birds are high, as is often the case, you will need a brimmed hat or you may sit in the shade of the tower

itself. In the spring raptors flying on strong south and southeast winds, will be seen to your east heading for the forested Tug Hill area or may appear suddenly overhead. If the wind is southwest almost all birds will be to your east towards Tug Hill and at times difficult to identify. It is necessary to be constantly checking in all directions because the birds can slip by very fast and at high altitudes. Late fall and early winter observations from this location can be a very rewarding but a cold and windy experience, so dress accordingly.

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