

PATCH BIRDING—THE STEWART SCHOOL SUMP

Brendan Fogarty

bmf25@cornell.edu

Divide the 2017 population of Nassau County, New York, by its area, and you get a unit area of 5,000 square feet per person. If that statistic were applied in some sort of hyper-equitable world, the Nassau residents could each claim about one professional basketball court of private land. Thankfully, people are social and have gained a general command of vertical architecture, so wild space remains. Still, most of Nassau's undeveloped terrain is unstable lowland sand and the narrow greenways that defend the street grid from our few imprudent streams. These parks are great, but only represent a tiny minority of bird habitat. Any occasion to sample the birdlife somewhere else is great. The ability to bird there with frequency and purpose is worth celebrating. This satisfying and productive habit is called patch birding.

I never expected patch birding would be for me. When I wanted to see birds, I went somewhere where diversity is expected. After joining the workforce after college, I came across patch birding by necessity. I worked in an office near the giant concrete temple that is the Roosevelt Field Mall. A hairline of greenery marked the border of the greater mall footprint, widening around a sump hidden behind near the Stewart School. It was surrounded by pokeweed and Japanese knotweed growing right out of a gravel lot. There were a few older trees right along the sump, but otherwise it was intensely disturbed demi-forest, with many invasive plants and evidence of occasional garbage dumping and squatting. The shoebox ecosystem was isolated by some half-hearted, temporary fencing. After a few weeks of walking along the edge, I found there was access within, and I began a quick lunch-hour walking routine around the Stewart School Sump, every possible workday.

I began working in the early summer, so birding was originally a byproduct of a relaxing walk. I was not even eBirding many days. Fall migration brought a case for documentation, beginning with a Tennessee Warbler (they are a local migrant east of New York City). A group of Chipping Sparrows formed and eventually attracted a Clay-colored, and the overgrown lot miraculously had Lincoln's and Lark Sparrows and an Orange-crowned Warbler later in the season. In the winter, there were Fox Sparrows, and hundreds of Fish Crow would fly by, commuting to the dumpsters behind the food court. I encountered Killdeer, Spotted and Solitary Sandpipers, and a woodcock, all in or along the giant, decidedly dry parking lot. A kingfisher once tried hunting the tiny sump. Tent caterpillars brought in a locally-scarce Black-billed Cuckoo at eye level. A Monk Parakeet visited, and a Rusty Blackbird. There was an early Winter Wren the second September, and a Mourning Warbler, and a Yellow-bellied Flycatcher. Many of these species I had only seen once or twice before in the

whole county. I encountered well over 100 species during my six seasons of visits.

In May, a stunning adult Red-headed Woodpecker enjoyed a particular dead tree in the nearby residential area. The bird left after a week, and another week later that same tree was cut to its base. The majority of my patch was also leveled shortly after I stopped working there. Tonight I happened to pass by it, and finally saw the first supports of the hotel that will cater to shopping enthusiasts and tired businesspeople with small rolling suitcases. I had known the hotel was coming since shortly after I began birding there. I had dreams of documenting endangered species on site to disrupt construction, or something to that effect, but the site had been purchased before I had even found it. My patch was an inevitable casualty.

Even though it was not rescued, my patch provided me many quiet hours and eBird with some nice, meaningful data. I was privileged to be able to see its true and surprising potential to shelter and feed birds throughout the whole year. Two or three random visits here would have likely turned up nothing of interest at all. I look forward to adopting a new patch someday, and hope everyone has the chance to find a place to survey routinely, like the Stewart School Sump.