

PATCH BIRDING—HOME PATCH, PITTSFORD MENDON CENTER ROAD

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Coming four years now, the hubby and I (he conceived during a WWII leave, me a somewhat younger baby boomer) upsized (gasp!) to a sprawling ranch on three acres, the better to host a growing family now containing three grandkids. The house is in southeastern Monroe County, Town of Mendon, in an outer suburb of Rochester. More to the point, it sits across the street from an under-birded piece of the largest county park in the system, Mendon Ponds, henceforth MPP. I promptly created an eBird “patch” that includes my yard and the county land. There are shrubby fields, three small cattail marshes, an old pine plantation, deciduous woods. The patch list is up to 112 species. Below are some of the highlights of these last four years.

There is an overwintering flock of Turkey Vultures in this part of the county, perhaps two dozen or so. This past winter, we were privileged to have some of them roost in the yard’s Norway Spruce. On cold winter mornings, walking out to fetch the morning papers, I’d be startled by an explosion of wing beats as they flushed and struggled to gain altitude in the cold, still air. On sunny afternoons, they would drop into these spruce to catch the last rays of warmth; we would watch amazed as the spruce swallowed up their hulking bodies as they settled in.

Woodcock is another favorite first-thing-in-the-morning bird. On warm mornings in early spring, often with snowy remnants lingering, I walk across the road and down into the field a bit to minimize traffic sounds and am greeted with woodcock peents. A bit later in the spring, I am serenaded by Eastern Phoebes and House Wrens, sometimes even the first ones in the county for the year.

Regulars include Screech and Great Horned Owls (and once a jealousy-provoking Barred!), all the expected woodpeckers except Red-headed (a Pileated Woodpecker swinging on a 5 x 5 wire suet feeder is a sight to behold), the three regular falcons, seven flycatcher species, year-round Red-breasted Nuthatches, Tree Swallows and Eastern Bluebirds breeding in provided boxes, all three mimics, 12 species of sparrows, Rose-breasted Grosbeaks and Indigo Buntings. Accipiters visiting the feeders in winter provide drama.

The warbler list is up to 14 species. Blue-winged Warblers, Common Yellowthroat, Yellow Warblers and Chestnut-sided Warblers breed in the shrubby field across the street, with American Redstarts and Hooded Warblers favoring the deciduous woods. In late winter/early spring there have been Pine Warbler visits to the suet. Not actually on my home patch but within the boundaries of MPP, my regular hilly-walk-for-exercise route includes four Hooded Warbler territories. A note of caution as we all get ready for the Breeding Bird Atlas: On any given day during breeding season the number of HOWAs that I actually hear ranges from 0 to 4 on the same exact route at roughly the same time of day.

A report from my home patch would not be complete without mentioning Chukar. In 2018 several escaped from the nearby private hunting preserve where they are raised and one ended up in my yard. It was a daily presence for several weeks, rooting about under the bird feeders. Every garden should have a Chukar. Or not. If the holes dug in mine are any indication, their means of escape is likely by digging. I've already seen some escapees just recently, despite their rearing pens having been extensively renovated earlier this year. OK, I know Chukar is a NYSOA unmentionable, but one can hold out hope that one day a Chukar would come by being followed by baby Chukars, and then who would be laughing?

One-time only sightings of Bald Eagle, Northern Shrike, Swainson's Thrush and Fox Sparrow keep me glued to the windows overlooking the bird feeders far longer than I'd care to admit. But the best thing is that the hubby, finally retired, is sometimes actually looking at birds and occasionally actually uses binoculars to do so. Hope springs eternal....

