

THE BREEDING BIRDS OF THE UPPER WISSAHICKON

KEITH RUSSELL

This paper covers the area from the bridge at Kitchen's Lane north to Harper's Meadows in Philadelphia. This is the same area dealt with by C. Chandler Ross in his earlier article on breeding birds of the Wissahickon (*Cassinia*, 1962). Included are the old Andorra Nurseries to Northwestern Avenue and the Houston Estate to Wissahickon Avenue. The Cresheim Valley is excluded.

It is interesting to compare the bird life in the upper Wissahickon in recent years to that discussed in Ross' article in 1962. The over-all picture is encouraging, with some increase in the number of regular nesting species. The Wissahickon has attracted southern lowland species such as the Acadian Flycatcher, Cerulean Warbler, and Kentucky Warbler, some northern species such as the Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Cedar Waxwing, and Black-capped Chickadee, as well as virtually all eastern forest species.

Probably one of the most interesting and rewarding birding spots during the peak of the breeding season is the Bell's Mill Road area from the creek between Bell's Mill and the covered bridge southwest to Wissahickon Avenue. With a diversified habitat of mature forest, grassy slopes, and brushy areas, it is possible to find a large variety of bird life. Most of this area is not owned by Fairmount Park but rather by the Houston Estate. Seventeen acres of meadowland were used to build the Samuel Houston Recreational Center. Unfortunately, construction of the center destroyed the only suitable nesting grounds for Killdeer, Grasshopper Sparrows, and Henslow's Sparrows. However, virtually all the remaining area is in a natural state and supports a high diversity of nesting land birds. Broad-winged Hawks, Red-shouldered Hawks, Red-tailed Hawks, and Sparrow Hawks frequent this area as do the Screech and Great Horned Owls. The latter have become almost common. Eight species of warblers nest and/or summer regularly. This and other areas such as the old Andorra Nurseries are in critical need of management and absolute protection from nearby civilization. These areas are within the city limits of the fourth largest city in the country. Hopefully, if the entire region is protected and preserved it will attract some species which have disappeared and possibly others which have never nested there before.

In this paper I am dealing with records over the last fifteen years (1958-1973). I am certain there may be some records which have escaped my attention, and I would be grateful to readers for informing me of them. The main body of this paper is an annotated list of birds which have occurred in summer or which possibly or certainly have bred in the included area. That which constitutes breeding or a breeding attempt is: a nest find, a juvenile bird sighting, an adult bird seen carrying nesting material, or an adult bird seen carrying food.

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Since 1958 only four species have completely disappeared from the area: Killdeer, Eastern Bluebird, Grasshopper Sparrow, and Henslow's Sparrow (all but the Bluebird had appeared as breeding species subsequent to 1958). Other species which have appeared as breeders and/or summering birds include: Mallard, Red-tailed Hawk, Red-shouldered Hawk, American Woodcock, Great Horned Owl, Whip-poor-will (one record), Black-capped Chickadee, Winter Wren (one record), Cedar Waxwing, Warbling Vireo, Parula Warbler, and Red-winged Blackbird.

ANNOTATED LIST

MALLARD. Feral status questionable and uncertain. One wild pair does exist in the Carpenter's Woods area, and breeding is suspected.

TURKEY VULTURE. Scarce permanent resident. Four to six or more birds are exclusive to the area, but breeding in recent years is undocumented.

COOPER'S HAWK. Rare summer resident between Rex Avenue and Valley Green Road. Present breeding status questionable.

RED-TAILED HAWK. Scarce but regular summer resident. Breeding is suspected because of yearly summer sightings of immature birds and family groups.

RED-SHOULDERED HAWK. Uncommon to rare summer resident and breeder, especially around Carpenter's Woods.

BROAD-WINGED HAWK. Scarce summer resident and breeder.

SPARROW HAWK. Uncommon summer resident and breeder.

BOBWHITE. Rare summer resident in fields and brush northeast of Wissahickon Avenue. House construction has greatly reduced suitable habitat and virtually eliminated this bird as a breeding species in the area.

RING-NECKED PHEASANT. Common breeding resident in wooded ravines near fields. This bird becomes very quiet after May.

KILLDEER. Formerly bred northeast of Wissahickon Avenue on the present site of the Houston Recreational Center. All suitable habitat for this species in the immediate area has now been destroyed.

AMERICAN WOODCOCK. Rare summer resident and possible breeder around Bell's Mill Road and north of Livezey's Lane. This species could be rather common but is seldom seen.

MOURNING DOVE. Common to scarce permanent resident and breeder.

YELLOW-BILLED CUCKOO. Uncommon summer resident and probable breeder in extensive woods near open areas.

SCREECH OWL. Uncommon permanent resident and breeder.

GREAT HORNED OWL. Uncommon to scarce permanent resident and breeder generally. However, it is quite prevalent around Bell's Mill Road.

WHIP-POOR-WILL. One breeding record in the woods southwest of the creek at Thomas Mill Road (1963).

CHIMNEY SWIFT. Common summer resident. However, most of the birds breed in residential areas bordering the Wissahickon.

RUBY-THROATED HUMMINGBIRD. Rare irregular summer resident. Present breeding status doubtful.

BELTED KINGFISHER. This bird is sometimes seen late into May and breeding is suspected below Valley Green and around Bell's Mill Road where steep banks exist along the creek.

- YELLOW-SHAFTED FLICKER. Common summer resident and breeder.
- RED-BELLIED WOODPECKER. Uncommon to scarce permanent resident and breeder in various places. These birds are very noisy in May but become difficult to locate thereafter. The first nest was found in Carpenter's Woods in 1959.
- HAIKY WOODPECKER. Uncommon permanent resident and breeder.
- DOWNY WOODPECKER. Common permanent resident and breeder.
- EASTERN KINGBIRD. Fairly common to uncommon summer resident and breeder around open areas.
- GREAT CRESTED FLYCATCHER. Uncommon summer resident and breeder near open areas.
- EASTERN PHOEBE. Uncommon summer resident and breeder with a rather spotty distribution near streams and in cool ravines.
- ACADIAN FLYCATCHER. Uncommon summer resident and breeder in moist or flooded woodlands along the creek south of Bell's Mill Road, in Carpenter's Woods, and other spots.
- EASTERN WOOD PEWEE. Fairly common to uncommon summer resident and breeder in mature woods.
- ROUGH-WINGED SWALLOW. Present breeding status unknown. Bred formerly in bridges across streams.
- BARN SWALLOW. Regular uncommon summer resident and probable breeder.
- BLUE JAY. Common permanent resident and breeder.
- COMMON CROW. Common permanent resident and breeder.
- FISH CROW. Rare to uncommon permanent resident and former breeder. Its present breeding status is unknown.
- BLACK-CAPPED CHICKADEE. Evidently a rare summer resident and breeder around Bell's Mill Road. Hybridization with the Carolina Chickadee is undoubtedly quite common.
- CAROLINA CHICKADEE. This species has become a common permanent resident and breeder.
- TUFTED TITMOUSE. Common permanent resident and breeder.
- WHITE-BREASTED NUTHATCH. Uncommon permanent resident and breeder, becoming scarce in June and July.
- HOUSE WREN. Very common summer resident and breeder in brushy areas and in street lights.
- WINTER WREN. One territorial bird was observed throughout the spring and summer of 1972 around a deep ravine just north of Thomas Mill Road.
- CAROLINA WREN. Uncommon permanent resident and breeder.
- MOCKINGBIRD. Uncommon permanent resident and breeder, but consistently found in brushy areas and often close to houses.
- CATBIRD. Very common to abundant summer resident and breeder.
- BROWN THRASHER. Uncommon summer resident and breeder in brushy areas near woodland edges.
- ROBIN. Abundant summer resident and breeder.
- WOOD THRUSH. Common summer resident and breeder. Very common in the old Andorra Nurseries.
- VEERY. Common summer resident and breeder along steep slopes and wooded ravines near water. Very common around Livezey's Lane.
- EASTERN BLUEBIRD. Until 1960 bred in fields northeast of Wissahickon Avenue. No recent records. With the erection of bird houses this species could possibly be re-established.
- BLUE-GRAY GNATCATCHER. Scarce but regular summer resident and breeder around Bell's Mill Road and occasionally Kitchen's Lane.
- CEDAR WAXWING. A scarce irregular summer resident. Flocks of up to twelve birds have been seen, but breeding is doubtful.
- STARLING. Common permanent resident and breeder.

WHITE-EYED VIREO. Uncommon summer resident and suspected breeder in second growth woods and scrub southwest of Bell's Mill Road and possibly elsewhere.

YELLOW-THROATED VIREO. Rare but regular summer resident and breeder in the woods along the bridle path southwest of Bell's Mill Road and the creek. Possibly occurs elsewhere.

RED-EYED VIREO. Common summer resident and breeder.

WARBLING VIREO. Formerly bred on the corner of Lykin's Lane and Wissahickon Avenue until the construction of houses. I suspect that this bird still breeds in the vicinity but has gone undetected.

WORM-EATING WARBLER. Scarce summer resident and breeder on wooded slopes along the main bridle path bordering the creek at Bell's Mill Road.

BLUE-WINGED WARBLER. Regular uncommon to common breeder in the fields and in the scrub growth southwest of the creek at Bell's Mill Road.

PARULA WARBLER. Irregular rare summer resident and possible breeder.

YELLOW WARBLER. Rare summer resident in the Bell's Mill Road area west of the creek. Breeding is strongly suspected.

CERULEAN WARBLER. Scarce but probably a regular summer resident and breeder near the covered bridge. The last confirmed breeding record was there in 1971.

CHESTNUT-SIDED WARBLER. Fairly common summer resident and breeder along brushy wood edges in the Bell's Mill Road area.

OVENBIRD. Fairly common summer resident and breeder in large mature woods. This bird has a rather spotty distribution.

LOUISIANA WATERTHRUSH. Rare but regular summer resident and breeder along the banks of the Wissahickon and smaller rushing streams.

KENTUCKY WARBLER. Fairly common summer resident and breeder. Most prevalent around Livezey's Lane.

YELLOWTHROAT. Common to very common summer resident and breeder, especially in brushy areas.

YELLOW-BREASTED CHAT. Uncommon summer resident and breeder in the fields to the southwest of Bell's Mill Road and the creek.

HOODED WARBLER. Regular rare summer resident and breeder in the woods southwest of Bell's Mill Road and the creek, and at Devil's Pool.

AMERICAN REDSTART. Uncommon summer resident and breeder along the east wood edges, around the fields west of the creek at Bell's Mill Road. Occasionally at scattered other locations.

HOUSE SPARROW. Uncommon permanent resident and breeder only along the borders of woods near houses.

RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD. Scarce summer resident and possible breeder in open brushy areas in Roxborough.

BALTIMORE ORIOLE. Fairly common summer resident and breeder.

COMMON GRACKLE. Common summer resident and breeder.

BROWN-HEADED COWBIRD. Uncommon summer resident and breeder.

SCARLET Tanager. Uncommon to common summer resident and breeder.

CARDINAL. Common permanent resident and breeder.

ROSE-BREASTED GROSBEAK. Uncommon to scarce summer resident and breeder seemingly only on the east side of the creek from Kitchen's Lane to the Cresheim Valley and at Bell's Mill Road.

INDIGO BUNTING. Uncommon summer resident and breeder in open brushy areas with scattered trees.

HOUSE FINCH. Scarce to uncommon permanent resident and breeder.

AMERICAN GOLDFINCH. Uncommon summer resident and breeder.

RUFOUS-SIDED TOWHEE. Very common to abundant summer resident and breeder.

GRASSHOPPER SPARROW. Formerly bred northeast of Wissahickon Avenue until the Houston Recreational Center consumed almost all suitable nesting grounds. Very good habitat does exist along Northwestern Avenue and should be closely investigated.

HENSLOW'S SPARROW. This bird suffered the same fate as did the Grasshopper Sparrow northeast of Wissahickon Avenue. Some rather interesting habitat does still exist around the recreational center and could possibly support this species again. This area should be given more attention by birders.

CHIPPING SPARROW. Rare and local summer resident and breeder around houses and on lawns.

FIELD SPARROW. Uncommon summer resident and breeder in suitable habitat.

SONG SPARROW. Common summer resident and breeder.

Following is a list of species that have either bred in the past and could breed again or, to my knowledge, have never bred in the upper Wissahickon but could very well breed in the future:

Upland Plover	Prothonotary Warbler
Spotted Sandpiper	Golden-winged Warbler
Black-billed Cuckoo	Yellow-throated Warbler
Barn Owl	Orchard Oriole
Pileated Woodpecker	Summer Tanager
Traill's Flycatcher	Blue Grosbeak
Cedar Waxwing	Grasshopper Sparrow
Warbling Vireo	Henslow's Sparrow

The following species have declined significantly as breeders since 1958: Cooper's Hawk, Bobwhite, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Rough-winged Swallow, Hooded Warbler, and Chipping Sparrow.

The following species have increased significantly as breeders since 1958: Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Great Horned Owl, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Eastern Kingbird, Mockingbird, Veery, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, Blue-winged Warbler, American Redstart, and House Finch.

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131 W. Hortter Street
Philadelphia, Pa. 19119