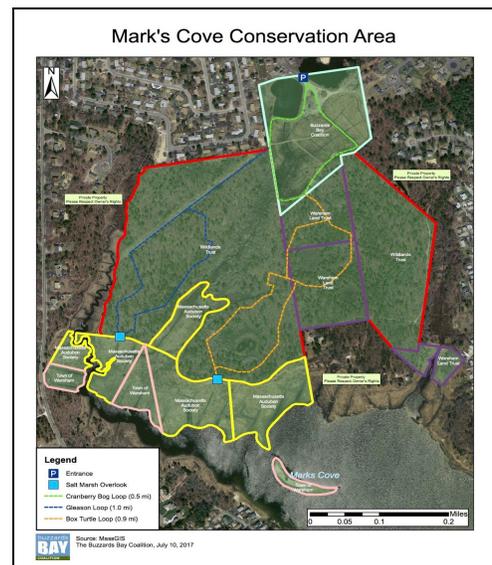


## Birding (Blog) Series: Early Arrivals at Marks Cove Natural Area

As a temporary TerraCorps Service Member with the Wareham Land Trust (WLT), one of my most exciting projects was the Birding Series program. As a birder and educator, one of my greatest aspirations is to connect the public to the natural world through birds, birding culture, and phenology, or the study of the change of seasons, which would have occurred and continued through the 5-month Birding Series program. The first few sessions were extremely successful and promising; participants were engaged, the birds were showing, and the community was building. Due to the rapid spread of COVID-19, WLT has decided to cancel all programs until the end of April or even beyond. As saddened as I am by this, we all need to remain safe, so I have decided to supplement these cancellations with blogs and videos that will follow the assigned themes at the designated locations (with some exceptions). Even though we cannot get out into the field together, I hope to shed enough light on the bird species, sounds, and habitats for people to actively bird in Wareham.

This will be my first blog following these changes: Early Spring Arrivals at Marks Cove Natural Area. I have attached links to listen to the songs, calls, and sounds I am referring to at the bottom of the article. Also, I included some photos of the species I am referring to, and all of the photos were taken by me on the day of birding described below. I hope you enjoy and please remember to follow social distancing practices... unlike some of our feathered friends (I am looking at you, Cedar Waxwings!).

Marks Cove Natural Area is a quilted-arrangement of properties and property owners that form a wonderful natural area with a gradient of ecosystems and natural communities, ranging from pitch pine- scrub oak forest to salt marsh. Due to the many shrubs and heathland understory (think blueberry, pepperbush, etc.), wintering birds and early arrivals seek berries, seeds, and shelter/protection around the property. For these reasons, Marks Cove Natural Area is a wonderful place to bird in early spring and even the winter, so I visited on March 24th to see what I could turn up!



**Marks Cove Trail Map**

(The property is located at the end of Nicholas Drive and I recommend looking up directions before heading out.)

As I pull up to the parking area at the end of Nicholas Drive, I begin my birding adventure with my first observation of nesting behavior of the season: a Mourning Dove carrying nesting material of grass, twigs, and leaves. A male dove will bring nesting material to the female, then she will weave a flimsy nest to be built on tree branches and vines. I exit my car and make my way onto the property, I am immediately hit with a creaky, squeaky, loud sign of spring: the newly arrived blackbird species. Both the



**Black-capped Chickadee**

Common Grackle and Red-winged Blackbird arrive in the Wareham area during the middle and end of February. These birds group up in giant flocks above marshes and agricultural fields. Both blackbird species spend the winter in states further south, and their loud songs and calls<sup>1,2</sup> signify the return of spring. A mixed flock of about fifteen blackbirds flies west over the entrance to the trail towards the Wareham River, where they will continue their ruckus and blatant disregard for social distancing rules.

Following the western side of the Cranberry Bog loop, I hear a flock of songbirds calling from one of the retired and overgrown cranberry bogs. I follow the noise to a stunted patch of pitch pine and oaks. As I stand still scanning the trees, I spy two Black-capped Chickadees and a Tufted Titmouse, but I hear a high-pitched trill that does not belong to either of these species. To grab the attention of the unknown bird, I begin to pish! Pishing is a technique used in birding to get birds closer and flush them out of hiding, where birders make the alarm calls of birds like chickadees and titmouses. Small songbirds will often flock up with these species to have more eyes looking for predators and food opportunities. Flocks will often “mob” or attack predators like hawks, cats, and foxes with alarm calls, so when birders imitate these sounds, other birds in the area will travel over to have a closer look at the commotion. People are confused why birds may go closer to the threat, but these birds are small and fast and can likely avoid detected predators, so think of it as a game of “catch me if you can!”. Pishing will stress birds out and distract them from foraging and breeding, so please do not pish in the breeding season (summer) and do not pish for long stretches of time.



**Black-capped Chickadee**

Back to the birds. Knowing I want to bring the mystery birds closer, I start pishing at the pines. Almost instantly, three Golden-crowned Kinglets emerge from the treetop to check me out.

Golden-crowned Kinglets are a tiny, round songbird that is grayish overall with yellow highlights on the wings and tail. Their golden-yellow crowns are only seen when males are advertising for a mate or defending territory. We have two species of kinglets in Massachusetts: Golden-crowned and Ruby-crowned. The golden-crowned will remain in Wareham throughout the winter, while the ruby-crowned are short distance migrants traveling to the southern United

States during the winter and pass through Massachusetts in mid-April (...or even earlier!). Both species will leave Massachusetts for the summer to breed in Northern New England and Canada. Kinglets are notorious for their energetic behaviors, and infamous for being extremely difficult to photograph for this reason.



Pitch Pine needles blocking Golden-crowned Kinglet



Hermit Thrush practicing social distancing

As I was observing the Golden-crowned Kinglets, a very special bird appeared: the Hermit Thrush. Some bird species hold sentimental value for birders, whether it be a family connection, a religious connection, your favorite species, or one that reminds you of a special place. In this case, the Hermit Thrush reminds me of Vermont, where I attended the University of Vermont and expanded my love for birds. The Hermit Thrush is the state bird of the

Green Mountain State, with its beautiful, melodic flute-like song<sup>3</sup> echoing through mixed hardwood forests. Like the Golden-crowned Kinglets, Hermit Thrush overwinter in Wareham, rarely poking out from the overgrown thickets. The Hermit Thrush has light brown wings, a light brown back, a reddish-brown tail, and a white belly with brown speckled polka-dots that fade from head to tail. Wareham is also home to the closely related Wood Thrush and Veery. Wood Thrush are darker brown than Hermit Thrush and have solid polka-dots throughout the breast, and Veery are uniform light brown (no reddish trail) and lack polka-dots on their white belly. The thrushes all have beautiful songs that sound similar<sup>4,5</sup>. Give a listen and try to tell them apart!



Hermit Thrush

As I make my way along the Box Turtle Loop, I am surprised by the silence. Every so often, I hear the whooping of a Northern Cardinal<sup>6</sup> or the “hey-phoebe!” song of a Black-capped Chickadee<sup>7</sup>. The start of these songs is another sign of spring at Marks Cove, breeding season. I pause at the bench overlook and use my binoculars to identify some ducks out in the cove. Buffleheads are easy to identify from a distance; their bold contrast of black and white and bubbly diving behavior give them away. As I scan the bay for more waterfowl, I come across a pair of Canada Geese and a few Herring Gulls. The most common gull species in Wareham are the Herring Gull and Ring-billed Gull. The Herring Gull spend their time closer to the ocean, like on beaches and in bays, while Ring-billed Gulls occupy inland parking lots and rivers. As I continue to scan, I discover the widely popular, locally famous Osprey nest on the Cedar Island rock. Near the mouth of the river leading to Marks Cove, a pair of Osprey have built a massive nest that sits extremely close to the surface at high tide.

**Northern Cardinal**



**Osprey nest on Cedar Island rock**

Typically Osprey will construct nests on nesting platforms, utility poles, or trees to avoid predators, so seeing this nest near at water level both intrigues and frightens me. As long as the nest remains sturdy in the winds and the water does not rise above the sides, the nest will be successful. Unfortunately, there are no Osprey here today, but I can guarantee that the nest will be occupied by next week<sup>8</sup>.

I leave the overlook and continue on the Box Turtle Loop until I reach the power lines. I hear a commotion of Blue Jays coming from the power lines, so I decide to take the Gleason Loop. Birding tip: when you hear a group of Blue Jays screaming and yelling,



**White-breasted Nuthatch**

follow the uproar and look for them. Jays will often mob predators like hawks or owls in trees, so you might stumble upon a sleepy Great Horned Owl or a ready-to-kill Red-tailed Hawk.

The forested thickets separating the backyards of abutting houses and the trail provide a party of common backyard birds. You may find that the number and diversity of birds increases near these

backyards and other areas like this. Birds prefer to occupy edge habitats, as there is more opportunity for food and a better chance of catching sneaking predators. Backyards may have feeders, birdbaths, and native plantings for seeds and fruits.



**Song Sparrow**

Following the jays, I do not find any predators, but I have a wonderful five minutes of birding. I begin to pish and a number of species present themselves: Black-capped Chickadee, White-breasted Nuthatch, Dark-eyed Junco, Song Sparrows, and Tufted Titmouse all flutter above my head, crossing over the trail. Amongst the nearly twenty individual birds, there are two signs of spring that stick out: the Dark-eyed Junco song and the molting of American Goldfinch.

During the spring, Dark-eyed Juncos will begin to sing their bell-like song<sup>9</sup> which can be heard from backyards, thickets, and edges of fields. These small, plump birds will travel in groups and forage for seeds and insects on the ground. They can be found with sparrow flocks, and if you are lucky, you might get spring and fall, spring-associated junco songs and autumn-associated White-throated Sparrow<sup>10</sup> song. The second sign of spring is the transitional plumage of American Goldfinches. In the winter, goldfinches will lose their beautiful, sunflower-yellow plumage (feather color and arrangement) and turn to a drab yellowish-gray. In the spring, the male goldfinches are preparing for mating season by molting, or shedding their winter feathers, to display their showiest colors to attract a female. As a general rule, non-breeding winter plumage is



**Dark-eyed Junco**



**Gradient of molting goldfinch**

referred to as basic plumage and breeding summer plumage is referred to as alternative plumage<sup>11</sup>.

As I continue on the trail, I run into a neighbor that I frequent regularly at Marks Cove. He walks the trails every day and knows more about the property than most. We stopped and chatted for a minute, at a safe six-foot distance, and he

explained that there seems to be an influx of birds by the Gleason Loop bench overlook. He pointed to the marsh and let me know that he often sees Great Blue Herons in the creek early in the morning, then we headed our separate ways. I walk away from the conversation feeling refreshed and thankful to chat about birds with familiar faces in Wareham.



**Female Downy Woodpecker**  
(males have red heads)

As I get to the bench, his tip does not disappoint! A group of chickadees, titmice, and nuthatches swarm me. As I watch a Downy Woodpecker peck at the branch of a pitch pine, I notice a smaller, buzzier bird mixed in the flock. Bouncing from tree top to tree top, I can barely get a look at this bird, which gives me my first idea of what species it may be. Finally it stays still long enough for me to get a good look and even photograph the bird. To my surprise, it is a Ruby-crowned Kinglet! This is an early individual and a welcome surprise for me. As explained above, Ruby-crowned Kinglets only pass through Wareham in the spring. Though this individual does not represent the entire population, it begs the observation that spring is occurring earlier and earlier every year.

After watching the kinglet interact with the flock for a few minutes, I continue on my way. The signs of spring (and spring migration birding) are becoming more obvious by the minute as told through the presence and sounds of our feathered friends like the blackbirds, phoebes, and breeding activities like molting and singing. To end the day, I tallied twenty-nine species and over two-hundred individual birds counted<sup>12</sup>. The spring birding is only going to become more exciting, so get out on some WLT trails and see what you can find hiding in the thickets!



**Ruby-crowned Kinglet**

Blog post by Mike Perrin, Wareham Land Trust, TerraCorps Land Stewardship Coordinator

Email [Stewardship@WarehamLandTrust.org](mailto:Stewardship@WarehamLandTrust.org) with any questions, birding blog/video requests, and/or bird sightings!

## Additional Resources

- <sup>1</sup> Red-winged Blackbird song/calls (“conk-la-ree!”)  
[https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Red-winged\\_Blackbird/sounds](https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Red-winged_Blackbird/sounds)
- <sup>2</sup> Common Grackle song/calls (creaky door)  
[https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Common\\_Grackle/sounds](https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Common_Grackle/sounds)
- <sup>3</sup> Hermit Thrush song (flute-like)  
[https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Hermit\\_Thrush/sounds](https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Hermit_Thrush/sounds)
- <sup>4</sup> Wood Thrush song (“eee-Olay!”)  
[https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Wood\\_Thrush/sounds](https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Wood_Thrush/sounds)
- <sup>5</sup> Veery song (Pac-man downward spiral)  
<https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Veery/sounds>
- <sup>6</sup> Northern Cardinal song (siren of a *red* fire truck)  
[https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Northern\\_Cardinal](https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Northern_Cardinal)
- <sup>7</sup> Black-capped Chickadee song (“hey-phoebe!”)  
[https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Black-capped\\_Chickadee](https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Black-capped_Chickadee)
- <sup>8</sup> Nest report from OspreyWatch volunteer monitoring program  
<http://www.osprey-watch.org/nests/7731>
- <sup>9</sup> Dark-eyed Junco song (bell-like trill)  
[https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Dark-eyed\\_Junco/sounds2](https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Dark-eyed_Junco/sounds2)
- <sup>10</sup> White-throated Sparrow song (Old-Sam-Peabody-Peabody, PEABODY!)  
[https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/White-throated\\_Sparrow/sounds](https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/White-throated_Sparrow/sounds)
- <sup>11</sup> Molting and plumage basics:  
<https://www.allaboutbirds.org/news/the-basics-feather-molt/>
- <sup>12</sup> eBird checklist from the day  
<https://ebird.org/checklist/S66193695>