

Birds of Mount Greylock

Mount Greylock State Reservation

INFORMATION GUIDE & SIGHTING LIST

Birds of Mount Greylock is a two-part document. **Part 1** is a basic overview of the variety of bird species found in and around Mount Greylock, where you might encounter them in the Reservation. **Part 2** is a birding checklist for your records.

Part 1

Managed by the Department of Conservation & Recreation (DCR), Mount Greylock State Reservation covers over 12,500 acres of upland habitat. The summit at 3,491 feet above sea level is the highest point in Massachusetts and supports the only sub-alpine ecosystem in the state; one of the southernmost extensions of the boreal or spruce-fir forest, normally associated with Canada.

Why go birding?

If you want a challenge, camaraderie, fun, passion, beauty, insight, travel, and discovery, go birding. All this aside, humans have certainly altered face of the landscape, sometimes negatively impacting bird habitats. Bird populations, over time, have responded by shifting to more suitable habitats or disappearing altogether from certain areas. Still other species have been either hunted to extinction, their distinctive habitats completely destroyed, affected by pesticides or pollution, or even displaced by competing bird species.

There is a widely held belief within the bird watching community is that an interest in birds is often the first step toward building a sound conservation ethic. Birds are sensitive indicators of the health of the environment. It is likely that a popular widespread commitment to their well-being will lead to a greater concern for the quality of the environment on which humans and birds are mutually dependent. The presence of diverse bird populations capable of sustained reproduction is one of the best indicators of a healthy environment.

A Unique Habitat

Contrasting with the cool, damp climate within thick growths of Red Spruce, Balsam Fir, Yellow Birch, Mountain Ash, are stands of American Beech, Paper Birch and Black Cherry found within the Hopper, along the Appalachian Trail; or Tall Spruces/Wilbur's Clearing, with the open meadows and fringe forests at Jones' Nose, Haley Farm, Greylock Glen or the Visitors Center.

Ecologists have oft compared the climb from the base of the Mount Greylock to the summit, passing through nearly four different vegetation zones, as if walking from Pennsylvania to Maine in one day. Eminent 19th century Ornithologist William Brewster ascended Mount Greylock by horseback in 1883. He noted the mountain's particular distinction as having a small transitional zone between the valley and the summit supporting two classes of birds. He remarked the mountain is "*a Canadian Island rising from an Alleghenian Sea.*"

Between these extreme changes in climate, topography and ecology, the mountain provides a unique habitat for birds not found or rarely seen anywhere else in the state of Massachusetts. For example three species historically nesting only on the summit: **Blackpoll Warbler** has not been known to nest further south, except on Slide Mountain in the Catskill Mountains of New York; **Bicknell's Thrush** has not been seen or heard since the early 1970s; and **Mourning Warbler**

has expanded its breeding range to include other parts of the Berkshire region.

Species that regularly nest on Mount Greylock, seldom found nesting elsewhere in the Berkshires or other parts of the state include: **Olive-sided Flycatcher**, **Red-breasted Nuthatch**, **Brown Creeper**, **Winter Wren**, **Swainson's Thrush**, and **Golden-crowned Kinglet**. Further north in Vermont's Green Mountains or Mount Monadnock in New Hampshire are other nearby locations where these high elevation birds are generally found.

Normally, the upper portion of the mountain has a more severe climate, often indicated by the clouds it pulls down from passing weather patterns. Flowers that bloom early in the spring in the valley do not blossom until June on the mountain. Similarly, some birds in June are starting a second brood down in Williamstown or Adams, while those on the upper mountain are just finishing their first nests.

The best time to look for breeding birds on Mount Greylock is late-May and mid-July. More species sometimes appear on the mountain in August, although since they have largely stopped singing, they are harder to find and identify.

Boreal Birds



Blackpoll Warbler, *Dendroica striata*
female (left) and male

The most characteristic song on upper Mount Greylock, during nesting season, is the plaintive “Oh Sam Peabody, Peabody” of the **White-throated Sparrow**; with the simple trill of the **Dark-eyed Junco** a close second. The beautiful tinkling song of the **Winter Wren** is commonly heard in thick tangles or deep ravines, which makes these birds difficult to see.

Some species have a fondness for mature spruce-fir forest on the upper elevations of the mountain, yet don't breed in the same type of forest at a lower elevation. Although it appears to be similar there are probably climatic differences so that they are *not* identical, and do not fill the bird's special requirements.

On Mount Greylock the elevation from about 2,600 feet up to the summit (3,491) is a unique habitat to Massachusetts. It is a *boreal, spruce-fir* or *sub-alpine* plant community characterized by Balsam Fir and Red Spruce, typical of forests further north in Canada. The boreal zone contains the state's only breeding population of **Blackpoll Warblers**. Many northern forest dwelling birds breed on the mountain, including **Swainson's Thrush**, **Yellow-rumped Warbler**, and **Dark-eyed Junco**.



White-throated Sparrow, *Zonotrichia albicollis*,
male (left) and female

A Rare Find

Bicknell's Thrush is a smaller, warmer colored species very similar to the **Grey-cheeked Thrush** and distinctively different from the lower altitude living **Hermit Thrush**. It is dependent on the boreal forest for habitat and has not been seen or heard on Mount Greylock since the 1970s. 10 pairs were recorded breeding during summers in the 1950s around the summit and along the Appalachian Trail towards Saddleball Mountain. Currently breeding pairs may be found further north in Vermont, within sight of Mount Greylock.

If present, the best time to listen for Bicknell's Thrush is after the sun has set. The quiet song resembles the **Veery**, commonly found in the valley. But the song runs up the scale at the end, not down. Also increasingly rare is **Swainson's Thrush**.



Bicknell's Thrush, *Catharus bicknelli*

The Raven



Common Raven, *Corvus corax*
© Paul Noll

Perhaps most intriguing to the casual bird watcher (and those that study them) is the **Common Raven**. About the summit, Adams Overlook, Stony Ledge, Rounds Rock or Ragged Mountain you might see them dramatically soaring or doing tumbling acrobatics through the sky. Look for the soaring wings held straight out and distinctive wedge shaped tail.

An impressive and very intelligent bird, it is the largest passerine (perching bird) at 21 to 27 inches in length. The raven is almost twice the size of the Common Crow, including up to a four-foot wingspan. When you hear one you'll

know; they don't "caw," they "croak," scream, or emit a series of guttural sounds. Their ability to mimic other birds, even people's voices may even confuse you.

Often associated with unbroken wilderness forests further north, apparently the forests of the across the Berkshire region are mature enough now to support this species. Generally pairs nest on rocky ledges, such as on Ragged Mountain, mating if not for many years together then for life.

Owls

The **Barred Owl** is the most commonly found owl on Mount Greylock. It is a woodland bird but often hunts over open country, feeding on mice, frogs and other small creatures. This owl stands about 20 inches high, is striped lengthwise and has dark eyes. The call of this owl is distinctive, seeming to say "who cooks for you, who cooks for you all?" Overnight visitors at the

Campground on Sperry Road or the backpacking shelters may hear this nocturnal call.

The **Great Horned Owl**, generally found at lower elevations, is the largest eastern “eared” (actually tuft feathers) owl, standing as much as 25 inches tall. This powerful bird may go after larger prey such as cats, hawks, other owls, and since it lacks the sense of smell, skunks too. Listen for its call: a series of deep, resonate hoots, usually three, five or six. Generally, owls respond readily to imitations or tape recordings of their calls.



Barred Owl, *Strix varia*
© Whatbird.com

Hawks



Northern Goshawk, *Accipiter gentiles*
Adult male (left) and juvenile female. © Paul Noll

Three types of hawks are seen over Mount Greylock: The *Accipiters*, *Buteos* and *Falcons*. Of *Accipiters* only the **Northern Goshawk** breeds in the Berkshires. A fierce hunter, the Goshawk has been known to doggedly follow its prey into buildings. Even humans getting near the nest have come under attack. Two *Buteo* species breed on Mount Greylock, the **Red-tailed** and **Broad-winged Hawks**. Lastly, the streamlined Falcon, not known as a soaring bird, is identified by long pointed wings and rapid wing strokes. Of *Falcons* only the **Kestrel** breeds here. Some of these hawks remain as year-round resident while others migrate south for winter.

Unlike Mount Wachusett State Reservation, 65 miles east, which is on a major north-south flyway for Hawk migrations, Mount Greylock and the Berkshire region does gets a small share of passers-by. Spring migration is from early March to April. The more spectacular fall migration is from mid-August to the first week in November. The best times to see these birds during hawk migration is from 10am to 3pm, when rising warm air from the valleys creates the updraft thermals on which hawks soar.

Other recommended locations to see hawks nearby are: Berry Mountain at Pittsfield State Forest; Spruce Hill at Savoy Mountain State Forest; Mt. Everett State Reservation, Mount Washington, and Hurlburt’s Hill at Bartholomew’s Cobble in Sheffield.



Broad-winged Hawk, *Buteo platypterus*
© whatbird.com

Birding Areas on Mount Greylock

Where you might expect to encounter certain species. This list is incomplete and some species may overlap habitats. Refer to the park Trail Map at <http://www.mass.gov/dcr/parks/trails/Mt.Grey-Summer.gif> for locations. Elevation/vegetation changes are generalized.

Northern Hardwood Forest *Elevation 1000 ft. to 2,300 feet.*

Visitors Center, Haley Farm, The Hopper, Greylock Glen

Blackburnian Warbler	Wood Thrush
Yellow-rumped (Myrtle) Warblers	American Robin
Black-throated Blue Warbler	Pileated Woodpecker
Black-throated Green Warbler	American Redstart
Black & White Warbler	Scarlet Tanager
Chestnut-sided Warbler	Goldfinch
Tennessee Warbler	Rose-breasted Grosbeak
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker	Ovenbird
Solitary Vireo	Wild Turkey
Red-eyed Vireo	Grouse
Pine Siskin, Red Crossbill	Barred Owl
White-winged Crossbill	Eastern Screech Owl
Louisiana Waterthrush	Kestel
Veery	

Transitional Forest A *Elevation 1,600 ft. to 2,400 feet.*

Jones' Nose, Stony Ledge, Rounds Rock, The Hopper, Mount Prospect

Hermit Thrush	Hermit Thrush
Black-throated Blue Warbler	Raven
Black-throated Green Warbler	Hawks
Black & White Warbler	Barred Owl
Chestnut-sided Warbler	

Transitional Forest B *Elevation 2,200 ft. to 2,700 feet.*

Tall Spruces/Wilbur's Clearing, Campground

Blackburnian Warbler	Olive-sided Flycatcher
Yellow-rumped Warbler	Winter Wren
Bay-breasted Warbler	Raven
Cape May Warbler	Barred Owl

Boreal Forest *Elevation 2,600 ft. to 3,491 feet.*

Summit, Adams Overlook, Saddleball ridge and bog, Mts. Fitch and Williams

Rufous-sided Towhee	Cedar Waxwing
White-throated Sparrow	Dark-eyed Junco
Blackpoll Warblers	Raven
Yellow-rumped Warbler	Swainson's Thrush
Mourning Warbler	Yellow-bellied Flycatcher
Canada Warbler	Broadwing Hawk
Indigo Bunting	

WOOD WARBLERS	J F M A M J J A S O N D
__ Blue-winged ASR	e-----m
__ Golden-winged ASR	e-----m
__ Tennessee AM	m-e m-e
__ Nashville ASR	l-----e
__ N. Parula AM	m e-e
__ Yellow ASR	m-----e
__ Chestnut-sided ASR	m-----l
__ Magnolia ASR	m-----m
__ Cape May BM	m m-e
__ Black-throated Blue ASR	e-----e
__ Black-throated Green ASR	e-----l
__ Yellow-rumped ASRM	e-----l
__ Blackburnian ASR	e-----m
__ Blackpoll ASRM	m-----l
__ Black and White ASR	l-----l
__ American Redstart ASR	e-----e
__ Ovenbird ASR	e-----m
__ Louisiana Waterthrush ASR	m-----l
__ Mourning BSR	l-----m
__ C. Yellowthroat ASR	e-----m
__ Wilson's AM	e-e e-m
__ Canada ASR	m-----m
TANAGERS	
__ Scarlet ASR	e-----e

CARDINALS & ALLIES	J F M A M J J A S O N D
__ Rose-brst. Grosbeak ASR	e-----l
__ Indigo Bunting ASR	e-----l
FINCHES	
__ Purple APR	m-----m
__ House APR	
__ Red Crossbill ASR	
__ White-winged Crossbill ASR	
__ Pine Siskin AWR	-----e m----
__ American Goldfinch APR	
__ Evening Grosbeak AWR	-----m l-----
__ Pine Grosbeak APR	
OLD WORLD SPARROWS	
__ House Sparrow APR	
NEW WORLD SPARROWS	
__ Rufous-sided Towhee ASR	
__ Chipping Sparrow ASR	
__ Field ASR	
__ Vesper BSRM	
__ Savannah CSRM	
__ Song ASR	
__ White-throated ASRM	
__ Dark-eyed/Slate-colored Junco APR	
__ Snow Bunting AWR	

Notes:

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