

## **Appendix C. Mass Audubon, Massachusetts Important Bird Area**

### **Site Summary: Upper Housatonic Valley**

**Nominated By:** René Laubach

**Size:** 1,300 acres

**Towns and Counties:** Lee, Lenox, Pittsfield; Berkshire

**Ownership:** MassWildlife, municipal, Mass Audubon

**Major Habitats:** 30% emergent freshwater wetland, 22% river/stream, 12% scrub-shrub wetland, 9% palustrine woodland swamp, 8% cultural grassland, 5% early successional shrubland, 5% oak-conifer transition forest, 5% lake/pond, 3% cultivate field

**Land Use:** wildlife conservation, hunting/fishing, agriculture, utility/right of way

**Threats:** invasive/non-native plants, water pollution, introduced animals, succession, development, hydrologic changes

### **Site Description:**

Approximately 1,300 acres of riparian woodland, oxbow ponds, marshes, beaver swamps, grasslands, and upland woods along the meandering Housatonic River, this IBA represents some of the finest riparian habitat remaining in central Berkshire County. The area is comprises Mass Audubon's 262-acre Canoe Meadows Wildlife Sanctuary in Pittsfield at the northern end of the proposed IBA; the 816-acre Housatonic River Valley Wildlife Management Area, south of Canoe Meadows, extending from Pittsfield to Lenox and Lee; and the 200-acre Post Farm, the site of a former Lenox town dump, currently managed by the Lenox Conservation Commission and abutting the Wildlife Management Area at its southern end. Canoe Meadows was established in 1975, the Housatonic Valley Wildlife Management Area was established in 1968, and Post Farm was established in the early 1980s. More than 200 species of birds have been recorded at the combined areas since 1970. The Housatonic is the major river of the Berkshires and flows almost 150 miles from its three sources near Pittsfield to Long Island Sound. The river valley is underlain by calcareous bedrock, and it is the alkaline properties of the soils created that give rise to numerous unusual species of flora and fauna. The area is bordered immediately to the east by the 16,000-acre October Mountain State Forest and several thousand acres of city of Pittsfield watershed land. This riparian corridor serves as a breeding habitat for numerous wetland species, as well as serving as a migration corridor for many other species of birds.

**Current Conservation Status:**

There is currently a broad-based effort underway to designate the Upper Housatonic River Valley region (Pittsfield to northwestern Connecticut) as a national heritage area (similar to the Blackstone River Valley) by the US National Park Service (USNPS). The proposed IBA falls within this potential Corridor. Recommendation by USNPS to Congress is thought to be very likely. River-bottom sediments in the Housatonic in this area contain very high levels of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs). This polymer was manufactured by General Electric and released into the environment for decades in Pittsfield prior to being outlawed in 1972 by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). This cancer-causing substance bio-accumulates in the fatty tissues of animals that feed on prey found in or near contaminated sediments. Scientific tests conducted by consultants for the EPA have found extremely high PCB levels in the tissues of animals present including dabbling ducks such as American Black Duck, The Tree Swallow, and other vertebrates. Another threat to the ecological integrity of this area is the spread of exotic invasive plants (notably Purple Loosestrife) within the Housatonic's floodplain communities.

**Ornithological Significance:**

Up to several pairs of the state-endangered American Bittern breed in the area annually. A special concern species, the Common Moorhen is an uncommon though regular breeder in the area. Other high conservation priority species represented by at least 25 breeding pairs include: American Black Duck, American Woodcock, Hairy Woodpecker, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Alder Flycatcher, Least Flycatcher, Great Crested Flycatcher, Eastern Kingbird, Veery, Chestnut-sided Warbler, American Redstart, Indigo Bunting, and Rose-breasted Grosbeak. Although numbering fewer than 25 pairs, one of the few Cliff Swallow colonies in Berkshire County is located under the New Lenox Road bridge. In addition, the following species with more than 1 percent of their entire breeding population within Massachusetts breed in the area: Eastern Phoebe, Wood Thrush, Gray Catbird, Blue-winged Warbler, Scarlet Tanager, and Baltimore Oriole. Riparian Forest is present along this portion of the Housatonic River. Characteristic breeding bird species of this vanishing habitat include: Wood Duck, Hooded Merganser, Warbling and Yellow-throated Vireos, Veery, and Blue-gray Gnatcatcher. Rare and/or declining species representative of extensive freshwater marshlands that breed on the area include: American Bittern, Sora, Virginia Rail, King Rail, and Common Moorhen. The site is a migration corridor for the Common Nighthawk.

**State Listed Species:**

Species	Breeding	Winter	Migration
Common Moorhen	1-2 pairs (2002)		
American Bittern	4-5 pairs		

**Other Important Species:**

<b>Species</b>	<b>Season</b>	<b>Maximum Numbers</b>	<b>Years</b>
Brown Thrasher	Spring, Summer, Fall		
Veery	Spring, Summer		
Cliff Swallow	Spring, Summer	17 active nests and 9 active nests	1998 and 2001
Eastern Kingbird	Spring, Summer, Fall		
Great Crested Flycatcher	Spring, Summer, Fall		
Least Flycatcher	Spring, Summer, Fall		
Alder Flycatcher	Spring, Summer, Fall	6 pairs	2002
Eastern Wood-Pewee	Spring, Summer, Fall		
Common Nighthawk	Spring, Summer, Fall	2,927 (FM)	1993
American Woodcock			
American Kestrel	Spring, Summer, Fall	4-5 pairs	
American Black Duck	Year-round		

**Other Floral or Fauna of Significance:** A breeding population of Wood Turtle a species of special concern in Massachusetts occurs in the area. Canoe Meadows Wildlife Sanctuary contains certified vernal pools where spotted salamanders breed. The Northern Leopard Frog also occurs there. A number of state-listed plant species have been recorded at Canoe Meadows Wildlife Sanctuary including Bristly Buttercup, and White Adder's-mouth. All three state sites of Wapato are located in the wildlife management area. Foxtail Sedge, a plant listed as threatened in the state, has been found at one site on the IBA.

- Data Sources:** Hendricks, Bartlett. 1999. *Berkshire Birds*. Third ed. The Berkshire Museum. 75 pp.
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- St. James, David P. 1986. Birds of the Housatonic Wildlife Management Area (checklist). MassWildlife. 1993.

Birding the Housatonic Valley Wildlife Management Area. *Bird Observer* pp. 76-84. 1999.

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Veit, Richard R. and Wayne R. Petersen. 1993. *Birds of Massachusetts*. Mass Audubon. 514 pp.

## **Massachusetts Important Bird Areas**

### **What is an IBA?**

An IBA (Important Bird Area) is a site providing essential habitat to one or more species of breeding, wintering, and/or migrating birds. The primary goals of the IBA program are:

- To identify, nominate, and designate key sites that contribute to the preservation of significant bird populations or communities.
- To provide information that will help land managers evaluate areas for habitat management and/or land acquisition.
- To activate public and private participation in bird conservation efforts.
- To provide public education and community outreach opportunities.

The Massachusetts Important Bird Area Program (IBA) is carried out cooperatively by staff from Mass Audubon, a volunteer Technical Committee and various partner organizations. We have an [informational brochure](#) (PDF - 400KB) about the IBA program that is available for distribution at birding meetings and events. If interested, please contact [iba@massaudubon.org](mailto:iba@massaudubon.org) for more information.

The IBA concept was developed by BirdLife International in 1985 as a model for bird conservation. By 2000, BirdLife and its European partners identified 3,400 IBA sites in Europe. In 1995, BirdLife partnered with the American Bird Conservancy and the National Audubon Society to launch the IBA Program in the United States. To date, IBA Programs have been started in 156 countries and in 46 states with 1500 nominated IBAs throughout the U.S. In 2000, the Massachusetts Audubon Society launched this initiative for the Commonwealth.

The IBA nomination process ended in December 2002. As a result of the hard work of Mass Audubon's IBA staff and the volunteer technical committee, 79 sites in Massachusetts were approved. Mass Audubon is currently working cooperatively with interested parties to develop conservation plans for future habitat management on designated sites. In some cases, efforts will be made to include IBAs in the state's open space planning program. In other cases conservation easements or a modification in land management practices may be recommended. The primary objective will be to facilitate whatever strategy works best for the site as well as to ensure the future protection of the site as an Important Bird Area.