

A Birder's Guide to Hamilton Veterans Park
Mercer County, New Jersey

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Introduction: Veterans Park, 350 acres of wooded and open habitats in southwestern Hamilton township, Mercer County, is known to birders chiefly for two first-rate rarities that have occurred here. In the winter of 1999-2000, a Sandhill Crane, initially discovered on the Trenton CBC, lingered for several weeks on the park's lake. Three years later, in the fall of 2002, a possibly wild Barnacle Goose was found among the wintering waterfowl; less reliable than the crane, this bird was nevertheless relocated several times in October and November among the masses of Canada Geese. As usual, the presence of these desirable species drew increased attention to the park, and a number of birders now make it a regular stop during winter and migration. Unfortunately, much of the park is rather zealously landscaped, and it sees heavy use, particularly in summer and early fall, for sports, recreation, and civic events; but it is large enough, and the habitats varied enough, that it continues to attract a good variety of interesting birds throughout the year.

Driving directions: Veterans Park is approximately ten miles south of Princeton and three miles east of the Delaware River. From the New Jersey Turnpike, I-295 North, or the Jersey shore, take I-195 to exit 3B. Proceed north on Yardville-Hamilton Square Road; cross Kuser Road and continue to the east entrance, ahead on the left. For the south and west entrances, turn left at the brown bank building onto Kuser Road; the south entrance is ahead on the right, and the west entrance can be reached by continuing on Kuser and turning right onto White Horse-Hamilton Square Road. The north entrance, which is the most heavily visited by park users, is reached by following either Yardville-Hamilton Square Road or White Horse-Hamilton Square Road north to Klockner Road. There is parking at each entrance.

To reach the park from I-295 South, take exit 63 and turn left at the first light onto Klockner Road; at the third light, turn right onto Whitehorse-Hamilton Square Road. The west entrance is on the left; the other entrances can be reached as described above.

Note that the Delorme atlas (map 42, grids M6-M7) does not identify the park, or even show the lake. The Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital at

Hamilton is adjacent to the park, and its website, <http://www.rwjhamilton.org/directions2.html>, provides additional driving directions and maps; Mapquest and other internet mapping services can also be consulted.

New Jersey Transit buses stop at the hospital as well.

Safety: Hamilton Veterans Park is heavily visited by families, retirees, and local residents; at no time of year and at no time of day have I (a male "I") ever felt the least unsafe in the park, which is patrolled more or less constantly by Hamilton Police and parks staff. Nevertheless, it is advisable to take the usual precautions of urban living when birding early in the morning or late in the evening, or when visiting the remoter areas of the park (for example, the maintenance area in the southwest, or the tall woods in the northeast).

Natural hazards are potentially a greater threat than human. The local mosquitoes are presumed to carry the West Nile virus; Lyme disease borne by deer ticks probably poses the greatest risk to Veterans Park birders, though I have encountered a total of one tick over all of my excursions.

Birding: Trail maps are often available from the park office, just inside the south entrance off Kuser Road; but even without a map, it is easy to find one's way through the park's various habitats. A wide, paved path connects all four of the park entrances; weekend crowds can make it a good idea to avoid this path after about eight in the morning, but earlier in the day or during the week, particularly during migration, the birder who follows it from the east to the west entrances and back (a distance of less than two miles in total) is likely to have very good views of most of central New Jersey's commoner species.

For the off-the-beaten-path birder, the following route, which takes about three hours on a reasonably good morning, can be quite productive. From the east parking lot off Yardville-Hamilton Square Road, walk the few yards down to the small creek that flows under the road just north of the park entrance. This is Pond Run, which is dammed in the western part of the park to form the lake; there are broad, flat, well-maintained grassy trails on either side of Pond Run. Walk west—away from the road—along the creek, following the brown trail markers. The dogwood thickets are particularly good during migration, when such locally uncommon birds as Mourning and Wilson's Warblers can be seen; a good selection of flycatchers, vireos, thrushes, and other passerine migrants are likely during May and September in the taller trees.

After approximately a quarter mile, you will reach the paved path; turning right and crossing the bridge over Pond Run will take you to the north entrance, while turning left will take you to the main east-west section of the path. On fallout mornings, it is often worthwhile crossing the bridge and walking back up Pond Run on the other side; otherwise, simply remain on the

brown trail and cross the paved path. You will cross the paved path again near a wooden gazebo; as you near the lake, the trail narrows and may be muddy. This is a good area for such relatively shy species as Green Heron and Wilson's Snipe; in spring and fall, the Song Sparrows and Common Yellowthroats are joined by a wide variety of migrants.

The upper reaches of the lake visible from here cannot be seen well from the dam, so scan the open water and the edges carefully. Greater White-fronted Goose and Barnacle Goose have both been seen in these backwaters, which provide some refuge to migrant waterfowl and shorebirds as the day goes on and human crowds grow larger. Double-crested Cormorants, herons, and raptors are often seen early in the morning perched in the trees on the small islands.

The brown-blazed trail ends where it meets the paved path on the lakeshore. Take the paved path to the left and uphill, and pass under a row of pine trees; you will now see below you and to the right the "Magic Field," a weedy depression with scattered trees and bushes. Leave the paved path to walk the dirt road around the field; many of central New Jersey's common open-country species breed here, and in the proper season one can expect such uncommon birds as Orange-crowned Warbler, Lincoln's Sparrow, or Blue Grosbeak. Particularly on cold mornings, the west edge of this field—where the sun strikes first—can be alive with migrants.

Walk through the open gate in the chainlink fence at the bottom of the field and turn left on the wide road through the damp woods; Ovenbird, Wood Thrush, and Gray Catbird are common breeders here, along with Hairy Woodpecker, Scarlet Tanager, Black-and-white Warbler, and Eastern Towhee. In May 2002, a Kentucky Warbler appeared here; for obvious reasons, the White-tailed Deer population is low in the park, making this—in spite of its relatively small size and fragmentation—potentially one of the best remaining sites in Mercer County for ground-nesting passerines.

This trail passes through tall second-growth tulips and sweetgums to join a wooden boardwalk. Follow the boardwalk to the right (north); there will be thrushes in the woods during May, but the last stretch of the boardwalk trail is not generally birdful. It ends in the west parking lot, where good views can be had of much of the lake from the dam. Unfortunately, the lake is greatly beloved of Canada Geese, with up to 3000 birds present at a time in fall migration; as a result, other waterfowl appear to be quite rare (for example, fall of 2002 has produced not a single record of such expected species as Wood Duck, Gadwall, American Wigeon, Blue-winged Teal, or Ring-necked Duck!). The domestic Graylag and Swan Geese, Mallards, and Muscovy Ducks are regularly joined by wild Mallards, Black Ducks, and Green-winged Teal, and very small numbers of other wild ducks are seen on occasion, but in general this does not seem to be a good place for wintering ducks. Double-crested

Cormorant, on the other hand, is a common year-round visitor, and herons can be found throughout the summer, with the two most common species—Great Blue Heron and Great Egret—persisting well into fall.

In spite of its proximity to Florence and the Delaware, Veterans Park does not attract large numbers of gulls; flocks numbering more than several hundred are rare. Laughing Gull is common from April through September, while the most abundant winter species is Ring-billed Gull. Both Iceland and Lesser Black-backed Gull have been seen here, and will probably prove to be regular in winter.

Surprisingly, the lake at Veterans Park is a reasonably good inland location for shorebirds. Killdeer breed commonly on the flats north of the lake; in years when the lake is low, fall sees small numbers of Semipalmated Plovers and Least, Semipalmated, and Pectoral Sandpipers. Both yellowlegs occur, and there is even a single record of Sanderling.

From the west parking lot, the fastest way to return to the east entrance is to walk along the dam back to the Magic Field; turn left on the paved path, which eventually ends at the east entrance. Along the way, at the fireman's monument, cross through the row of trees separating the park from a large field, planted in alternate years with corn and soybeans. The edges of this field are good for a number of open-country birds hard to find in the park proper, including Indigo Bunting and Eastern Bluebird.

Instead of taking this direct route, birders with time and waterproof footwear will want to explore the wooded northeast side of the lake. Walk along the grassy berm between the hospital and the lake; in migration, the thickets near the hospital playground are worth checking, and the edge of the lake may have shorebirds of the species mentioned above. Savannah Sparrow and American Pipit are regular here.

Several rather ill-defined trails enter the woods at the end of the berm; they all intersect with a wide path that curves to the right. Follow this abandoned road, stopping wherever possible to scan the lake and islands, until it reaches Pond Run; turn right and walk down the creek as far as possible until the path ends on a narrow spit extending into the lake.

More species can be seen from this spot, known to local birders as "Cape Maybe," than from any other location in the park. The small pond on the right is a favored retreat of wild dabbling ducks, while herons can be seen on the left where Pond Run flows into the lake. Cormorants and kingfishers perch in the tall trees on the island, and migrant passerines can be abundant in the vegetation between the point and Pond Run. Hawks and vultures can be seen overhead or hunting the woods, and any interesting waterbirds present usually move into these backwaters as the day progresses. Especially in the fall, an

hour spent here can produce a list to rival the tally from any Mercer County site.

Return to the east entrance and parking by following the wide trail back up Pond Run to Yardville-Hamilton Square Road.

This long route covers all of the habitat types represented in Veterans Park. A shorter route, especially good in spring and fall, can also be followed by entering the park from Kuser Road and driving all the way in to the hockey and skateboarding areas. Walk west (left) across the lawns to the volleyball courts; behind them is a small maintenance area, shielded from view by a small thicket that can be excellent for ground-feeding migrants. This is also a good location for roosting and hunting raptors. Enter the woods at the storm sewer outlet; cross a small, usually dry stream and turn right onto the red-blazed trail, which stays just inside the forest edge and ends at a feeding station, maintained year-round by local residents. The feeders provide stunning close views of a good variety of common birds, and could be especially interesting in "invasion" winters. Turn left, away from the parking lot, and follow the paved path to the "Magic Field," just a few steps away; the lake is on the other side of the line of pine trees, and your car behind you, at the end of the paved path leading to the feeding station.

Systematic presentation: The following species have been recorded in 2002 as confirmed or probable breeders in Veterans Park:

Canada Goose; Mallard; Killdeer; Spotted Sandpiper; Mourning Dove; Great Horned Owl; Red-bellied Woodpecker; Downy Woodpecker; Hairy Woodpecker; Northern Flicker; Eastern Wood-Pewee; Eastern Phoebe; Great Crested Flycatcher; Eastern Kingbird; Tree Swallow; Barn Swallow; Blue Jay; Fish Crow; Carolina Chickadee; Tufted Titmouse; White-breasted Nuthatch; Carolina Wren; House Wren; Blue-gray Gnatcatcher; Wood Thrush; American Robin; Gray Catbird; Northern Mockingbird; European Starling; Red-eyed Vireo; Yellow Warbler; Ovenbird; Common Yellowthroat; Northern Cardinal; Indigo Bunting; Eastern Towhee; Chipping Sparrow; Field Sparrow; Song Sparrow; Common Grackle; Brown-headed Cowbird; Orchard Oriole; House Finch; American Goldfinch; House Sparrow.

The following species have been recorded in 2002 as migrants or non-breeding residents (winter or summer or both) in Veterans Park:

Double-crested Cormorant; Great Blue Heron; Great Egret; Green Heron; Black-crowned Night-Heron; Mute Swan; Snow Goose; Greater White-fronted Goose;

Canada Goose; Barnacle Goose; Green-winged Teal; American Black Duck; Northern Shoveler; Ruddy Duck; Black Vulture; Turkey Vulture; Osprey; Northern Harrier; Sharp-shinned Hawk; Cooper's Hawk; Red-tailed Hawk; American Kestrel; Peregrine Falcon; Semipalmated Plover; Greater Yellowlegs; Lesser Yellowlegs; Solitary Sandpiper; Semipalmated Sandpiper; Least Sandpiper; Sanderling; Pectoral Sandpiper; Common Snipe; American Woodcock; Laughing Gull; Ring-billed Gull; Herring Gull; Iceland Gull; Great Black-backed Gull; Rock Dove; Black-billed Cuckoo; Common Nighthawk; Chimney Swift; Ruby-throated Hummingbird; Belted Kingfisher; Yellow-bellied Flycatcher; Purple Martin; Northern Rough-winged Swallow; Bank Swallow; Black-capped Chickadee; Brown Creeper; Winter Wren; Marsh Wren; Golden-crowned Kinglet; Ruby-crowned Kinglet; Eastern Bluebird; Veery; Swainson's Thrush; Hermit Thrush; American Pipit; Cedar Waxwing; White-eyed Vireo; Blue-headed Vireo; Yellow-throated Vireo; Warbling Vireo; Blue-winged Warbler; Tennessee Warbler; Nashville Warbler; Orange-crowned Warbler; Northern Parula; Chestnut-sided Warbler; Magnolia Warbler; Black-throated Blue Warbler; Yellow-rumped Warbler; Black-throated Green Warbler; Blackburnian Warbler; Palm Warbler; Blackpoll Warbler; Black-and-white Warbler; American Redstart; Ovenbird; Kentucky Warbler; Mourning Warbler; Wilson's Warbler; Canada Warbler; Scarlet Tanager; Rose-breasted Grosbeak; Blue Grosbeak; Savannah Sparrow; Lincoln's Sparrow; Swamp Sparrow; White-throated Sparrow; White-crowned Sparrow; Dark-eyed Junco; Red-winged Blackbird; Baltimore Oriole.