



Brunswick Wildlife Ev-Henwood Nature Preserve

On a cold, beautiful morning in mid-December, I headed out to Fort Fisher, one of my favorite winter birding sites, to look for sea ducks and sparrows. It was just below freezing, with a hard frost on the ground, a welcomed relief from recent overly-warm days.

I started north on US 17 and it was quickly evident that Memorial Bridge was open or there had been an accident or both. Who knew? Traffic backed up between Leland and Wilmington at 8:00 AM? I did not see that coming.

I turned around and visited the Ev-Henwood Nature Preserve, another of my favorite winter sites, that is close to home. Ev-Henwood is on Town Creek in Winnabow and was donated to the University of North Carolina at Wilmington in perpetuity for the purpose of nature observation and nature education. Its trail system makes it a very desirable a winter hike even for non-birders.

After parking, I walked back to the dirt road that leads to the fields and pond areas. On the map, available at the parking area kiosk, the road is appropriately named the “fields trail”. At trail’s beginning is a large cleared area with scattered oak trees. The path then crosses the wetlands at the base of the pond and leads into early successional fields on the other side.

The birds had not become active so I just enjoyed the walk. Frost was still in the shaded areas. Fresh deer and turkey tracks littered the road.

The birds eventually started their morning chorus. Carolina Chickadees and a Tufted Titmouse appeared overhead, all fussing at me. Next was the shrill “keeeee-arrr” of a Red-tailed Hawk in the distance.

As it continued to warm up, I started hearing others join the chorus...the harsh scream of the Blue Jay and distinctive calls of a Red-bellied Woodpecker. A Pileated Woodpecker cranked up on the other side of the pond. I never saw it but heard it many times so it must have seen me.

A Towhee was repeating its name from the pond area and then I heard the “chupping” of one of my target birds. After a couple of minutes, I found the Hermit Thrush located near the forest edge. Then I heard the “tap, tap, tap” of a Downy Woodpecker accompanied by its “pik” call as it entered nature’s “chat room”.

The Red-tailed Hawk continued its cry as I walked to the wetlands crossover. The crossover usually provides a vantage point on the pond to find Wood Ducks and on this day there two males and one female. Finally the red-tailed hawk appeared overhead still giving an occasional scream.

Sparrows were my other target. The fields beyond the wetlands are perfect for sparrows, featuring brush on the forest edges, saplings, brambles, weeds, high grass, broom sage, and brush piles. Unfortunately I briefly glimpsed only one unidentified sparrow.

On my first trip down and back, I purposely did not take a camera. I just planned to enjoy the walk, silent except for the birds and the distant hum of snarl hour traffic.

That worked well for me until, on my return trip, I came upon a flock of over a hundred cherished Rusty Blackbirds. I watched them for fifteen minutes. Originally there were about twenty birds and others streamed in. I was afforded a close range photo op as they milled around in a riotous display, going from tree to tree and to the ground and back up. And me without a dang camera!

Ev-Henwood has everything Rusty Blackbirds need...wetlands for roosting and an all-you-can-forage supply of acorns under the oak trees. Fortunately for them, even in our extreme drought, the pond and adjacent wet areas are close to their normal water level.

I walked the trail again, after retrieving my camera to photograph the blackbirds. You may have already guessed. Not a single blackbird; however, this time I at least got photos of the Hermit Thrush.

This species may be quickly identified by the rusty tail that it pumps upwards from horizontal. Tail pumping is a good behavior to aid in identification of many species; however, this thrush is the only one I know that pumps up instead of downward.

As you can see by the photos, it is well camouflaged to blend in with dead leaves and other ground litter, perfect protection for foraging on the ground. Its camouflage is a good segue to an important birding lesson.

When trying to find a bird after seeing movement or have temporarily lost sight of a bird like the thrush, it is best to keep your binoculars down but in a ready state. Binoculars should be held with both hands, just below the chin, and be pre-focused on the area you saw last the bird.

You have a much wider field of view with just your eyes and therefore a better chance of relocating one of our fast feathered friends by quickly raising your binoculars when you next see movement.

Ev-Henwood is a site on the NC Birding Trail and is open daily during daylight hours. More information and directions may be found on the webpage for southeastern trail sites at http://www.ncbirdingtrail.org/TrailGuide/Guide_Southeast.pdf and on UNCW's website at <http://www.uncw.edu/ba/pplant/arboretum/evhen.html>.

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