



Rusty Blackbirds are winter visitors whose summer range stretches from Alaska to the Canadian Maritime Provinces



Large Eastern Fox Squirrels average twice the size of gray squirrels

Brunswick Wildlife Brunswick Town Winter Birding

Winter is a great time for birding around the Brunswick Town/Fort Anderson State Historic Site. Heck, it is just a great season for a walk around the site even if you forget to bring or do not own binoculars. The days can be cold and crisp, the oxygen abundant, and the biting insects practically non-existent.

The overwintering birds are present, along with residents such as the Eastern Fox Squirrel. The star attraction is the Rusty Blackbird because their numbers are in rapid decline, especially on their eastern wintering grounds.

Rusties roost overnight in trees above wetlands and move out to forage at sites that provide good sources of acorn mast, like the top of the bowl around the wetlands area. The wetlands area is labeled “Brunswick Pond” on the wonderful map available at the visitor center.

In winter, Rusties sometimes join other species of blackbirds in roosts; however, based on my experience, they feed in pure flocks near but apart from other blackbirds making them a little easier to find. Like many other species, Rusties take advantage of the acorn pieces produced by vehicles and beaks of the larger grackles.

The co-star of this winter’s tale is the southeastern variation of the Eastern Fox Squirrel, which may be seen most days foraging around the many oak trees. They come in two models...black with the white-trimmed ears and nose and mostly gray with the same trimming. The color difference is not gender based...just different color morphs of the same species.

Just left of the main entrance is a road that leads to Russellborough, the site that was home to Royal Governors Dobbs and Tyron. Tyron eventually moved to New Bern in 1770 to the site where the reconstructed Tyron Palace is located today. Russellborough was burned by the British during the Revolutionary War but the ruins still attract history buffs and birds.

Winter sparrows such as White-throated, Field, and Fox Sparrows may be found along the edges of the woods near the Russellborough site. Most sparrows may be seen from your car since the road circles the area. If you see sparrows duck into the thick stuff, turn your car off, stay in your car (it serves as a blind), and wait for a few minutes. They will usually pop back out to continue foraging.

At the town site, sparrows may be found along the edge of the wetlands, the grassy areas near forest edges, and brush piles purposely left by maintenance personnel. These areas like Russellborough provide access to seed and cover for sparrows to hide.

For the time being, the wetlands are not wet due to the drought so some species may be temporarily absent; however, several species of woodpeckers will be present. One species, the Northern Flicker, is present in greater numbers during the winter. They can usually be seen foraging on the ground.

In addition to sparrows and woodpeckers, overwintering songbirds are members of the supporting cast. They may be found, along with residents such as the Carolina Chickadee, foraging in small, mixed-species flocks. Look for great winter birds like Hermit Thrush, Blue-headed Vireo, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, and Eastern Phoebe.

The visitor center provides a short video which portrays three major segments of Brunswick Town's history. It first chronicles Native American inhabitants, European settlement, the Spanish attack, and the importance of the port for suppliers shipping naval stores to England. Next is the Stamp Act Resistance at Russellborough in 1765 and the Revolutionary War period. Finally, the video examines the role of the earthen Fort Anderson as part of the Confederacy's Cape Fear River defense complex during the War Between the States.

If you go, Brunswick Town is on Plantation Road near Orton Plantation off NC 133. A tour of this area's history actually begins just after you head south on NC 133 from Leland. Stop and read the roadside historical markers.

Unfortunately, due to budget shortfalls, the site is only open from 10AM to 4PM Tuesday through Saturday. Orton Plantation, also on the birding trail and of historical significance, is open March through November.

Between Orton Plantation and Brunswick Town are several birding sites. Unfortunately, they only offer roadside parking, so be careful of cars and alligators. Orton Pond on the right offers a great place to see ducks during the winter.

On a recent trip, the waterfowl I saw included Northern Pintail, Gadwall, American Wigeon, Ring-necked Duck, Lesser Scaup, and Green-winged Teal. The number of waterfowl and

diversity were more than I normally experience, possibly a result of drought-induced lower water levels. Of course, resident Wood Ducks may be seen all year, this trip included.

If, like me, you love a side of history to go with your wildlife entree, the NC Birding Trail offers many sites in addition to Brunswick Town such as Moore's Creek Battlefield National Park and Fort Fisher for you to feast on. Information on birding historical sites may be found in the *North Carolina Birding Trail Coastal Plain Trail Guide*.

Additional information on the twenty-seven NC historic sites may be found at: <http://www.ah.dcr.state.nc.us/sections/hs/default.htm>. I also recommend referencing the NC Department of Cultural Resources' *Guide to North Carolina Highway Historical Markers (8th edition)* (<http://www.ncmarkers.com/book.aspx>). The revised 9th edition is temporarily unavailable.

John Ennis

