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U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# Oxbow

## *National Wildlife Refuge*



Northern Flicker  
Karen Hollingsworth





*“When one tugs at  
a single thing in  
nature, he finds it  
attached to the rest  
of the world.”*

—John Muir

Tim Prior/USFWS

*Inset: Little wood satyr*

© John and Rona Balco



This goose, designed by J.N. "Ding" Darling, has become the symbol of the National Wildlife Refuge System.



Denny Binghaman

*Belted kingfisher*

## Welcome

The winds of change blow through the history of a landscape now known as Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge. Here, where farmers once tilled fertile floodplain soils and, later, soldiers trained, nature has reasserted itself. A place set aside for wildlife, Oxbow is a place where a visitor can witness the wonder and diversity of the natural world.

Located just 40 miles west of Boston, the 1,667-acre refuge lies along almost eight miles of the Nashua River in north-central Massachusetts. Within its boundary is a diverse array of habitats beneficial to wildlife: wetlands, forested uplands, old fields, oxbow ponds and, of course, the river itself. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service manages the refuge for a variety of wildlife species, with a special emphasis on migratory waterfowl and birds that are dependent on grass/shrubland habitat.

Oxbow is one of eight national wildlife refuges comprising the Eastern Massachusetts National Wildlife Refuge Complex. These ecologically diverse refuges include Assabet River, Great Meadows, Mashpee, Massasoit, Monomoy, Nantucket, Nomans Land Island and Oxbow. The refuges include inland and coastal wetlands, forests, grasslands and barrier beaches that provide important habitat for migratory birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians and plants.

## Becoming a Refuge

Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge is one of more than 530 refuges in the National Wildlife Refuge System, administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The National Wildlife Refuge System is the world's largest and most diverse collection of lands and waters set aside specifically for the protection of wildlife and wildlife habitat. Units of the system stretch across the United States from northern Alaska to the Florida Keys, and include small islands in the Caribbean and South Pacific. The character of the refuges is as diverse as the nation itself.

At the turn of the century, Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge was rich farmland. For generations, one family owned a large tract of land extending from the present Route 2, southward along the Nashua River to Bolton Flats. Field crops and orchards were abundant. In the early 1800s a carriage road, known as the Union Turnpike, ran east-west through what is now refuge land. Its remnants can be seen along one of the refuge trails.

In 1917, Camp Devens was established, later to become Fort Devens. The Fort was carved from the towns of Harvard, Lancaster, Ayer and Shirley. Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge was established through land transfers from the Department of Defense to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, beginning in 1974. In 2001, the Service acquired an additional 120 acres in the Town of Harvard and continues to work with partners to protect additional wildlife habitat.



Ed Moses/USFWS

Randy Lennon



*Beaver*



## What is in a Name?

Oxbow gets its name from the oxbow ponds which formed as the meandering Nashua River changed its course over the centuries. These ponds, the river, wetlands and upland habitat now provide excellent wildlife habitat for a variety of birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians and invertebrates.



Lindsey Brown

*Wood duck*

## Working for Wildlife

### *Managing for native species*

National wildlife refuges exist to benefit wildlife. Refuge managers at Oxbow work to help migratory birds and other wildlife in a number of ways:

Wetlands are among the most valuable types of wildlife habitat. Some of Oxbow's wetlands are being invaded by non-native plants – purple loofestribe being the most obvious and abundant. The refuge is attempting to control purple loosestrife by releasing host-specific beetles – insects that feed only on this invasive plant and pose no threat to the wetland ecosystem. The impacts of other invasive plants such as common reed (*Phragmites*), will require further research before managers can determine the need to control them.

### *Baseline wild-life surveys*

Refuge biologists are conducting a number of population surveys and inventories focusing on American woodcock, marsh birds, breeding birds, frogs and toads. Research partners provide refuge managers with additional data. All of this information will help to determine future wildlife and habitat management efforts.



USFWS

*Maintaining open field habitat*

### *Managing for species diversity*

Open fields are particularly valuable for a number of migratory bird species. Refuge staff maintain 25 to 30 acres of presently existing old field/shrub habitat by mowing every three to five years. Managers are also working to maintain wetlands—valuable habitat for a wide array of species. The extensive and regionally significant wetlands in and near the refuge, including their associated tributary drainages and headwaters, have been listed as a priority for protection under the North American Waterfowl Management Plan and the Emergency Wetlands Resources Act of 1986. The refuge's large population of beavers play a natural role in creating and maintaining wetlands.

### *Protecting rare species*

A number of plant and animal species rare in Massachusetts occur at Oxbow. The refuge plays a vital role in protecting these species by safeguarding their habitats and by supporting research. Managers maintain nesting habitat for the Blanding's turtle, a protected species in Massachusetts.

### *Blanding's turtle*



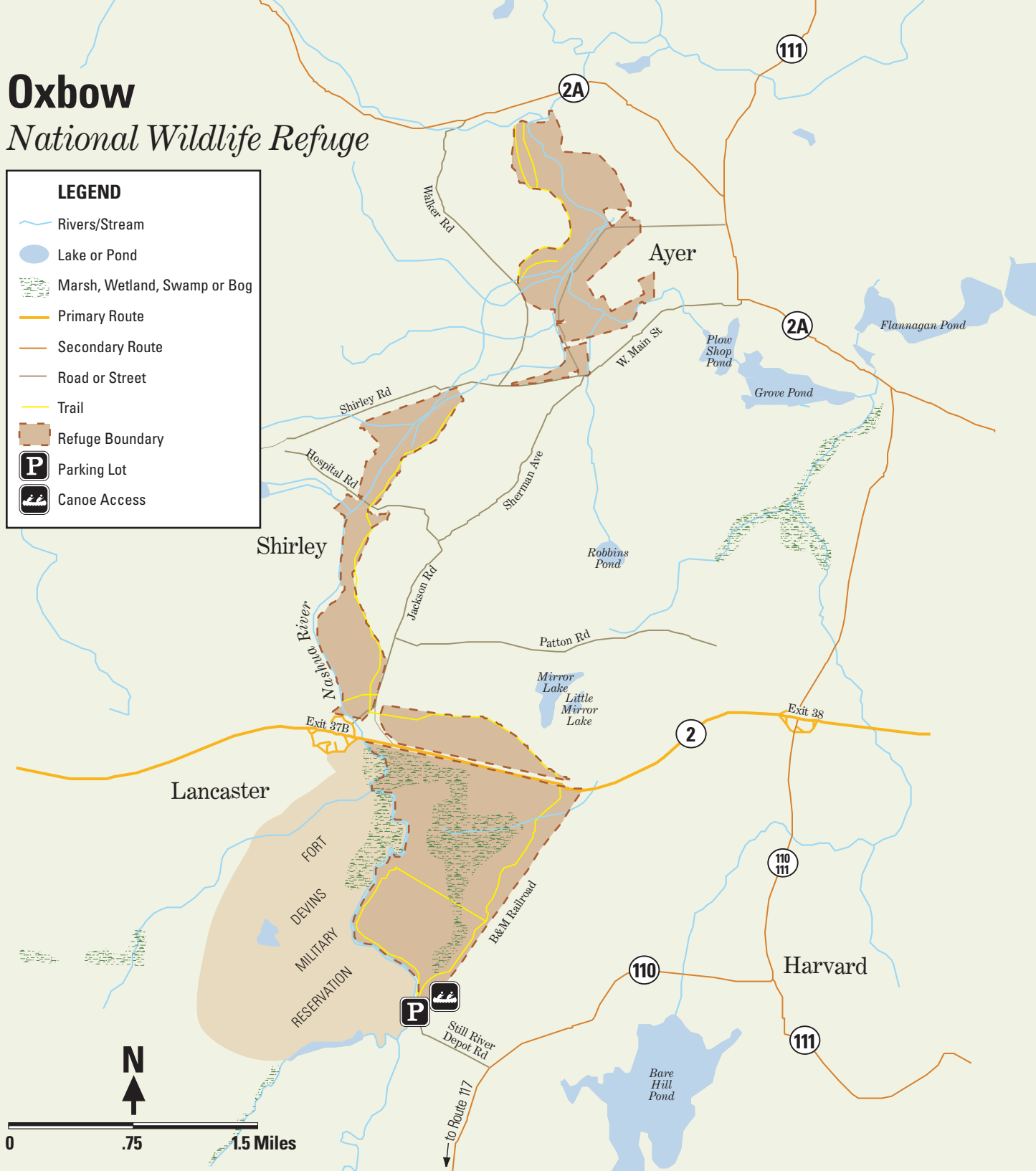
Bruce D. Flaig

# Oxbow

## National Wildlife Refuge

**LEGEND**

- Rivers/Stream
- Lake or Pond
- Marsh, Wetland, Swamp or Bog
- Primary Route
- Secondary Route
- Road or Street
- Trail
- Refuge Boundary
- Parking Lot
- Canoe Access



0 .75 1.5 Miles



Canoeing

## Enjoying the Refuge

Opportunities for wildlife-oriented recreation abound at Oxbow. Wildlife observation, photography and nature study are popular year round. A two mile self-guided nature trail begins at the parking area, follows the riverbank, crosses two oxbow ponds and returns along the tank road. Trail hikers will observe evidence of the industrious beaver, and other wildlife. Cross-country skiing and snowshoeing are popular winter activities. A canoe launch is available adjacent to the parking lot. Use is restricted to daylight hours.

A current schedule of refuge interpretive programs can be found in *The Meadows Messenger* newsletter or on the refuge's web site (see address on back cover).

## Hunting:

The refuge is currently open to small game and upland game bird hunting, in accordance with Massachusetts state laws. Permitted species are woodcock, ruffed grouse, pheasant, turkey, snipe, gray squirrel and cottontail rabbit. Use of federally approved lead-substitute shot is required for all seasons except turkey hunting.

## Whitetail deer



## Making Connections

Oxbow is a place where visitors experience nature on its own terms. Barriers that exist between people and wildlife in developed areas are conspicuously absent here. The refuge provides a setting where one can explore and discover personal connections to the natural world.

The refuge is serving as an outdoor classroom for Worcester students participating in the new Urban Education Program. The program's goals are to provide students with meaningful, hands-on learning experiences both on the refuge and in their own urban environments—experiences that may move some of them to pursue environmental careers.

## Starflower



## Our Friends

The refuge is fortunate to have the support of a dedicated group of people called *The Friends of the Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge*. The group was formed in 1998 to support the Service, and to encourage individuals to actively participate in helping protect refuge resources. The Friends have been active in funding and supporting the new Urban Education Program, assessing the biodiversity of refuge resources, conducting clean-ups of the Nashua River and many other programs.

## Environmental education at Oxbow NWR





## Wildlife Watching Tips

Dawn and dusk are the best times to see wildlife.

Observe from the sidelines. Leave abandoned young animals alone. Its parent is probably close and waiting for you to leave. Do not offer snacks; your lunch could disrupt wild digestive systems.

Use binoculars or a long lens for a closer look.

Try sitting in one good location. Let wildlife get used to your presence. Many animals that have hidden will reappear once they think you are gone. Walk quietly and remain in designated areas, being aware of sounds and smells. Often you will hear more than you will see.

Teach children the values of quiet observation. Other wildlife watchers will appreciate your consideration.

Look for animal signs. Tracks, scat, feathers and nests often reveal interesting information.



*Goldfinch*  
Bruce D. Flaig

## A Few Simple Rules

- The section of the refuge north of Route 2 is presently closed to public access.
- Public use of designated trails within the refuge's southern unit are open for nature study, hiking and photography from one-half hour before sunrise to one half hour after sunset.
- There are no picnic areas or campsites.
- Pets must be on a short handheld leash at all times, except for dogs actively engaged in hunting.
- Motorized vehicles and bicycles are restricted to the parking area and its access road only.
- Horses are not permitted in the refuge.
- Camping, fires and swimming and fishing in refuge lakes and ponds is prohibited. River fishing is permitted.
- The disturbance, destruction, or removal of wildlife, vegetation and facilities are prohibited.
- The area was once used for military training. The possibility exists that unexploded ordnance could be present. Do not touch any unusual metallic objects you may discover; but report them to the refuge manager immediately. Army vehicles still occasionally transit the refuge maintenance road from Route 2 to Still River Depot Road. Please be cautious in their presence.

*Red-winged blackbird*



Bruce D. Flaig

*This is your refuge to enjoy. Please respect the wildlife and other visitors. Remember to take only memories and leave only footprints.*



Laura Eaton-Poole/USFWS

*Wood frog*

## Getting There

From Route 2, take Exit 38 (Route 110/111) south toward Harvard; bear right to stay on Rt 110 at Harvard Center; and, turn right onto Still River Depot Road at the Still River Post Office. The refuge parking area is at the end of Still River Depot Road, past the railroad tracks.

*Green-winged teal*



Bruce D. Flaig