

Steep Rocks Preserves ~13,887 acres

Includes Lake Waramaug

Washington Depot, Litchfield County

Status: Identified IBA

Site Description: This IBA stretches from Lake Waramaug, to the Macricostas and Mt Rat Preserve, to Mt Tom State Park, to Hidden Valley Preserve, to Steep Rocks Preserve, to Roxbury Land Trust's Mine Hill Preserve and includes all adjacent 70% forested land and streams important to Louisiana Waterthrush. The area includes the Shepaug River and its tributaries making it a very important area for the Louisiana Waterthrush (continental concern). The 368 acre Macricostas Preserve includes 50 acres of prime farmland; 90 acres of woodland and rocky ridge, and 98 acres of critical wetlands, including the headwaters of Bee Brook, a major tributary of the Shepaug River. The 974-acre Steep Rock preserve offers hiking trails which follow the Shepaug River banks and provide access into the hillsides above. Hidden Valley, a 650-acre tract, is characterized by densely wooded hillsides cascading into the meandering Shepaug below. This preserve also includes a rocky high point and small meadows, accessible by hiking trails. Mt. Tom State Park (236 acre) is one of the oldest state parks in CT.

IBA Criteria met:

2.) Site Important to species of continental or regional concern

Annually, the three preserves support 25 or more pairs of each of the following species: Veery, Gray Catbird, Ovenbird, Black-and-white Warbler, Louisiana Waterthrush. The preserves also support Scarlet Tanager (at least 20 pairs), Eastern Wood Pewee (20 pairs), Baltimore Oriole (20 pairs), American Woodcock (16 pairs), Wood Thrush (15 pairs), Hairy Woodpecker (15 pairs), Black-throated Blue Warbler (12 pairs), Rose-breasted Grosbeak (12 pairs), Blue-winged Warbler (10 pairs), Bobolink (10 pairs), and Chestnut-sided Warbler (5 pairs) (Personal observation by Peary Stafford).

The IBA also is known to be used by Whip-or-will.

3.) Sites important to endangered or threatened species in Connecticut

Hidden Valley Preserve hosts a pair of Northern Goshawks, 10 pairs of Savannah Sparrow, and 3 pairs of Alder Flycatcher.

4.) Sites where significant numbers of birds concentrate for breeding, during migration, or in winter.

Lake Waramaug consistently supports high numbers of Common Merganser during spring migration and during the winter, before the lake freezes over (Checklists submitted to Ebird.org by Ray Belding).

High Counts	Spring	Winter
2014	1474	1607
2013	4500	801
2012	2048	4005
2011	2097	2800
2010	5000	2622
2009	6250	131
2008	2538	3800

Other waterfowl present on the lake in large numbers during spring migration and winter include Canada Geese (Spring migration highs for the last 5 years: 456, 603, 4066, 351,

275) and Ring-necked Duck (winters/spring migration highs for last 5 years: 86, 138, 330, 90, 123). American Black Duck, Hooded Merganser, Ruddy Duck, and Bufflehead also use the lake but in lower number.

5.) Sites that contain rare or unique habitat within the state/region or an exceptional representative of a natural habitat, and that hold important species or species assemblages largely restricted to a distinctive habitat type.

Bill Morehead III conducted *An Inventory of Critical Habitats, Other Significant Natural Communities, and Vegetation Types on Steep Rock Association In-fee Reservations* (the preserves) in 2014. The primary purpose of the inventory was to identify habitats on-site that have been defined in the Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy (CWCS) as "Critical Habitat" for birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and invertebrate fauna of "Greatest Conservation Need" (i.e., "GCN species"). Moorhead identified 16 Critical Habitats on SRA in-fee preserves which occupied at least 378 acres. The largest type identified was Old Growth Forest (147 acres verified by ring counts, plus 33 unverified acres, embedded in 225 acres of coniferous forest). The next largest unit is Floodplain Forest, with ~70 ac, the majority being the High Floodplain Subtype. Remaining critical habitats include: the Shepaug River and its riparian zones (~75 acres, including bars and riverbank habitat), Cool Season Grassland (~46 acres), and Wet Meadow (~20 acres), and 6 additional Critical Habitat types identified on SRA in-fee preserves cumulatively occupy ~14.2 acres. GCN Bird species associated with these critical habitats in the CWCS are listed at the end of the infosheet.

Non-avian Resources: Four plant species of special concern were located at Steep Rocks and Macricostas Preserve: Giant St. John's-wort (*Hypericum ascyron*), Violet wood-sorrel (*Oxalis violacea*), Pale green orchid (*Patanthera flava* var. *herbiola*), and Threadfoot (*Podostemum ceratophyllum*). Lastly, 85+ species of butterfly have been observed at the preserves.

Ownership: Maricostas, Steep Rocks, Mt. Rat, and Pleasant Valley preserve are owned by Steep Rocks Association. To the south, Roxbury Land Trust owns the Mine Hill Preserve (360ac), Carter Preserve (160ac), Battle Swamp Brook Preserve (45ac), and the Emil Griffith Beardsley Preserve (138ac). The state of CT owns Mt. Tom SP (236ac). Lake Waramaug and many smaller parcels around the preserves and park appear to be privately owned.

Habitats:

Primary – Lake (~650ac), Old growth mixed forest (180ac), high and low floodplain forest (70ac), river/stream (70 ac), cool season grasslands (45 ac). **Secondary** – Conifer forest, deciduous forest, shrub, fields, calcareous fens and swamps, and vernal pools.

Land Use:

Primary – Nature and wildlife conservation, **Secondary** - fishing, agriculture, research, utility/right-of-way.

Threats:

Serious – Invasive or non-native plants, deer browsing, **Minor** – cowbird parasitism,

Existing Conservation Measures: Invasive plant species (Reed Canary Grass, Multiflora Rose, Barberry, Knotweed, Phragmites, Euonymus, Garlic Mustard, and

Japanese Stilt Grass) and deer browsing are the two primary problems that were identified by Bill Moorhead during the Critical Habitats Survey. While areas of the preserve are free of invasives some of the more critical habitats – the young floodplain forests – are choked with them. Generally it is the younger habitats that are having problems with invasives. Steep Rock Association (SRA). is actively managing invasives. Deer browsing has been a large issue as deer hunting is not currently allowed on preserve. SRA is considering having a deer hunt, but it has not currently gotten traction.

Dogs are allowed on leash but many dog owners disregard the rule. SRA does not have enforcement capacity.

Sources of Information:

- Personal Observation by Peary Stafford.
- Moorhead III, W.H. 2014. *An Inventory of Critical Habitats, Other Significant Natural Communities, and Vegetation Types on Steep Rock Association In-fee Reservations.*
- Steep Rocks Associations. <http://www.steeprocksassoc.org/>. Accessed April 2015.
- www.ebird.org
- CT DEEP Mount Tom State Park. <http://www.ct.gov/deep/cwp/view.asp?A=2716&Q=325244>. Accessed Oct. 2015.

Bird Species Associated with Critical Habitats in CWCS, 2005.

Old Growth Forest – Wood Thrush, Hairy Woodpecker, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Veery, Gray Catbird, Black-throated Blue Warbler, Blackburnian Warbler, Black and White Warbler, Louisiana Waterthrush (along the river), Canada Warbler, Ovenbird, Scarlet Tanager, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Baltimore Oriole and Northern Goshawk

Floodplain Forest - American Woodcock, Black-billed Cuckoo, Black-throated Blue Warbler, Canada Warbler, Chestnut sided Warbler, Green Heron, Hermit Thrush, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, American Redstart, Baltimore Oriole, Barred Owl, Black-throated Green Warbler, Eastern Kingbird, Great Blue Heron, Louisiana Waterthrush, Red-shouldered Hawk, Veery, Winter Wren, Yellow-throated Vireo.

Rivers and riparian zones - same as for the floodplain forest, plus Belted Kingfisher, Common Merganser and Warbling Vireo.

Cool Season Grasslands – Savannah Sparrow, Bobolink, Field Sparrow, Indigo Bunting, Eastern Kingbird, Gray Catbird, and Willow Flycatcher.

Wet Meadows – much the same as cool season grassland with Orchard Oriole and Alder Flycatcher.