

A BRIEF GUIDE TO BIRDING FORT DRUM, NEW YORK

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The Fort Drum Military Installation is a 107,265 acre training facility for the United States Army located in Jefferson and Lewis Counties in Kingbird Region 6. Much of the installation lies within the Eastern Lake Ontario and St. Lawrence Plains ecozones, but the eastern portion is in the Western Adirondack Transition, and part of Fort Drum's southern border lies within the Black River Valley. Within the boundaries of the installation are a variety of ecological communities, including old hayfields, sandplain grasslands, shrubland, deciduous and coniferous forest, extensive wetlands, and several small to medium-sized ponds. This landscape diversity provides nesting habitat for more than 140 species of birds, including several species that are severely declining or difficult to find elsewhere in New York State, such as Common Nighthawk, Whip-poor-will, Red-headed Woodpecker, Sedge Wren, Golden-winged Warbler, and Clay-colored and Henslow's Sparrows. Historically, few birders have visited Fort Drum, at least partly because few realized that the installation was accessible or understood the process for gaining access. In this article we outline the procedure for obtaining permission to bird Fort Drum, and then describe several routes through the installation that provide access to habitat for nearly all of the local breeding species.

ACCESS

To access Fort Drum, visitors must obtain recreation passes and follow certain regulations. Regulations and applications for passes can be found at Fort Drum's Fish and Wildlife web page (<http://www.drum.army.mil/garrison/pw/FishAndWild.html>); all visitors should read these regulations carefully before visiting Fort Drum, so we will only briefly describe the process here. Recreational permits and access passes are available through the mail (or in person when the permit office is open). The application package for a pass includes a signed hold-harmless agreement, a photocopy of a driver's license or other government issued photo identification, and a small fee (\$5 in 2007) in the form of a U.S. Postal Service money order; passes are valid for the federal fiscal year (October 1 through September 30). Before entering the installation, visitors must call the Fort Drum Sportsman's Hotline (315-772-7153) to find out what Training Areas are open for recreation and to register their access pass number. The hotline lists all Training Areas that are open for recreation

and is generally updated daily at 6 pm for the next day only; entrance into any Training Area not listed on the hotline is prohibited. Purchasers of access passes will also receive a recreation map of Fort Drum, and if requested, a checklist of birds.

A few tips may help the first time visitor. At least part of Fort Drum is open for recreation most days of the year, but on any given day some of the installation is closed for military training. By far the best time to visit Fort Drum is on a major federal holiday weekend (Memorial and Independence Days for breeding species, including 1-2 days before and after each holiday), when training normally does not occur and nearly all of the training areas are accessible for recreation. Birders should be aware that hunting is allowed on Fort Drum and all recreational users are required to wear blaze-orange when in the field during any hunting season. A network of generally well-maintained gravel roads provides access to the training areas; heavy military vehicles sometimes create large potholes, so birders should drive cautiously. Most of these roads lack signs, so we suggest that visitors study their recreation map and the directions given below carefully before entering the installation.

GENERAL LAYOUT OF THE INSTALLATION

Fort Drum is divided into three general areas: the Cantonment Area, the Main Impact Area, and the Training Areas. The Cantonment Area (the developed portion of the installation, including Wheeler-Sack Army Airfield) has restricted access. At this time the public can enter the Cantonment Area with a photo i.d., vehicle registration, and proof of insurance, but birding is far better in the Training Areas, so we do not include the Cantonment Area in the following description. The Impact Area is where ordnance is fired into and is off-limits to all recreational use.

The Training Areas (TAs) consist of approximately 70,000 acres of mostly undeveloped land, and are identified by alphanumeric codes and divided into sub-training areas (e.g., sub-TAs 12A, 12B, 12C, and 12D make up TA 12); these designations are indicated on the recreation map. Before calling the Sportsman's Hotline, visitors should identify the TAs they hope to enter, as the recorded message lists them rather quickly.

Vegetative communities are varied across the installation, but tend to occur in several broad areas. The western half of the installation consists of a mosaic of old hayfields, shrubland, and woodland patches of various ages; at the core of this area is a 3500 acre patch of old hayfield in TAs 12 and 13 often referred to as "the Fort Drum grasslands". The southern one-third of Fort Drum is on sandy soil; vegetation in these sandy areas includes sandplain grasslands, open oak and pine-oak woodland, and successional northern hardwoods. A large expanse of wet mixed forest dominates the south-central training areas (especially TAs 8 and 9). The largest expanse of contiguous forest occurs in the northeastern corner of the installation and is adjacent to additional private and state forest off-post.

BIRDING FORT DRUM

The following tours describe the birdlife likely to be encountered on Fort Drum during the late spring and summer, when most birders are likely to visit. Birding is generally slow during the colder months, although during some winters good numbers of several northern species may be found, including Rough-legged Hawk, Northern Shrike, Snow Bunting, Common Redpoll, and occasionally Snowy Owl. The roads in the TAs are not always well maintained in winter, however, and access can be difficult. Unless stated otherwise, directions for the following tours begin at the intersection of State Highways 3 and 26 in the village of Great Bend, near the southern boundary of Fort Drum.

Grassland tour

The grassland tour actually passes through a variety of upland habitat types in the western training areas, including sandplain grassland, old hayfields, shrubland, and open oak and pine-oak woodland. This tour can be covered in half a day and focuses on the species that are most sought after by most birders visiting Fort Drum.

From Great Bend, drive 1.2 miles northwest on State Highway 26 and turn right at the traffic light onto the Main Tank Trail. This gravel road follows the western and northern boundaries of Wheeler-Sack Army Airfield, passing primarily forest to the west and a mosaic of sandplain grassland and shrubland to the east. The proximity of extensive open woodland and numerous fields provides excellent habitat for Whip-poor-will, and patches of bare sandy soil provide abundant nesting sites for Common Nighthawk; both species can often be heard along the length of this road before sunrise or after sunset (however note that visitors are generally not allowed to be on Fort Drum from 1 ½ hours after sunset to 1 ½ hours before sunrise, and cannot use headlights at night).

Approximately 1.5 miles north of highway 26 the road crosses a patch of sandplain grassland, where Grasshopper and Vesper Sparrows are common, and Horned Lark and Upland Sandpiper can occasionally be found. These sandplain grasslands are characterized by native bunchgrasses such as common hairgrass and support an assemblage of breeding bird species quite different from that which breeds in the old hayfields at the end of this tour. Unfortunately, most of this habitat is within the airfield fence and is thus off-limits to birders. This first stop includes the most extensive patch outside the fence, and is thus the best opportunity to find both sparrows and Horned Lark, but if missed here, they might be found at any of several grassy spots along the Main Tank Trail during the next 2.5 miles. Upland Sandpiper was formerly a common nester on Fort Drum, but has declined severely in recent years, probably because of a variety of problems, including development on-post; this stop presents the best chance of finding one, but birders can no longer expect to find one anywhere on Fort Drum.

Continue north on the Main Tank Trail 0.4 mile, where the road passes an open stand of oak (and a metal and concrete latrine; these are scattered

throughout the training areas); a pair of Red-headed Woodpecker has nested here for many years, and another pair has nested recently in the open pine-oak woods 0.5 miles farther north. Adjacent to this latter stand of trees, the road passes through a series of regenerating clear cuts, where increasing numbers of Clay-colored Sparrows have occupied territories in recent years; numerous Brown Thrashers and Field Sparrows also nest in these dense shrubby oaks, and Prairie Warbler occasionally shows up in this area. At the stop sign turn right and drive 1.1 miles to the intersection with old County Highway 29, the only paved road in the training areas. The fields SW of this intersection are another good place to look for Grasshopper and Vesper Sparrows, which can often be seen perched on the fence here. The open oak woodlands east of this intersection host 1-3 additional pairs of nesting Red-headed Woodpecker.

Turn left on the paved road and drive north 2.2 miles to Reedville Road. Turn right onto Reedville and drive 0.9 miles to Antwerp Tank Trail. During late May and early June Golden-winged Warbler (and the occasional Brewster's Warbler) can be heard singing along this stretch of Reedville Road. Continuing straight on Reedville for 4.0 miles past Antwerp Tank Trail brings you to the middle of the forest tour, which is described in the next section. However, for the grassland tour, turn left onto Antwerp Tank Trail and drive 2.4 miles north through a mix of shrubland and mostly early successional woodland to the intersection with Gray Road. The intersection of Gray Road and Antwerp Tank Trail is near the southern boundary of "the Fort Drum grasslands", a large expanse of old hayfield interspersed with patches of shrubland and successional woodland.

Northern Harrier, Savannah Sparrow, and Bobolink are easily found along Antwerp Tank Trail, but Henslow's Sparrow, Sedge Wren, and Clay-colored Sparrow require some effort to find. The latter three species can usually be found near Poagland Road (intersects with Antwerp Tank Trail 0.5 mile north of Gray Road), north of Dogwood Lane (2.4 miles north of Gray Road), or west of Zimmer Road (not shown on the Fort Drum map and closed to vehicles; begins at Antwerp Tank Trail 1.7 miles north of Gray Road and runs southwest to Poagland Road 0.6 miles west of Antwerp Tank Trail). During 2006, the most reliable place for Henslow's Sparrow was south of the intersection between Poagland and Zimmer Roads, but recent grassland management may produce good conditions (perhaps as soon as 2007) for this species west of Zimmer Road (especially the north end) and southeast of the intersection between Antwerp Tank Trail and Dogwood Lane. Sedge Wren is more unpredictable than Henslow's Sparrow, occurring in good numbers some years and virtually absent others; they are most likely during late June and July, when they can often be found in damp depressions with tall grass and sedge, often near Henslow's Sparrows. Clay-colored Sparrows nest throughout this area, usually in areas with scattered shrubs.

Several other grassland species are less reliable in this area. Short-eared Owls are sporadic breeders, nesting for 1-2 years and then not again for 1-4 years. When present, they are most easily seen hunting over the grasslands in or near TA 12C just before sunrise or in the late afternoon. Upland Sandpiper and Eastern Meadowlark formerly nested in good numbers here, but have virtually

disappeared since about 2001. Upland Sandpipers probably declined as shrubs increased in this area, and there is hope that they will return in response to ongoing efforts to control woody vegetation. The reason for the disappearance of meadowlarks from much of this area is less clear, especially given that individuals nesting on neighboring hayfields often forage along the edges of Fort Drum. A small patch of sandy soil west of Antwerp Tank Trail and 0.6 miles north of Dogwood Lane is the only location in Training Area 12 where Grasshopper and Vesper Sparrows are regularly found; Henslow's Sparrow was common a few hundred yards to the west of this site as recently as 2003.

From the grasslands you can exit Fort Drum by continuing north on Antwerp Tank Trail, which veers eastward to an intersection with U.S. Military Highway. From this intersection, turn left and drive north to the village of Antwerp; remain on this road until it reaches US Highway 11, where you can turn left to Watertown or right toward Canton. If you are not ready to leave the installation, you can cross U.S. Military Highway and follow the directions in the Wetlands section to the best marsh on Fort Drum.

Forest tour

This tour passes through a variety of forest types, including northern hardwood forest, successional hardwoods, open oak and pine-oak woodland, various mixed forest types (especially white pine-northern hardwoods), and both natural and planted conifer stands. The forest tour can be covered in half a day, depending on how thoroughly it is birded. A larger patch of contiguous forest can be reached by way of FUSA Boulevard, but this road is often closed for training (although it should be open on major federal holidays), and is a longer drive (see below).

To begin the forest tour, drive east on State Highway 3 from Great Bend for 1.8 miles; turn left onto County Highway 3A shortly after crossing the Black River. Continue on highway 3A, crossing a set of railroad tracks 3.8 miles from Great Bend. Before sunrise or after sunset, the red eyeshine of a Whip-poor-will can often be seen along the shoulder of highway 3A during the 2 mile stretch of road east of the RR crossing. The left turn onto Lake School Road is 6.1 miles from Great Bend.

Drive north on Lake School Road, passing through a diverse forest. Stands of pine and aspen along the southern stretch of Lake School are good for Nashville Warbler, and Common Raven nests in nearby pine plantations (ravens also nest on Fort Drum in open sheds and on cliffs). The shrubby border of a small stream 1.0 mile north of highway 3A can be excellent for migrating passerines, and often hosts nesting Canada Warbler; Blackburnian and Pine Warblers often sing from the large white pines adjacent to the stream. The stretch of Lake School Road between Gormley (1.1 miles) and South Tank Trail (2.2 miles) is particularly good for Common Nighthawk, which nests in the open pitch and jack pine plantations here. Blue-headed Vireo and Red-breasted Nuthatch are also common here, and Mourning Warbler nests in stands of recently thinned trees with extensive undergrowth, especially of blackberry and raspberry.

Two side trips off Lake School Road are worth exploring. At Gormley Road, turn right and drive 0.5 miles east to a small pull out on the north side of the road. A short walk north leads to Butts Road (not shown on the Fort Drum map and open to foot traffic only). For the first 250 yards, Butts Road passes along the western edge of a Norway spruce plantation, one of the few reliable locations on Fort Drum for nesting Magnolia Warbler; during some years Sharp-shinned Hawks nest in this spruce stand, and a Long-eared Owl was heard here in May 2006. Typical species found in the wet woods along Butts Road include Red-shouldered Hawk, Northern Waterthrush, Canada Warbler, and White-throated Sparrow. Return to Lake School and continue north, crossing South Tank Trail; 1.3 miles north of this intersection is a small road on the left that leads to Conservation Pond. Spotted Sandpiper and Hooded Merganser are often on this pond or along the stream that feeds into it, and the surrounding forest is home to nesting Red-shouldered Hawk, Barred Owl, Winter Wren, Brown Creeper, Hermit and Wood Thrushes, Black-throated Green, Yellow-rumped, Black-throated Blue, Blackburnian, and Canada Warblers, and Northern Waterthrush.

Return to Lake School Road and drive another 0.7 miles north to the intersection with Reedville Road. Golden-winged Warblers are common along most of Reedville Road; to find one, drive west, stopping to listen for the “bee-buzz-buzz-buzz” song. Brewster’s Warblers also occur here, but so far fewer Blue-winged Warblers have been found along Reedville Road than in other parts of Fort Drum. By driving 4.0 miles west from Lake School Road you can join the grassland tour at the intersection of Reedville Road and Antwerp Tank Trail; otherwise drive east to U.S. Military Highway (0.8 miles from Lake School Road).

Cerulean Warbler is one of the rarest and most difficult to find species that regularly nests on Fort Drum. Most sightings have been in stands of large sugar maple in the center of the installation, and most of these stands are in relatively inaccessible areas. Perhaps the best place to look is in TA 15 along Canfield Road. If TA 15 is open for recreation (most likely on federal holidays), turn right off U.S. Military Highway 0.3 mile north of Reedville Road (this road is definitely closed if a red flag is flying at this intersection) and drive northwest for 2.2 miles, checking each stand of large maples on your way. In recent years Cerulean Warblers have been found 0.3 and 2.0 miles from U.S. Military. When you reach a “T” intersection (at 2.2 miles), you can either turn around and backtrack to U.S. Military Highway, or turn left and follow Nauvoo School Road to U.S. Military farther north. The latter route passes extensive shrubland and early successional woodland where winged warblers nest, and the scrubby fields at the intersection of Nauvoo School Road and U.S. Military Highway support large numbers of Brown Thrashers and Field Sparrows, and some years Clay-colored Sparrows.

Once back on U.S. Military Highway, drive south to the intersection with South Tank Trail (2.3 miles from the intersection between Canfield Road and U.S. Military). Turn left onto South Tank Trail and follow it for 1.3 miles to Russell Turnpike. For several years the best place to find Prairie Warbler on Fort Drum has been in TA 14D east of Russell Turnpike. You might find one by working Weaver Road (described below), but you’ll have a better chance of

spotting one by birding the western end of TA 14D first. To do this, turn right onto Russell and look for narrow, unused sandy roads on the left at 0.1 and 0.4 miles; a short walk down each of these trails should turn up one or more Prairie Warblers in June. To get to Weaver Road, return to the intersection with South Tank Trail and continue driving 0.3 miles northeast to the next gravel road on your right.

Turn right onto Weaver Road and drive 0.5 miles to the top of a short hill. Prairie Warblers were formerly abundant in the scrubby woodlands to the south, but have become less common in recent years. Heading south, Weaver Road passes through the most diverse conifer forest on Fort Drum, with stands of white cedar, balsam fir, scattered spruce, and plantations of several species of pine. During irruption years, this is the most reliable place on the installation to find Pine Siskin and Red and White-winged Crossbill; nesting has been confirmed for the former two species. Regular nesting species include Common Nighthawk, Whip-poor-will, Blue-headed Vireo, Hermit Thrush, Nashville, Magnolia, Yellow-rumped, Pine, and Canada Warblers and Purple Finch. Continue south on Weaver Road to State Highway 3, where you can exit Fort Drum; see the next section for continuing on to FUSA Boulevard To return to Great Bend, turn right on highway 3 and drive 3.9 miles; turn right onto highway 3A and drive to the western intersection of highways. 3 and 3A; turn right again and drive to Great Bend.

FUSA Boulevard

FUSA Boulevard (FUSA) passes through the northeast corner of Fort Drum, which is the most rugged and remote portion of the installation. The birds here are generally the same as along the forest route described above, but with fewer nightjars (although Whip-poor-will can be abundant during migration) and the addition of nesting Common Loon and Osprey. FUSA also offers the greatest possibility for finding Northern Goshawk or Bald Eagle, although these raptors are occasionally seen elsewhere. The southern portion of FUSA is often used for military exercises, so this road is frequently closed, but should be open on major holiday weekends.

To get to FUSA from Weaver Road at the end of the forest tour, turn left and drive 0.4 mile on highway 3 to Lewisburg Road; turn left onto Lewisburg and drive 1.6 miles north to the intersection with FUSA. To get to FUSA from Great Bend, follow the directions for the forest tour, but instead of turning onto Lake School Road (where that tour begins), continue east on highway 3A 0.8 mile. Turn left onto highway 3 at the stop sign and flashing red light and drive 3.9 miles to Lewisburg Road. Turn left onto Lewisburg and drive 1.6 miles north to the intersection with FUSA. Turn right onto FUSA; just before making this turn you will enter Lewis County, through which FUSA passes for its entire length.

To bird FUSA, drive north, stopping occasionally to look for birds. Much of the southern portion of FUSA parallels the Indian River, where Wilson's Snipe, American Bittern, Virginia Rail, and Sora can be heard. At 1.7 miles from the beginning of FUSA, a side road to Quarry Pond provides access to a series

of wooded ponds where Pied-billed Grebe, Wood Duck, and Common Moorhen have nested; Quarry Pond itself generally lacks birds, although Eastern Phoebe nest on the cliffs above the pond. Approximately 2.8 miles farther north the road passes a small finger of Indian Pond; you can park here and hike through the woods to the edge of the pond, where loons often summer and Merlin has been seen during June. Another place to look for loons is at Indian Lake, which you pass 1.4 miles north of Indian Pond; an Osprey nest on the pond west of FUSA here has been active for several years. Continue 0.6 miles north to another side road (often closed for training) that heads west to a fishing access site, which is the best spot from which to scan Indian Lake for loons. FUSA continues north for another 5 miles, mostly passing through dense forest where a good variety of forest birds can be found. You can exit Fort Drum at the north end of FUSA, but it may be easier to turn around and drive back the way you came, as the off-post roads north of the installation can be confusing.

Wetlands

Fort Drum has several thousand acres of wetlands, beaver ponds, and other habitat for waterbirds and waterfowl, but much of this habitat is isolated and difficult to observe. Perhaps the best place to see wetland birds on Fort Drum is a cattail marsh on Mattoon Creek in TA 17B. To get to this site, follow the directions from the end of the grassland tour to Antwerp, but instead of turning left onto U.S. Military Highway, cross it onto Carr Road, which parallels U.S. Military a short distance and then veers northeast. Drive 2.5 miles to a small gravel road on the left; turn left and drive 0.6 miles to a small pullout on the left. Park here and backtrack about 100 yards until you see a narrow grassy lane that heads to the northeast. This lane passes through wet shrubland for about 250 yards and ends at the edge of a cattail marsh surrounded by extensive shrub wetlands.

Birds frequently observed here include Wood Duck, Mallard, American Black Duck, Blue-winged Teal, Pied-billed Grebe, Northern Harrier, Green Heron, American and Least Bitterns, Virginia Rail, Sora, Common Moorhen, and Marsh Wren. This is the only spot on the installation where Black Tern has been documented (three years since 1991), and is among the best locations on the Fort Drum for migratory waterfowl.

Black River Lowlands

Perhaps the best place to witness the passerine migration on Fort Drum is near the Black River in TA 6A. To get to TA 6A, drive east from Great Bend on State Highway 3 for 0.6 mile, looking for a sign on the left indicating the road into the TA. Turn left; the road will head north and then curve eastward. Roads on the left at mile 0.7 and 0.9 form a loop, with the north edge of the loop following the river. This loop passes through pine plantations, mixed forest, and shrubland, which support a good variety of nesting species and if conditions are right, excellent concentrations of migrating passerines. TA 6A is also the most likely place on Fort Drum to find Red-bellied Woodpecker, Tufted Titmouse,

Carolina Wren, and Northern Cardinal, species that are generally absent from the installation (perhaps because there are no bird feeders in the training areas). This training area can be heavily used by hunters during the spring Turkey season and in the fall, so birders should be aware of other recreational users.

Pleasant Road

We did not include a specific shrubland bird tour because shrublands are widely scattered throughout Fort Drum, and birds typical of this habitat type can be found along the grassland and forest tours. In case there are shrub birds you may have missed on these tours, a good place to look for them is along Pleasant Road, which runs northeast from State Highway 26 to County Highway 29 near the west end of Reedville Road. Pleasant Road passes through extensive shrubland and early successional woodland, with stands of more mature trees and numerous streams and wetlands. Common nesting species here include American Woodcock, Whip-poor-will, Gray Catbird, Brown Thrasher, Golden-winged, Blue-winged, Yellow, Chestnut-sided, and Canada Warblers, Eastern Towhee, and White-throated Sparrow. Fort Drum has five summer records for Yellow-breasted Chat since 1991, with four of them coming from TA 3 west of Pleasant Road.

Postscript

Since this article was written, Fort Drum has developed a new training exercise that may result in closure of the portion of County Highway 29 that is on Fort Drum. Such a closure will require an alteration of the directions given for the grassland tour relating to travel from the airfield area to the core Fort Drum grasslands. When you reach Highway 29, follow these directions instead: turn left onto Highway 29 and drive north 0.8 miles; turn right onto a gravel road; drive north, then northeast, for 1.4 mile to the intersection between Reedville Road and Antwerp Tank Trail. Resume following the directions in the grassland tour at this intersection. However, if Highway 29 is completely blocked off, backtrack 0.5 mile on the Main Tank Trail to a gravel road that heads north (this will be on your right as you come from Highway 29); turn right onto it and drive 1.9 mile north to the intersection of Reedville Road and Antwerp Tank Trail.

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