



Winging It

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Birding on DoD Lands: Fort Drum, New York

BY JEFFREY S. BOLSINGER AND RAYMOND E. RAINBOLT

Fort Drum is located in northern New York, approximately 25 miles south of the St. Lawrence River and 10 miles east of Lake Ontario. At 107,265 acres, Fort Drum is the largest Army facility, and one of the largest federal properties, in the northeastern US.

Fort Drum lies at the convergence of the Lake Ontario Plains, the St. Lawrence River Valley, and the Adirondack Highlands. The terrain in the western and southern parts of the installation is flat to gently rolling, with elevations increasing from approximately 420 feet in the southwestern corner of the Fort to about 900 feet in the northeast. The habitat types represented on the installation include tens of thousands of acres of deciduous and coniferous forest, and thousands of acres of wetlands, successional shrublands, and old fields and sandplain grasslands.

Varied habitat, large areas of undeveloped land, and military activities all contribute to the diversity of bird life found on the installation. The relationship between undeveloped landscapes and bird diversity is obvious, but the benefits of military activities are less widely recognized. Military training

and associated land management activities have slowed natural succession and provided habitat for many old-field and shrubland species, several of which are declining severely elsewhere in New York and the northeastern US. The mosaic of grassland, shrubland, and forest that has resulted from military land-use patterns over the past 50 years today provides habitat for more than 220 species of birds, including 27 listed by New York State as endangered, threatened, or of special concern.



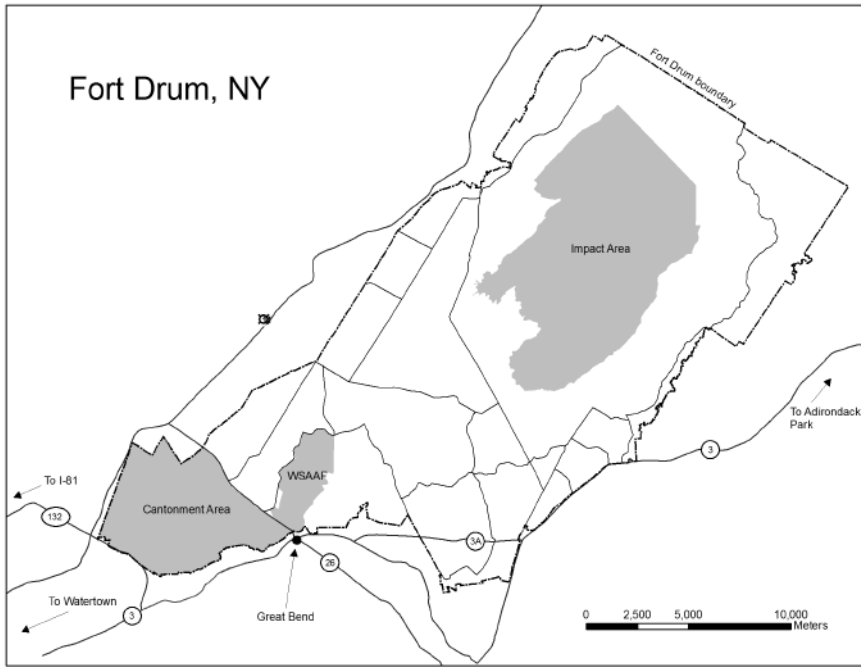
History

In the 19th century, the land that was to become Fort Drum was extensively logged and converted to agriculture. Dairy farming was the predominant land use, and by 1900 the landscape was dominated by large hayfields with scattered stands of maples that farmers tapped for syrup. Larger patches of forest were limited to what would become the south-central and northeastern portions of Fort Drum, where sandy and rocky soils were less conducive to farming.

Military use of the area began in 1907. In 1910, Pine Plains was established on the Black River as a training site for Army and National Guard troops. Pine Plains, later renamed Pine Camp, grew during the 1920s and 1930s, but the largest land acquisition occurred in 1940,

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when the US expanded training facilities for the war in Europe and the Pacific. Approximately 75,000 acres were acquired in this expansion, which displaced 525 families and eliminated 3,000 buildings and five villages. Three divisions were deployed at Pine Camp for training during the war, including General George C. Patton's 4th Armored Division.

Pine Camp was renamed Camp Drum in 1951 to honor General Hugh A. Drum, commander of the First Army during World War II. The installation acquired its current name in 1974, and the 10th Mountain Division was permanently posted to Fort Drum in 1984. In addition to serving as a home and training site for soldiers of the 10th Mountain Division, Fort Drum is also the major training facility for National Guard and Reserve soldiers in the northeastern US, and one of the military's most important cold-weather training facilities.

Environmental Setting

To the extent that New York's birders are aware of Fort Drum, their knowledge is generally limited to the grasslands in Training Areas 12 and 13. This 3,500-acre patch of old hayfield, a remnant of Fort Drum's agricultural past, consists of a mix of non-native grasses, such as Kentucky bluegrass and timothy, and native sedges, goldenrods, and other herbaceous plants. Shrubland and successional woodland occur throughout the remainder of the western training areas, interspersed with old fields, pockets of mature forest, and beaver ponds and wetlands.

Most of the southern part of Fort Drum lies on sandy soil, in contrast to the clay and loam soils elsewhere. The sandplain grasslands near the Wheeler-Sack Army Airfield (WSAAF) are characterized by a sparse cover of hairgrass and other native bunch grasses. Surrounding the sandplain grasslands are oak savannah—a very rare community in New York—and open pine-oak woodlands. The south-central part of Fort Drum

consists of extensive mixed deciduous and coniferous forest on sandy soil; this area also has several large wetlands.

The largest block of continuous forest is in the northeastern corner of Fort Drum, where more than 20,000 acres of northern hardwoods and white pines abut additional state and private forested lands. Within this forested landscape lie extensive wetlands, numerous beaver ponds, and several small lakes. Indian Lake (186 acres) is the largest body of water entirely on Fort Drum, but Fort Drum's Mud Lake connects with Lake Bonaparte (1,283 acres), which borders the installation to the east.

Birding Fort Drum

The best time of year to bird Fort Drum is late spring and summer, when the weather is pleasant and bird diversity is highest. More than 140 species have been confirmed nesting on the installation; most breeding species are present by the third week of May, although

spring migration extends into June. Large concentrations of migrating warblers and sparrows have been noted during fall migration, but Fort Drum has not been heavily birded during this season. Access in winter is often difficult because of heavy snow, but birders who brave the cold temperatures can see Rough-legged Hawk, Northern Shrike, Common Redpoll, and occasionally Snowy Owl.

The Antwerp Tank Trail passes through the largest block of grasslands on Fort Drum. Bobolink and Savannah Sparrow nest here in very high densities, and American Bittern and Northern Harrier are seen frequently. Henslow's Sparrow nests locally in the larger grassland patches, especially along the western end of Dogwood Lane. Sedge Wren, seen here most years in small numbers, can occasionally be fairly common in wet sedge meadows. Short-eared Owl, among the rarest breeding species in New York, nests sporadically in this area. Upland Sandpiper and Eastern Meadowlark formerly nested in good numbers, but have been rare in recent years.

The sandplain grasslands near WSAAF host a different assemblage of nesting birds. Grasshopper and Vesper Sparrows are common, and Horned Lark breeds locally where vegetation is sparse. During the past few years, the airfield area has been the only reliable place to find Upland Sandpiper on Fort Drum. The airfield itself is off-limits, but Uplands can be observed along the Main Tank Trail west of the airfield, as can Red-headed Woodpecker, which nests in the open oak woodland along this road. Other species limited to sandy soils on Fort Drum include Common Nighthawk, which nests in a variety of habitats with bare sandy soil, and Prairie Warbler, locally common in open scrubby woodland.

Perhaps the most sought-after shrubland specialists that nest on Fort Drum are Clay-colored Sparrow and Golden-winged Warbler. Clay-colored Sparrow, rare in the northeast, nests in small numbers on Fort Drum, where it is most easily

found in regenerating clearcuts near the airfield and in shrubby patches in the grasslands of Training Area 12. Golden-winged Warbler can be heard from mid-May through mid-June in shrubland and successional woodland throughout the western half of Fort Drum, especially along Pleasant, Reedville, and Carr Roads. Because Blue-winged Warbler also nests on Fort Drum, with hybrids noted annually since at least 1998, it is best to visually confirm the identity of any “winged warbler.” Other species commonly found in shrublands include American Woodcock, Whip-poor-will, Brown Thrasher, Chestnut-sided Warbler, and Eastern Towhee. Yellow-breasted Chat, one of the rarest birds to summer on Fort Drum, has been observed in dense shrubland at least five times in the last 15 years.

Fort Drum’s varied forests are also home to numerous species. FUSA Boulevard, Lake School Road, and Alexandria Road provide access to extensive deciduous forest, where Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Least Flycatcher, Eastern Wood-Pewee, White-breasted Nuthatch, Veery, Wood Thrush, Black-throated Blue Warbler, American Redstart, Ovenbird, and Scarlet Tanager can be found. Common species in coniferous or mixed stands along these roads include Red-breasted Nuthatch; Hermit Thrush; Yellow-rumped, Black-throated Green, Blackburnian, and Pine Warblers; and Purple Finch. Among the more local species, look for Canada Warbler in wet wooded areas, Nashville Warbler in young stands of aspen and gray birch, and Cerulean Warbler in stands of tall maples in the center of the installation. Red-shouldered Hawk and Barred Owl are frequently heard calling in wet forest in the south-central and northeastern training areas, and Common Raven, formerly rare, is now seen commonly throughout the installation.

Most of the ponds on Fort Drum are isolated and difficult to view, but they shelter nesting Pied-billed Grebe and the occasional Great Blue Heron rookery. Perhaps the best place to observe wetland birds is Matoon Creek Marsh west of Carr



Common Nighthawks breed on sandy soil.
Photo © Fort Drum Forestry Program.

Road, where Mallard, American Black Duck, Blue-winged Teal, Pied-billed Grebe, American and Least Bitterns, Northern Harrier, Sora, Virginia Rail, Common Moorhen, and Marsh Wren nest. This is the only location on Fort Drum where Black Tern has been recorded. Canada Goose, Wood Duck, and Hooded Merganser are fairly common nesters throughout Fort Drum, and Green-winged Teal and Gadwall occasionally breed. Common Loon nests on the larger bodies of water in Training Area 19, includ-

ing Indian Lake and Mud Lake, where Osprey and Bald Eagle are occasionally seen flying overhead.

Access

Fort Drum Recreation Permits are required for birding and all other outdoor recreation activities. Permits are available at the Natural Resources Permit Office in Building S-2509, on NYS Rte. 26 one-half mile northwest of Great Bend. From Interstate 81, take Exit 48 and go east on NYS Rte. 342 for 4.5 miles to US 11. Turn left on US 11 North and go 3.9 miles to NY Rte. 26 (at Evans Mills). Turn right on NYS Rte. 26 and drive 4.8 miles past Wheeler-Sack Army Airfield. Turn left into the driveway leading to the parking lot. Permits cost \$5 and are effective October 1 through September 30. A photo ID is required to obtain a permit. For additional information, including the Fort Drum birding brochure, office hours, and regulations, visit the Fort Drum Fish and Wildlife Management Program web page at <http://www.drum.army.mil/garrison/pw/FishAndWild.html>, or call 315/772-9636 or 315/772-4999.

Jeff Bolsinger, a Research Associate at Colorado State University, has been monitoring bird populations on Fort Drum since 1995. Ray Rainbolt has been Fort Drum’s Fish and Wildlife Program Manager since 2002. Thanks to Chris Eberly, Program Manager of the Department of Defense Partners in Flight program and series editor for “Birding on DOD Lands,” for his assistance with this article.

Grassland habitats at Fort Drum support a wide variety of nesting species. Photo © Jeff Bolsinger.

