





## QUABBIN RESERVOIR'S WILDLIFE: 500 MILES HIKING, CAMERA IN HAND

by Jim Morelly

Imagine hiking from Massachusetts to Virginia with a camera in your hand.

What would hiking that distance on the trails and roads of Quabbin Reservoir present for wildlife photo opportunities?

Quabbin is sometimes called the "Accidental Wilderness." It is managed by the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR). Created in the 1930s, it is famous among sportsmen's circles for providing some of the best fishing opportunities in the Commonwealth, but to an avid hiker/photographer, the fact that it offers approximately 62 square miles of publicly accessible, undeveloped land is an even bigger draw. The hiking and photography opportunities are endless. The eastern side of the huge reservation where I have done most of my exploring can be accessed from gates 30 through 50, all of which are located in the towns of New Salem, Petersham, Hardwick, and Ware. All gate entries offer easy hiking on roads and trails that can lead you to many different types of habitat: open fields, swamps, hardwood ridges, conifer stands, beaver ponds, and erratic boulders left by glaciers.

If wildlife interests you, Quabbin's diverse habitat supports many species and communities.

A good first step for any hiker is to learn the rules of the reservation, its access points, and get a rough idea of where various habitat types are located. Some areas, like the Prescott Peninsula (Gates 17-21) and all of the islands, are closed to the public, and if you are caught trespassing you may be arrested and prosecuted. You can get most of the information online at [www.mass.gov/dcr/parks/central/quabbin.htm](http://www.mass.gov/dcr/parks/central/quabbin.htm), but it's even better to start with a visit to the Quabbin Visitors Center located on Route 9 in Belchertown. Run by the Quabbin Interpretive Services Program, the Center provides visitors with the opportunity to purchase several different maps, talk to the always-helpful DCR staff, and learn more about the reservoir and its history. We are good to go!

It is late summer several years ago and I am off to one of my favorite Quabbin swamps when suddenly I stop: My eyes



Photo © Jim Morelly

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have caught the shadow of something moving along on a distant ridge! It offers little clue as to what it is (other than something fairly large) as its shadow flickers among the trees along the ridge line. Could it be a bear, a moose, or a deer? With each hike there is always the anticipation of getting a picture of a bear, an animal that has long eluded me. Would this be that day?

Stooping down, I wait in anticipation, hoping that, whatever the animal, it will continue to move my way and eventually present an opportunity for a picture. I am new to digital photography and leave the camera set on automatic mode. My camera skills are entry level at best, and I am not confident enough in my abilities to trust them not to squander a rare opportunity.

Time passes. I remember thinking that whatever was heading my way "should have crossed the cart road by now." Noting a light breeze hitting my face from the direction the animal should be

approaching from, I relax a little: I can discard any concerns about my human scent allowing the animal to pick up on my location.

Then, as is so often the case, it appears magically: A cow moose steps onto the cart road a short distance from where I am kneeling. She is completely unaware of my presence. Unbelievable! When the cow turns her head away, I stand slowly and position the monopod with camera on top, focus, and then start pushing the shutter. The moose clearly picks up on the shutter noise from the camera, but is not overly concerned as she walks away.

This was my first good opportunity to get something big with my camera. Could one of these shots be the next cover photo on some national wildlife magazine? Clearly not, I see, as I review the photos on the camera's digital screen: the best picture is not even close to being a tack sharp image. No matter, I am elated with the excitement of the moment. Like most novice hunters who do everything

right and then miss their shot, I still find satisfaction in knowing I was able to react properly to the situation as it was unfolding, and other than my failure to make the best use of my equipment, I have been entirely successful in orchestrating this encounter.

It was this experience that truly ignited my interest in hiking the roads and trails of Quabbin while carrying a camera. Would there be other days as productive and enjoyable as the moose experience? Or did I just happen onto an opportunity? You can be the judge as I relate some of my many Quabbin wildlife experiences.

## RAPTORS & OTTERS

The initial plan was to hike Quabbin and log 100 miles. I thought this would be a reasonable goal, and would give me opportunities to use my camera while (hopefully) improving my skills. Needless to say, hiking at Quabbin became a more frequent occurrence in my life, and the



Photo © Jim Morelly

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experiences I enjoyed actually motivated me to hike more often. Most weekend mornings you would (and still will) find me at one of the Quabbin gates. The total miles I have hiked are now approaching the 500-mile mark.

The next weekend hike following the moose encounter would be a 5-mile jaunt on the southeast side of the reservoir. It was a beautiful morning hike, but as I neared its finish I must admit I was disappointed that not a single animal had appeared for me to photograph in all those miles.

Suddenly, out of the tall grass, a hawk flew up and landed on a branch not 15 feet from me! Camera in hand, I started clicking away. The hawk was tolerant of my presence, perching for several minutes before flying off. I didn't have any idea what type of hawk it was, but part of the enjoyment of taking bird photos is identifying and researching them after the hike. This one wasn't easy to identify even with the leisure to peruse the field guides, but the experts tell me they think it's an immature Broadwing Hawk (*Buteo platypterus*). Regardless, taking pictures of birds (and especially raptors) has added another dimension to my photography and given me the incentive to learn more about the wild residents of the Quabbin woods.

The mild winter last year allowed me relatively easy access to all of the Quabbin open to the public. Standing at the water's edge, anyone can usually view eagles soaring over the reservoir. On one particular day, while watching several eagles, I heard an odd chattering noise coming from a nearby cove hidden from my view. The chatter sounded as if it was getting closer even though there was a thin layer of ice across the surface of the water. I kept a careful watch in anticipation of getting a glimpse of whatever was making all the commotion. To my surprise, three otters popped their heads through a small hole in the ice!

I was able to get only one quick picture of them, the lighting was poor, and I knew the result wouldn't be a quality image. The experience, however – and particularly learning and remembering the sound the otters made that day – would later guide me in setting up quickly when I encountered a family of otters feeding in



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a small swamp. While watching them, I came up with a plan based on my previous experience, and I was able to put myself in a position to photograph one of the otters eating a fish while stretched out on a log. I would rather get a poor picture and enjoy the wildlife experience.

Because I usually start my hikes very early in the morning (typically well before sunrise), the Quabbin wildlife is usually still active when I'm wandering through, providing me with many photographic opportunities. However, depending on the light and weather, taking a quality picture can be a challenge. Persistence and learning my camera will eventually produce the tack-sharp images to which I aspire.

## MOST MEMORABLE MOMENTS

The wildlife encounters and photo opportunities have been many over the 500 miles I have walked. My two most memorable wildlife adventures occurred about a month apart, the first in late summer, the second in early fall. Since the majority of my hikes have been conducted on the east side of the reservoir, I have learned most of the terrain and the location of various wildlife habitats in this sector of the Quabbin's hills and valleys. Thanks to this experience, I have come to focus on several quality areas where I now like to spend most of my time.

On one special morning I could not have imagined the extraordinary tableau that would unfold before me. Dawn broke

with me settling in at one of my favorite swamps. A number of immature wood ducks caught my attention. Surprisingly, my presence went undetected (or at least ignored) by the ducks this morning. This was unusual, as even my earliest arrivals are typically greeted with squeals and quacking as mallards and wood ducks take to the air in alarm. It didn't happen on this day, and not long after I settled in I could sense the normal routines returning as the swamp came back to life with frogs croaking and a variety of birds flying around.

As I looked northwest down the swamp, I spotted two bears on the opposite side working their way towards me. It was a sow with what appeared to be a 2-year-old cub! The stage could not have been set any better: A light wind was blowing from east to west (with me sitting on the west side of the swamp), there was cloud cover to filter the sun and give me great lighting, plus two bears that were in no hurry to leave. It just doesn't get much better than that!

Over the next 30 minutes these two bears put on a show. They would run after each other, climb deadfalls, roll and swat each other. They were both enjoying the easy conditions that late summer brings with abundant food and mild temperatures.

As the bears played, I was able to get a number of pictures, though none at close range. The excitement of watching the animals was unbelievable, and getting pictures, even distant ones, was the icing on the cake. My enjoyment of the



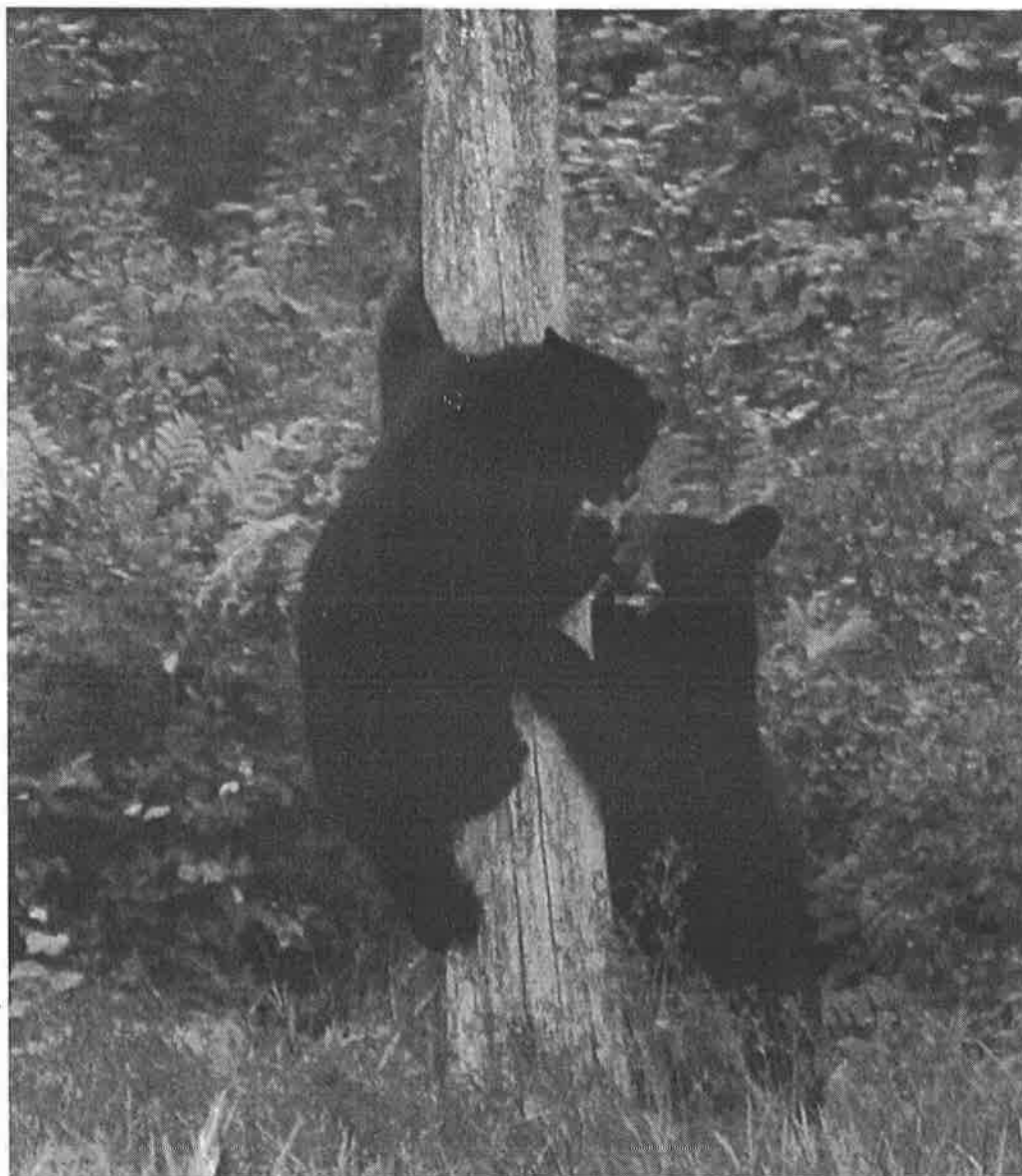


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experience far outweighed any picture that could have been taken, however. I was just thrilled to have the opportunity to observe the bears, undetected, as they engaged in interesting and entertaining behavior. This was truly the most memorable encounter I have had in 500 miles.

A close second-place experience happened to me in late September. Again, it was about a one-hour hike to reach the area where I wanted to spend my morning.

The wind was perfect as I approached the swamp. I was nearing my destination, moving quietly, when something busted out of the hardwood ridge to my right, breaking sticks and branches as it moved through the woods. At the same time (and somewhat alarmingly) I also heard something snapping branches to my left! Then, as suddenly as the sharp noises had begun, they ceased.

I stopped immediately and stood completely still, carefully scanning the woods around me, looking for horizontal lines. This technique, a secret known to many hunters, helps me locate mammals that most other people would likely miss. Horizontal lines are not common in Nature, and often denote the back outline of a deer or some other large, stationary mammal that is hoping to be overlooked.

Patience and several minutes of scanning revealed something standing very tall about 50 yards away, deep in shadow. It was a moose! It began to move, clearly on alert, as it walked along the edge of the swamp. Was this a cow, or a bull? Several minutes passed and the moose continued walking along the edge of the swamp, then turned and looked back in my direction. The sun just caught his head as it left the concealing shade of the trees.

The sunlight glistened off an impressive span of antlers: a mature bull! My heart was beating so loudly in my excitement I thought the bull was going to hear it. I snapped off a quick shot – a picture, even

a poor one, would at least be evidence of the event – but I was already thinking that if I could remain undetected, there might be a chance the bull would continue on his path – a path that would intersect the cart road I was standing on!

My luck held, and along he came, headed my way. Unfortunately, calculating his trajectory, I could see that my position was poor in terms of getting a great picture. I needed to close the distance by about 10 yards. Each time the bull disappeared behind trees, hiding me from his view, I took a few careful steps while watching both the moose and the placement of my feet. If all went according to my hasty plan, I figured that just about the time I finally got in position, the bull would step onto the cart road about 40 yards away. I had just enough time to check my camera for the proper ISO setting, lock my autofocus on the tree just past where I anticipated he would appear, and BINGO!

He stopped at the spot. I clicked the camera shutter twice. Then he crossed the cart road and started to move away. I



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had guessed by now that the sound I had heard earlier to my left must have been a cow the bull was courting. Figuring the bull would head her way, I anticipated he would again offer me a portrait shot about 45 yards away.

Once again I needed to move several yards to get into a clear shooting lane. When the bull entered the only window I had to get his picture, I bleated, hoping my cow moose impression would get him to stop. That got his attention! I was able to click a few more pictures. Unfortunately, the sun had not yet reached the forest floor, and the camera struggled for light. No matter: The experience was priceless even if the picture was not.

## ENJOY THE OPPORTUNITY

To have access to such a place as the Quabbin Reservoir in Massachusetts is remarkable. It offers a very large, unique, and wonderful place to hike, and is an extraordinary location to take wildlife photos. My hope in writing this article is to inspire other folks to enjoy Quabbin Reservoir's wildlife while hiking and carrying a camera.

Hiking and photographing the wildlife in Quabbin can be as simple or complicated a proposition as you would like to make it. At minimum, a fanny pack and a point-and-shoot camera is all you need to get started. Every outing offers the hiker fresh air, exercise, and a big unknown just around the next corner. It's something the entire family can enjoy.

A wonderful choice I can recommend for a first hike is to start at Gate 40 in Petersham. There is a small parking area located on Route 32A right at the gate. It's an easy walk to Dana Center, one of the forcibly-abandoned towns sacrificed to build the Quabbin, and the full round trip is approximately 4 miles. This road offers a number of photogenic fields, as well as the always-interesting Pottapoug Pond on your left. This is one of my favorite hikes, as it is easy terrain, not too long, and almost always offers some wildlife viewing prospects. Hitting the trail early will increase your wildlife photo opportunities.

Quabbin Reservoir has provided me with a place to hike while I enjoy nature,



Photo © Jim Morelly

*Many wildlife encounters are surprising and momentary: If you don't have the camera ready for an instant shot, you will miss the opportunity.*

observe wildlife behavior, and determine how to make the most of my photographic skills. The hobby has proved very enjoyable, allowing me to learn more about Quabbin Reservoir's wildlife through observation and study while improving the quality of my pictures. I have a number of additional Quabbin pictures that can be viewed at [hikingcamera@smugmug.com](mailto:hikingcamera@smugmug.com). If you would like to comment, or if I can be of any help, please feel free to contact me at [hikingcamera@aol.com](mailto:hikingcamera@aol.com).

*Jim Morelly is a lifelong Massachusetts sportsman who enjoys nature and outdoor activities including hunting, fishing, and coonhounds. He has long participated in the Mass. Hunter Education program and supported the North Worcester Fox & Coon Club to give something back to the conservation of the outdoors. He often spends his time hiking while carrying a camera, and hopes to someday organize his days afield so he can inspire others to enjoy all that the Bay State outdoors has to offer.*