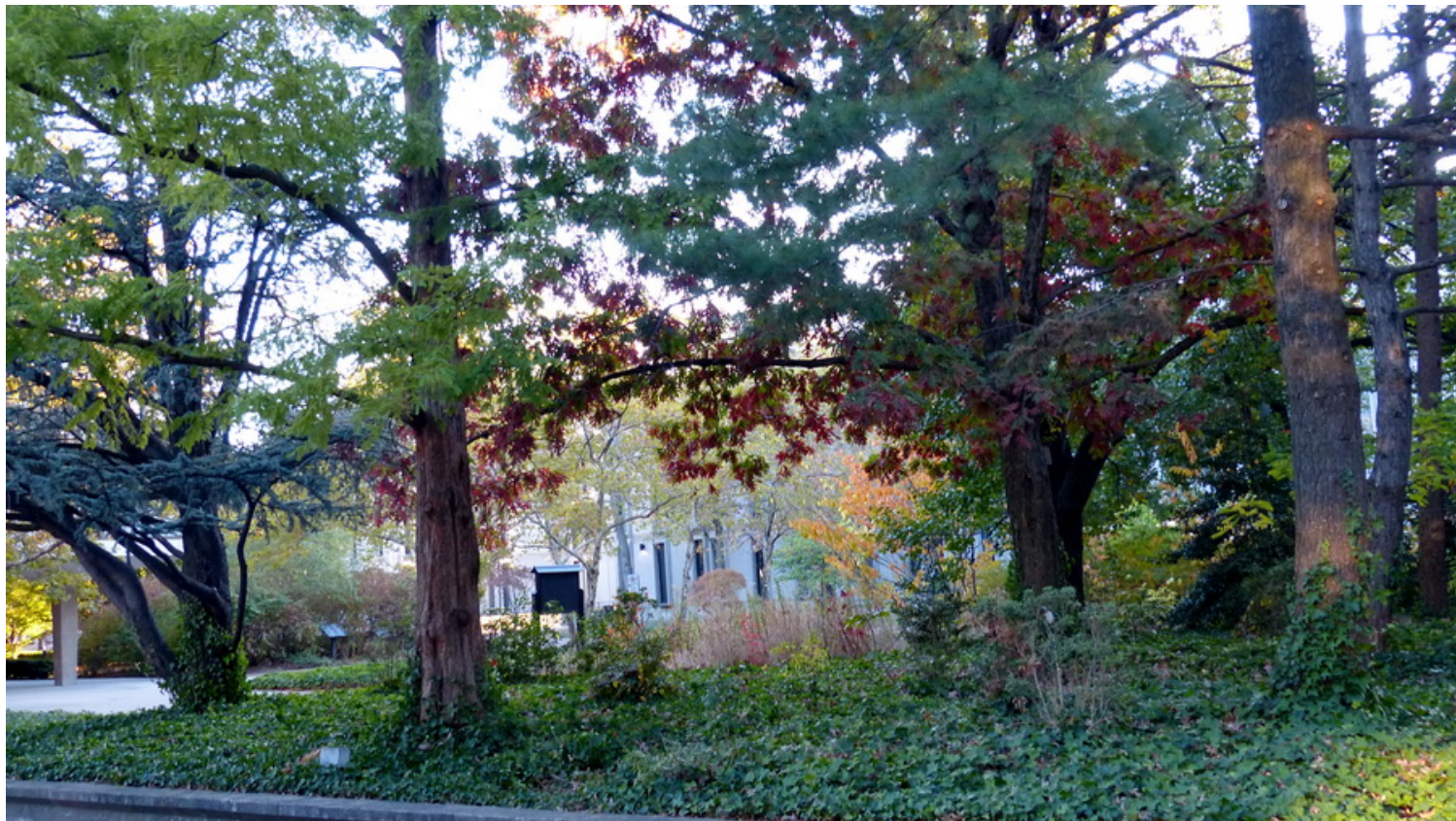


## The Birds of Rutgers Newark

By sbarnes | March 20, 2015



### Rutgers- Aidekman's Wood

View of the 0.15 acre "Aidekman's Wood" in the fall: time to look for those warblers. October 2013. Photo by author.

### Birding on an Urban Island

*By Claus Holzapfel*

Why do we like to watch birds? There must be very many reasons, but one of my favorites is the uncertainty and the therefore the potential for an unexpected discovery. Birds move around and can show up in unlikely places, one never knows exactly what you will see on a given outing. And to be honest, would it still be fun if you could predict exactly what you will see on a future trip to your local, personal hotspot? There are places that are (almost) always great and birdy, but many sites are sometime good, sometimes lousy – unpredictable. Spend a morning in such place and you might ask yourself: why did I come here? Seemingly not for the birds, as they are not around. You can overcome this sense of failure with the Schwarzenegger's pre-gubernatorial catch-phrase "I'll be back". And next time, yes, it could be THAT magic morning. Places that work this kind of magic are often islands, real ones in a sea of water or

virtual ones like an oasis in the desert. I am sure every birder can name many such (some-times) bird magnets. I have the fortune that I happen to work in one of those, a small but leafy university campus in the wide “sea” – or need I say “desert” – of a large city.



<http://content.ebird.org/nj/wp-content/uploads/sites/38/Rutgers-Ovenbird.jpg>

Ovenbird patrolling the pavement. October 2013. Photo by Marjolein Schat.

Birds of cities are often interesting on their own right. They are the real survivors who manage to make a good living beside and in spite of us. Think of House Sparrows, Starlings and Street Pigeons – you might not like them, call them unwanted non-natives, but you have to admire their tenacity. True, most days our urban campus is not a place for remarkable bird diversity, but given the right time, a birding visitor is in for a real treat. Like a true island, migratory birds are attracted to our small green spot and once here, are relatively easy to locate. After all, the central campus is about 9 ha and only about ten percent is likely bird habitat. So if you need an Ovenbird, a Northern Water thrush, an American Woodcock, a Swamp Sparrow for you year, state, or county list, these are all common and easy to find.



American Woodcock: this forest bird seems to be out of place on campus, it is nevertheless somewhat iconic here. Sadly, this status is achieved largely due to the large number of the birds that crash into windows and most often die. Up to 40 are recorded annually. November 2013. Photo by author.

The list of birds that have been seen here since 2005 by a small but dedicated group of birders (mostly faculty & students) is remarkably long for a small urban spot, particularly for a spot that lacks any wetlands: 140 plus (check out the bar chart function on the eBird hotspot).

<https://ebird.org/ebird/nj/hotspot/L657485> (<https://ebird.org/ebird/nj/hotspot/L657485>).

What makes this site so alluring for birders (at least during migration season), is that birds are relatively easy to find due to the small size of habitat patches and due to high densities of resting migrants. Obviously, most of the birds seen here are common migrants, but almost on a daily basis exceptions are found. Our local "Megs" are Connecticut and Mourning Warblers (annual), Cape May Warbler, and one of the latest addition to the list, a single Chuck-will's Widow that spent at least 2 day here last May. Bird of prey are often present, with American Kestrels, Red-tailed Hawks and Cooper's Hawks being the most regular (there are plenty tasty squirrels around), and Peregrines, Merlins and Sharp-shinned Hawks take advantage of easy avian prey in fall and spring. In the last few years Common Ravens became almost iconic, they are visiting the campus almost daily and have bred not too far away, on top of a tall building in downtown Newark.



Common Raven in the Brick City. Rooftops are the favorite habitat of this returning symbol of the wild. October 2013. Photo by author.

### **A special urban bird habitat**

The centerpiece for birds and birders alike are two large planters comprising 0.3 acres on the Rutgers University campus in Newark. They provide a unique area of urban wilderness — a hotspot for biodiversity that is rich with opportunities for nature study and research. Described as a “bio-diversity haven,” these two areas on the Norman Samuels Plaza at Rutgers-Newark have been created by hundreds of Earth Day student volunteers, working with staff members, faculty from the Dept. of Biological Sciences, and horticulture professionals from the nearby Greater Newark Conservancy. Seven consecutive years of Earth Day activities have resulted in a huge increase in the number of native plant species growing in the planters, providing a wildlife habitat that is largely self-sustainable. Despite occasionally seen by some as an eyesore or even perceived as an urban security risk, and therefore being at constant risk of obliteration, the “Biodiversity patches” developed in the last 10 years through non-obtrusive management and spontaneous, natural succession into nature-like habitats that attract wildlife. The benefits of these plots for us urbanites range from general appreciation of nature and nature-related recreation (e.g., bird watching, etc.), to university-specific activities such as teaching (all field oriented biology courses use these patches) and research. The site is utilized increasingly in science outreach to the student body and to residents of surrounding neighborhoods in activities such as Earth Day plantings and annual BioBlitzes, and is featured as a campus highlight and fund raising asset during open houses and alumni functions. All this showcases that urban biodiversity in itself can be a provider of varied social ecosystem services.



Chuck-will's Widow: quite a surprise visitor on campus. October 2013. Photo by author.

### **To learn about urban birds – research**

In addition to keeping a tap on the migrants here on a daily basis, we are asking a number of scientific questions in regard to this stop-over site. Are small nature-like patches in cities havens or traps for migratory birds? How long do birds stay? Do they benefit and are they able to refuel their needed fat reserves here? What amount of food is available for birds in such small patches, particularly in comparison to larger, more typical stop-over sites (think Central Park!). Julian Rondon-Rivera, a Ph.D. candidate in my lab, is leading a mist-netting bird banding effort on campus and since 2011 has handled more than 2,600 individual birds (of 71 species). His data show that at least some species can gain weight and stay several days, longer than we previously had believed. Research is ongoing.



Stop for a chat with the bird bander. Julian is holding a Yellow-breasted Chat October 2011. Photo by author.

Bird strikes at campus windows are an ongoing problem; we even find rarer birds, often only as corpses (e.g., Hooded Warbler, Worm-eating Warbler, Clay-colored Sparrow, etc.). One species that is particularly vulnerable to deadly window-strikes is the American Woodcock. Annually we find 15-30 of them dead, mostly in November. We have installed reflective stickers to the "killing-hotspots" that proved not to be too effective. However, bird kills have been significantly reduced since the sustainable wild spots matured. Recent research found that the number of birds killed per year declined from about 600-800 per year to less than 200 in the last year. One possible explanation for this is that resting migratory birds now have good cover and food sources and do not need to move around on campus that much, thereby avoiding strikes at the abundant window surfaces.



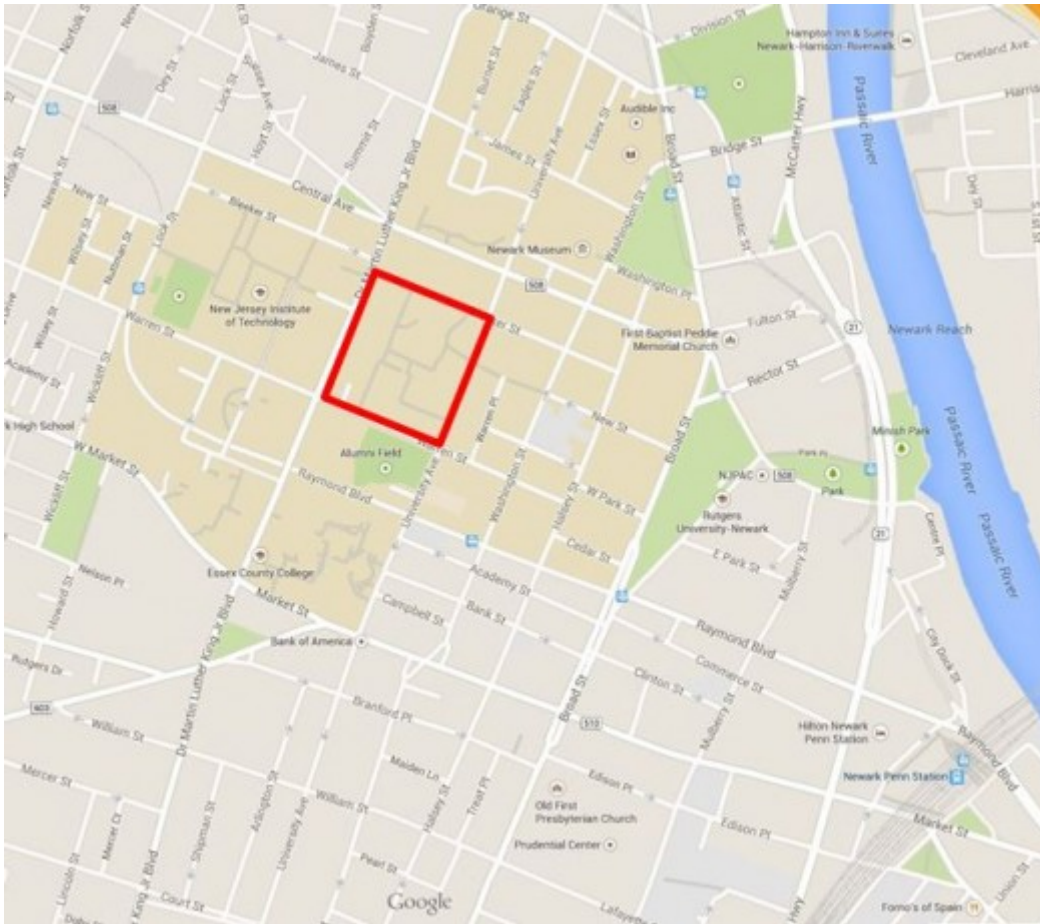
Birds killed by window impact. Clockwise from top: White-throated Sparrow, Lincoln Sparrow, Swamp Sparrow, Song Sparrow, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Ovenbird. October 2014. Photo by author.

### Where to watch birds on Rutgers Newark Campus?

**How to get there:** It is easy to reach here by public transportation, the closest light rail station – accessed from NJ Transit Penn Station – is Washington Street, a mere block away (after getting off the train, walk in the direction of the train and use that exit. (Street parking ranges from easy to impossible, but since you will arrive early in the morning, you will enjoy the easy end of the range. Do feed the meter! Maps and more info can be found:

[http://runewarkbiology.rutgers.edu/Holzapfel Lab/Main Pages/Contact us/Contact us.htm](http://runewarkbiology.rutgers.edu/Holzapfel%20Lab/Main%20Pages/Contact%20us/Contact%20us.htm)

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(<http://content.ebird.org/nj/wp-content/uploads/sites/38/Rutgers-location-map.jpg>)

Map of the central campus of Rutgers University Newark. Source Google Maps, February 2015.

**When to come:** Clearly the migration period is the time you want to come. Mid April to end of May and mid September to mid November is the best time to be here. Come early, the closer to sunrise the better. Around 8:30am the students regain control of the campus and birds tend to hide in the shrubbery and tree canopies and are harder to spot. Some might have already dispersed to other areas (location yet unknown to us). As with other potential fall-out sites, incoming cold or storm fronts can produce more birds. But one never knows. It does not take much time to find out whether it is a birdy morning or not, the good spots on campus are distinct and few (and do remember this is small campus).





1 Aidekman's Woodland    4 Cedar Corner  
2 Smith's Woodland    5 Blood Beech  
3 East Library Green    6 Great Lawn

50 yd

<http://content.ebird.org/nj/wp-content/uploads/sites/38/Rutgers-birds-eye-map.jpg>

Bird's eye view of the observation hotspots on Rutgers University Newark: Source: Bing Maps, February 2015

**Where to look:** The whole campus plaza might be good, but there are special hotspots that should be checked first (see the accompanying aerial photos). Start with the two large planters that are largely unmanaged and left alone to provide cover for wildlife and wild plants (1 Aidekman's Wood, 2 Smith's Wood). The tree canopies there may hold warblers, woodpeckers, flycatchers, tanager and more; the lower vegetation will hide sparrows, thrushes and more warblers. There is a small and hidden watering hole at the western end of the Aidekman's Wood; often birds congregate here. When done with the "woods" head to the east Library Green (3), often a very good spot for birds that like lower vegetation (thrushes, ovenbirds, water thrushes, sparrows). Your best bet for a close encounter with a Yellow-breasted Chat would be here. Once these sites are exhausted, head over to the Cedar Corner (4) and the Blood Beech (5; don't worry this is not a crime scene, just a reddish variety of the European beech tree). Deep forest birds might be found here: look for American Woodcock (in November), Sapsucker, forest warblers and the like. If you arrive really early, the larger lawn areas (6), especially the edges and "sore spots" that support crabgrass and unwanted yet nutritious weeds, might produce good flocks of migratory sparrows. Scan the flocks carefully as more rare sparrows can be among them (Field, Savannah and even Clay-colored Sparrow are almost regular). Well, now you are done, or make another round, just in case. Make sure to report to eBird and use the hotspot: **Rutgers University Campus Newark.**



Hermit Thrush. This is the most common thrush on campus during migration. This ground forager seems to do well here and is able to refuel on campus. May 2013. Photo by author.

Please do some 'Urban Birding' and check out this site come May. If you do not want to do this on your own, join our weekly bird walks in May – and October – (every Wednesday at 7:45am) and check the nature log for updates:

[http://runewarkbiology.rutgers.edu/Holzapfel Lab/Main Pages/BirdsOnCampus/Migration log.htm](http://runewarkbiology.rutgers.edu/Holzapfel%20Lab/Main%20Pages/BirdsOnCampus/Migration%20log.htm)  
(<http://runewarkbiology.rutgers.edu/Holzapfel%20Lab/Main%20Pages/BirdsOnCampus/Migration%20log.htm%20>)

Claus Holzapfel, [holzapfe@andromeda.rutgers.edu](mailto:holzapfe@andromeda.rutgers.edu) (<mailto:holzapfe@andromeda.rutgers.edu>), March 2015

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