



# Quabbin: The Accidental Wilderness

*Thomas Conuel*

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When one looks out on the quiet waters and forested hills of Quabbin Reservoir in west central Massachusetts, it is hard to imagine that the area was once dotted with buildings and farmlands or that it echoed with the activity of several villages and towns. Today, the daytime silence may be broken only by the cry of a hawk overhead or the slap of a plunging fish, and the evening calm, by the lonesome howl of a coyote. But in the nineteenth century, things were quite different.

In 1895, engineers for the Metropolitan Water Board began to search the state of Massachusetts for a site on which to construct a reservoir to supply water for the growing city of Boston. Sixty-five miles west of the city, in a region of high hills and running streams known as the Swift River Valley, they found what they were looking for. When Quabbin Reservoir was finally completed and filled in 1946, the engineers had created the third largest body of fresh water in New England and had accomplished one of the larger public works projects of its time. They had also uprooted and displaced the valley's inhabitants, leveled and flooded four towns and six villages—and formed a magnificent wilderness on some 85,000 acres.

The valley that was once known for its picturesque villages and mill ponds is now, over forty years later, home to a wide array of wildlife. Coyote, bobcat, and deer flourish, and Quabbin's eagle restoration project, begun in 1982, produced the first nesting pair of bald eagles in Massachusetts in almost a century. Today, the bald eagle population at Quabbin is estimated at forty-one birds.

But this accidental wilderness is being increasingly threatened. As early as the 1950s, the sounds of power boats occasionally intruded on the peaceful silence of the waters. In more recent years, acid rain, ozone and other pollutants, the ravages of a herd of hungry deer, and demands for increased recreational use are all jeopardizing Quabbin's waters and forests.

This book tells the story of Quabbin, tracing Quabbin's history, describing its natural resources, and discussing the environmental challenges it currently faces. The original edition, issued by the Massachusetts Audubon Society in 1981, has now been expanded and updated.

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