



BIRDING PLUM ISLAND

by Richard A. Forster, Massachusetts Audubon Society

No other area in Massachusetts receives as intensive birdwatching coverage as Plum Island and the surrounding environs of Newburyport and Salisbury. The reason becomes obvious once the observer makes the initial visit. Plum Island is a classic barrier beach with open ocean and a sandy beach on the seaward side. An extensive dune system vegetated predominantly with beach plum, bayberry, and other shrubby trees runs the length of the island fronting the beach. On the landward (western) side of the road that bisects the island is an extensive salt marsh. Three manmade wetland impoundments provide good habitat for marsh and waterbirds. There are two areas of planted pines located on the main portion of the island that provide additional habitat. The most interesting seasons are the spring and fall migration. The winter landscape can be bleak, but there is always the possibility of the one rarity that can turn an otherwise dismal day into a lifelong memory.

The island can be divided into three entities. The northern quarter of the island is densely populated with summer and year-round cottages. Birding opportunities are limited here, but brief stops can be productive on occasion, especially in winter. The major portion of the island south of the access road from Newburyport is the Parker River National Wildlife Refuge administered by the Department of the Interior, U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. There is an information booth at the entrance to the refuge which dispenses bird checklists, rules and regulations pamphlets, maps, and other pertinent information. A birdwatching permit is also available (at the booth or the headquarters) that allows parking and admittance to otherwise restricted areas at designated times of year. The permit is issued for a calendar year and is free of charge. Birdwatchers without a permit who violate these privileges are subject to substantial fines (which are enforced). The federal refuge is the destination of most birdwatchers and other outdoors buffs. The refuge provides limited parking, and once the 350-vehicle capacity is reached, the refuge is closed. This is standard procedure on summer weekends - and even on weekdays - when the weather is good. Increasingly, the visitor will find the refuge filled to capacity and closed early in the day on weekends throughout the year when ideal weather conditions exist. However, the gate usually is reopened by 3:00 P.M., even during the summer. Refuge hours are from dawn to dusk. Additional information can be obtained at the refuge headquarters on Northern Boulevard, Plum Island, Newburyport, MA 01950; telephone (617) 465-5753.

The southernmost seventy-two acres of the island comprise the Plum Island State Reservation administered by the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Management. The parking capacity of the two small lots at this end is about fifty cars. This area is primarily a beach area, but a self-guided nature trail is also to be found here. The rules and regulations are generally in keeping with federal standards.

The approach to the island. Plum Island can be reached from Newburyport on only one road - the Plum Island Turnpike. From the intersection of Rolfe's Lane and Water Street along the edge of Newburyport Harbor,

proceed east toward Plum Island. Almost immediately on the left is the Sportsman's Lodge, an eating establishment with a large parking lot. The edge of the parking area is an excellent vantage point for checking the harbor for shorebirds, gulls, and waterfowl on rising and falling tides. About half a mile farther along, the Plum Island Airport is located on the right. The field across from the airport is worth checking for shorebirds at high tide in spring and again from mid-July through October. The field is usually mowed in late August, and shorebirds are more easily seen then. Species most frequently encountered here are both yellowlegs, Least Sandpiper, and Pectoral Sandpiper (fall). Upland Sandpiper, which breeds nearby, is always a possibility. Rarities that have been seen here include Ruff and Buff-breasted and Baird's sandpipers. During high tides in late summer and fall, a walk along the edge of the field and the harbor will likely produce Marsh Wren and Sharp-tailed and Seaside (uncommon) sparrows. Be prepared to get your feet wet.

Farther along the road there is a pink house on the right. Turn right 0.3 mile past the pink house on a well-concealed dirt track. This is the area referred to as Plumbush by local birders. This is another location for resting shorebirds at high tide, and Whimbrel is often encountered here in the fall. A dirt track leads into the salt marsh. Sharp-tailed Sparrow is found along the edges of the tidal creeks in late spring and summer, and Willet, which nest in the marsh, may fly around noisily protesting your approach. Upland Sandpiper is often found in this area in summer.

As you approach the bridge leading to Plum Island proper, pull off to a small parking area on the right immediately before the bridge. Walk to the top of the bridge where the elevation affords good vistas of the marsh to the north and south. This is an excellent place to search for Snowy Owl in winter. Look for them perched on hunting blinds, hay staddles, or other marsh debris that affords elevation. This is also a good location for Snow Geese in April and Glossy Ibis during the latter part of April.

Continuing over the bridge toward the island proper, the first (and only) road to the right leads to the entrance of the Parker River National Wildlife Refuge (PRNWR).

The North End of the Island.

Before entering the Parker River Refuge, the observer may opt for checking the northern portion of the island. A cursory investigation of the area may take less than half an hour while an in-depth search should take less than two hours. Shortly beyond the turnoff to the PRNWR, the road makes a 90° turn to the left (north). There is a small parking area just at the bend in the road. Park here and walk to the beach to scan the ocean.

The best seasons for birding here are fall, winter, and especially spring. Loons, grebes and sea ducks are frequently seen. Northern Gannet is fairly routine in fall (October to early November) and again in spring (April to early May) especially when winds are onshore.

During strong northeast winds in fall, Black-legged Kittiwake and alcids are possible. From here, proceed to the northern end of the island where there is a large parking lot near the Coast Guard Station (just beyond the PRNWR headquarters). This area affords a view of the outer harbor and the two jetties embracing the mouth of the Merrimack River. Viewing the outer harbor in fall, winter, and spring should produce Bufflehead, Common Goldeneye, Red-breasted Merganser, and Oldsquaw. Gulls often trade back and forth at the mouth of the river. Bonaparte's Gull can be seen both spring and fall and occasionally in winter. Alert observers will be on the lookout for Little Gull and Common Black-headed Gull or perhaps something even rarer - Ross' Gull has been seen here on more than one occasion. In winter, a walk to the jetty will almost certainly produce Iceland Gull, Purple Sandpiper, and an occasional Glaucous Gull. A small flock of Common Eider is usually present here in winter, and the odd King Eider is always possible. Rarer sea ducks and alcids are occasionally seen. On the walk to the jetty, Horned Lark, Snow Bunting, and an occasional Lapland Longspur may be found,

When departing the north end, a quick look at "the Basin" may be in order. It is located 0.8 mile south of the refuge headquarters on the west side of the road. Access is from the church parking lot. This is a good location for viewing shorebirds in spring and fall on rising and falling tides when the extensive flats of the harbor are not fully exposed. It is a good location for Hudsonian Godwit in fall and Iceland Gull at high tide in winter.

The Parker River Refuge.

At the entrance, ask for maps, regulations, and a bird list. Just beyond the gate is the main parking lot. Birders usually stop here and scan the marsh. Restrooms and drinking water are available here, but this building is closed in winter. (Future plans call for a year-round facility.) An active Purple Martin colony is adjacent to the restrooms, and others are obvious farther down the island. The moor just south of the parking area has breeding Horned Lark and Savannah Sparrow, and Vesper Sparrow has bred here and may still occur on migration. If you arrive early in the morning, take a quick look at the two shrubby hillocks just south and to the west of the parking lot. If a good migration is in progress, these usually harbor an assortment of passerine species and may dictate how you wish to birdwatch on the remainder of the island. Continuing south, the road roughly bisects the island with salt marsh on the right and dunes with thickets on the left. In late fall and early winter, watch for Snowy Owl perched upon the dunes. The first landmark is Parking Lot #2 on the left. This is usually closed from May to September to prevent access and avoid disturbance to the Least Tern colony located on the outer beach.

The Salt Panne or Shorebird Pool. The next obvious landmark is on the right about one mile south of the main parking lot. Variouslly known to birders as the salt flats or salt pans, whatever its name, this area is one of the main focal points of activity on the island. Shorebirds roost here at high tide, and the road has been widened to provide live nature study for birdwatchers and other onlookers. The prime feature here is shorebirds in May and from July to October. The spring migration is fairly routine with few oddities noted. Wilson's Phalarope,



*Spotted Redshank at Salt Panne
July 28, 1981*

Photo by Joyce Cloughly

which breeds in the marshes, and White-rumped Sandpiper are regularly seen. Snowy Egret and other herons are routine and increase in numbers as the season progresses. Beginning in July and continuing into fall, an increasing number of shorebirds are present. Among the first migrants to arrive are Short-billed Dowitchers followed closely by two of the regular specialties - Hudsonian Godwit and Stilt Sandpiper. The Hudsonian Godwit is invariably present until at least mid-September, but Stilt Sandpiper numbers build quickly to a peak in early August and dwindle shortly thereafter. Another feature is the Long-billed Dowitcher. The first arrivals may appear in late July, but they can be readily found, if identified, from mid-August to late September. Both Stilt Sandpiper and Long-billed Dowitcher prefer to feed in brackish pools and tend to shun the mudflats of the harbor. Consequently, a visit here when the tide is low in the harbor will reveal these species still present. Other uncommon species which can be expected but not always seen are Red Knot, Lesser Golden-Plover, White-rumped and Western sandpiper. To provide a complete list of shorebirds that have been recorded here would read like a "Who's Who" of shorebirds in Massachusetts. Suffice to say that the possibilities are broad.

Another midsummer speciality is the heron congregation, especially in early morning. Snowy Egret is numerous, and Glossy Ibis less so but still regular. Little Blue Heron is scarce but does occur occasionally. This pool is an excellent place to study the plumage differences between adults and immatures. Sharp-tailed Sparrow is another species encountered around the edge of the pool. They are usually seen flying feebly for short distances but are occasionally found feeding on exposed mud where



Snowy Owl on Dune at Plum Island

*Photo by John Gavin
Courtesy of MAS*

they scurry mouselike between grassy clumps. Small numbers of gulls and terns rest with the shorebirds and are worthy of scrutiny for something different.

The Kettle Hole is found shortly beyond the salt pans at Parking Lot #3. A circular trail through this densely wooded area is worth a look-see during migration season although this writer has experienced a singular lack of success here even during periods of heavy migration. Across the road from the parking lot is another marsh pool that often has the same birds as the Shorebird Pool. This pool is smaller and has fewer birds which are farther away but is still worth checking.

The Warden's. Another mile down the island is a maintenance area (also known as sub-headquarters) with a small parking lot (permit required). This is a likely location for sparrows in the fall, especially the more uncommon, open-ground species like White-crowned, Clay-colored, and Lark. The small pond and surrounding salt marsh are worth scanning for shorebirds and herons, while the bushes often have landbirds. There are several Purple Martin colonies here, and Cliff Swallows have nested on the building.

Beyond the maintenance area and extending south for about two miles are two freshwater impoundments - North Pool and Bill Forward Pool. The main access point is the dike separating the two at Hellcat Swamp (Parking Lot #4). Before reaching Hellcat Swamp, there are several areas worth examining according to the season. Scan the drier portions of the east side of the road in fall for Whimbrel, Lesser Golden-Plover, or Buff-breasted Sandpiper. In spring, the wet, flooded portions are worth

checking for Common Snipe, Pectoral Sandpiper, both yellowlegs, or a possible Ruff. Parking is allowed in winter (again, permit required) along the side of the road near the prominent stone marker designating the Newbury/Rowley town line. This affords access to trails meandering through the New Pines. In some years Northern Saw-whet and/or Long-eared owls are present here as are winter finches, especially crossbills, and Red-breasted Nuthatches. In keeping with the vagaries of these northern visitors, in some years a walk through the area will produce virtually nothing.

Hellcat Swamp is another prime birding location, and deciding what to do first is dictated by the time of year and the observer's main interests. A series of trails and boardwalks lead through Hellcat Swamp including a self-guiding nature trail (pamphlet available). Fundamental restrooms are also available here.

A viewing platform located along the boardwalk on the high dune immediately to the east of Hellcat Swamp has proved a reliable spot for hawk-watching enthusiasts in recent years during spring migration. Favorable westerly winds in April bring hawks bounding over the dunes often close enough that binoculars are useless. The bulk of the migrants consists of Sharp-shinned Hawk and American Kestrel with lesser numbers of Merlin, Northern Harrier, Osprey, and Cooper's Hawk, with always a chance for a Peregrine Falcon. In fall there is no definitive hawk flight but Peregrine, Merlin, and Sharp-shinned Hawk can be encountered often in desperate pursuit of a shorebird or duck.

The wooded thickets on both sides of the road offer suitable habitat for migrant vireos, warblers, thrushes, and flycatchers. Because the emergence of the vegetation is retarded by the cool ocean water, the normal May migrants tend to be more prevalent in the latter half of May unlike the situation in warmer inland localities, which foliate earlier. Often there is a wave of migrants in early June that features such uncommon species as Mourning Warbler and the flycatchers, especially Yellow-bellied and Olive-sided. Unlike the late spring migration, the typical April migrants featuring kinglets, Hermit Thrush, White-throated Sparrow, and Yellow-bellied Sapsucker occur on the same time schedule as in inland areas. Fall migrants become obvious in mid-August with the best variety usually occurring in late August or early September. The uncommon Cape May and Bay-breasted warblers are often a major component of this flight. Fall migration provides a better chance for seeing such uncommon, or overlooked, species with a more westerly breeding distribution. Philadelphia Vireo and Yellow-bellied Flycatcher are two species which come immediately to mind that can reasonably be expected, and a fortunate observer might glimpse a Connecticut Warbler or a chat.

A well-marked trail leads to an observation blind that overlooks the freshwater marsh. Ducks can be seen from here in spring, and marsh birds are occasionally heard and more rarely seen. Seed is spread on the ground, and this attracts blackbirds and sparrows. Yellow-headed Blackbird has been seen here on several occasions in late August or early September. A boardwalk extends off the trail and leads in a loop through the marsh. Marsh Wren is a conspicuous summer resident along the trail. Rails and Least Bittern are resident but much more difficult to see.

The dike at Hellcat separating two Impoundments leads to an observation tower. This dike offers sufficient elevation to view both impounded areas. The tower is very shaky in moderate winds or when people are climbing. The southern (Bill Forward) pool is the more interesting of the two. The water level is usually lower, and extensive "flats" are present. During spring and fall, various ducks (teal, pintail, and shoveler) can usually be found, and from July to October numerous shorebirds rest and feed here at high tide. Most of the commoner shorebirds occur here in varying numbers, and Stilt, Buff-breasted, and Baird's sandpipers, Long-billed Dowitcher, and Lesser Golden-Plover can be expected especially in the late August and early September period. Limited access is allowed by permit along the north and south dikes from July 15 to September 30 allowing closer examination of the shorebirds. However, the lighting conditions can prove difficult in the morning. A check of the marsh pools behind the dike may yield a Yellow-crowned Night-Heron.

The Old Pines. Once the birding opportunities at Hellcat Swamp are exhausted, it is time to move on to the next destination - the Old Pines by Parking Lot #5. This area doesn't offer any new birding possibilities, but one advantage for the observer here is that the pines are open and the birds easier to see. The trail leading through the pines can be good for landbirds. The marsh and pools are worth a scan from the edge of the parking lot or from the pines. Herons and egrets are frequently seen, and Tricolored Heron is a possibility. Ducks often concentrate here in late March and April. During high tides in November the number of American Black Ducks can be impressive.

Cross Farm Hill. Continuing on, the next mile or so borders that salt marsh and is generally unproductive but is worth an occasional glance. A prominent grassy knoll, Cross Farm Hill, is worth checking in the fall. Numerous Canada Geese browse on the hill, and a small group of Snow Geese frequently accompanies them in late fall. The area appears to be attractive to raptors with Northern Harrier frequently present except in summer and an occasional Rough-legged Hawk in winter. Just south of Cross Farm Hill is a small marsh pool which can be easily viewed from the road. The pool and surrounding marsh are surprisingly good for shorebirds in season at high tide and for ducks and herons.

Stage Island Pool is the next birding hotspot on the island with access at two points - Parking Lots #6 and #7. Water conditions here can vary dramatically from year to year depending on climatological conditions and/or management decisions. Normal conditions are wet in spring and early summer and drying up with edge and muddy flats later in summer, continuing into fall. The winter's ice usually breaks up in March at which time ducks begin arriving. During April the usual assortment of freshwater ducks is present with sporadic visits by Bufflehead, scaup, and others. Ruddy Duck usually put in an appearance and may remain to breed if conditions are right. By May, marsh birds appear. Rails, Marsh Wren, Least Bittern, possibly American Bittern, and Common Moorhen may be heard or seen. On cool, cloudy days in May, swallows can be found in numbers skimming over the surface of the water. The summer months can be exciting with roosting or feeding gulls, terns, shorebirds, and herons all present. The array of rarities belonging to these species

groups that have been recorded here over the years is seemingly endless. The shorebird group is probably best represented with Buff-breasted and Baird's sandpipers regular if the proper water levels exist. Viewing is required from both access points because each affords different views of the rather expansive area. The tower at Parking Lot #7 is a must for observation, and a telescope is a necessity. Generally speaking, the area seen from the tower is more productive, especially for herons and terns. [A note of caution: in the summer months beach users prefer the southern end, and the parking lots fill early.]

Stage Island Pool is currently the site of an evening roost for herons and egrets. More birds can be seen in an evening flying in than one can observe in an entire summer scanning the marshes. Little Blue Heron, Tricolored Heron, Glossy Ibis, and Great Egret are usually present in the congregation.

As fall approaches, the ducks begin to increase. American Wigeon sometimes occur in some numbers, and rarely, a Eurasian Wigeon is found. During October and November, ducks of various species dominate the scene.

A walkway leads from Parking Lot #7 across the dune area to the beach where it affords a view of Emerson Rocks. The rocks are completely covered at high tide, and even in winter, this seems to be the worst time to look for birds. In summer, Red Knot and Ruddy Turnstone are frequently seen feeding on the exposed rocks but are surprisingly inconspicuous as they walk about. In fall, winter, and spring look for loons, grebes, sea ducks (especially scoters) and gulls. Harlequin Duck and King Eider are seen here rarely, and Purple Sandpiper is infrequent on the rocks.

Plum Island State Reservation. Shortly after departing from Parking Lot #7, you leave the Parker River National Wildlife Refuge and enter the state reservation, also known as Sandy Point. Park at the southern terminus of the road and walk out along the beach. A small colony of Least Terns nests here, and a pair or two of Piping Plover can usually be found. Although the state reservation is infrequently birded, it can be a surprisingly productive area for shorebirds in August and September. There are usually some roosting terns along the water's edge at the higher tides and among them, a few Roseate Terns. Royal Tern is seen rather frequently in summer, either feeding offshore or resting on exposed sandbars at lower tides. Look for shorebirds feeding along the tidal wrack. As you continue along the beach, you will come to a cove that harbors a good variety of shorebirds at low tide. From here, you can return along the beach or along the old road, now a nature trail, which leads from the back side of Stage Island to the state reservation parking lot. One final thought: the woody hillside (known as Bar Head) adjacent to the parking lot is worth a look-see, especially in fall. It can be surveyed either along the trail or from the perimeter.

Helpful hints.

1. Landbirds can occur anywhere on the island from the hillocks near the the main parking lot at the entrance all the way down the island to Bar Head on the state reservation.

2. Sparrows are best seen along the roadsides and around the parking lots.
3. In the fall keep a close lookout for exposed perches where a Western Kingbird, Loggerhead Shrike, or even a Red-headed Woodpecker might be seen; in winter, do the same for Northern Shrike.
4. During summer or good weekends in spring and fall, be prepared for crowds and arrange to arrive early to gain entrance to the refuge. Also in summer from July to mid-August, the greenhead flies can be unbearable. Long sleeves and repellent are advised.
5. Obey all rules and regulations of the refuge. Report sightings of rarities to the attendant at the main gate.

RICHARD A. FORSTER has estimated that during the more than twenty-five years that he has been studying the birds of New England, he has visited Plum Island close to a thousand times. Associated with Massachusetts Audubon Society for many years as bird expert, biologist, natural historian, and tour leader, Dick is best known for his work on the records of Massachusetts birds, the Breeding Bird Atlas, the Tern Project, and for his addiction to the birds of Heard's Pond and "The Valley" - Sudbury, of course.

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