

Depth curve and soundings in feet. Datum is mean low water. Shoreline shown represents the approximate line of mean high water. The mean range of tides is approximately 9 feet. Based on USGS Provincetown, MA Outerport, 1972. Map by J.L.H.

BIRDING IN PROVINCETOWN

by Blair Nikula

Provincetown, that overgrown sand dune at the tip of Cape Cod, was long neglected by birders visiting the cape in spite of, or perhaps because of, its unique, isolated location. However, increased coverage over the last decade or two has proven the area to be an exciting though unpredictable birding spot at any season, usually well worth the extra driving time required to get there (about half an hour from Orleans, two to three hours from Boston). The list of birds recorded here exceeds three hundred species and includes a veritable who's who of Massachusetts vagrants.

Perhaps the most alluring aspect of birding in Provincetown for most landlubbers is the presence of varying numbers of pelagic birds within sight from land at almost any time of the year, but especially in the fall. On a day-to-day basis, this area has been the most consistent locale in the state, and probably on the east coast, for land-based observations of pelagic birds. Frequent sightings of marine mammals from shore serve as icing on the seabird cake. P'town, as it is known locally, also harbors several active whale-watching fleets. These make almost daily trips in season (late April to early October) to Stellwagen Bank a few miles to the north, affording the seaworthy observer the opportunity for a more intimate pelagic experience.

During the fall the area is also favorable for migrant landbirds and is on a par with many of the better-known coastal landbird traps. A northwest wind at this season often results in waves of passerines, showering the dune thickets with sparrows, thrushes, vireos, and the like. Migrant falcons and accipiters are routinely encountered at this season as well.

Provincetown is also the best spot on Cape Cod to witness the spring migration. The cape was once considered an avian wasteland in the spring, but it is now known to be otherwise. Although the occurrence of spring migrants is more unpredictable than on the mainland and the volume of migration is usually considerably less, the species diversity on the cape is every bit as great, and the birding at times equals or even surpasses that on the mainland. Indeed, spring birding in P'town offers some advantages over the mainland: the trees are generally smaller, and the cool ocean breezes retard the emergence of vegetation by as much as ten to fifteen days in comparison to inland areas. Consequently, while birders at Mt. Auburn suffer "warbler neck" playing frustrating games of hide-and-seek with warblers hidden in the densely foliated treetops, observers in the Beech Forest are still enjoying open, often eye-level views of their quarry. Here a Tennessee Warbler is more than just an unseen voice in the canopy! An added attraction in the spring is a substantial movement of hawks over the outer

cape, with the resulting concentration of these birds in the Provincetown area. The following areas are some of the most consistently productive.

Pilgrim Lake. During the early 1900s this lake, created in 1860 by the diking of what was originally a saltwater harbor, apparently teemed with marsh birds and waterfowl. However, the encroaching sand and a sixteen-inch, man-induced lowering of the water level in 1958 (in the name of mosquito control) have led to its demise. It is doubtful that any marsh birds are now breeding here, and ducks other than the ubiquitous American Black Duck are an infrequent sight. A sandbar occasionally exposed toward the west end of the lake attracts Double-crested Cormorants (April to October), and the ever-present flocks of gulls should be checked for possible Iceland Gull or Glaucous Gull during the winter months. Along the east end of the lake the thickets harbor migrant landbirds in season and can be explored from a dirt road off Route 6 just before you reach the lake on the right. To check the lake, you can pull off Route 6 onto the grassy shoulder, but be careful to avoid the soft spots and storm drains. The grassy borders of the highway from here to the end at Herring Cove should be watched for sparrows, pipits, etc., during migration.

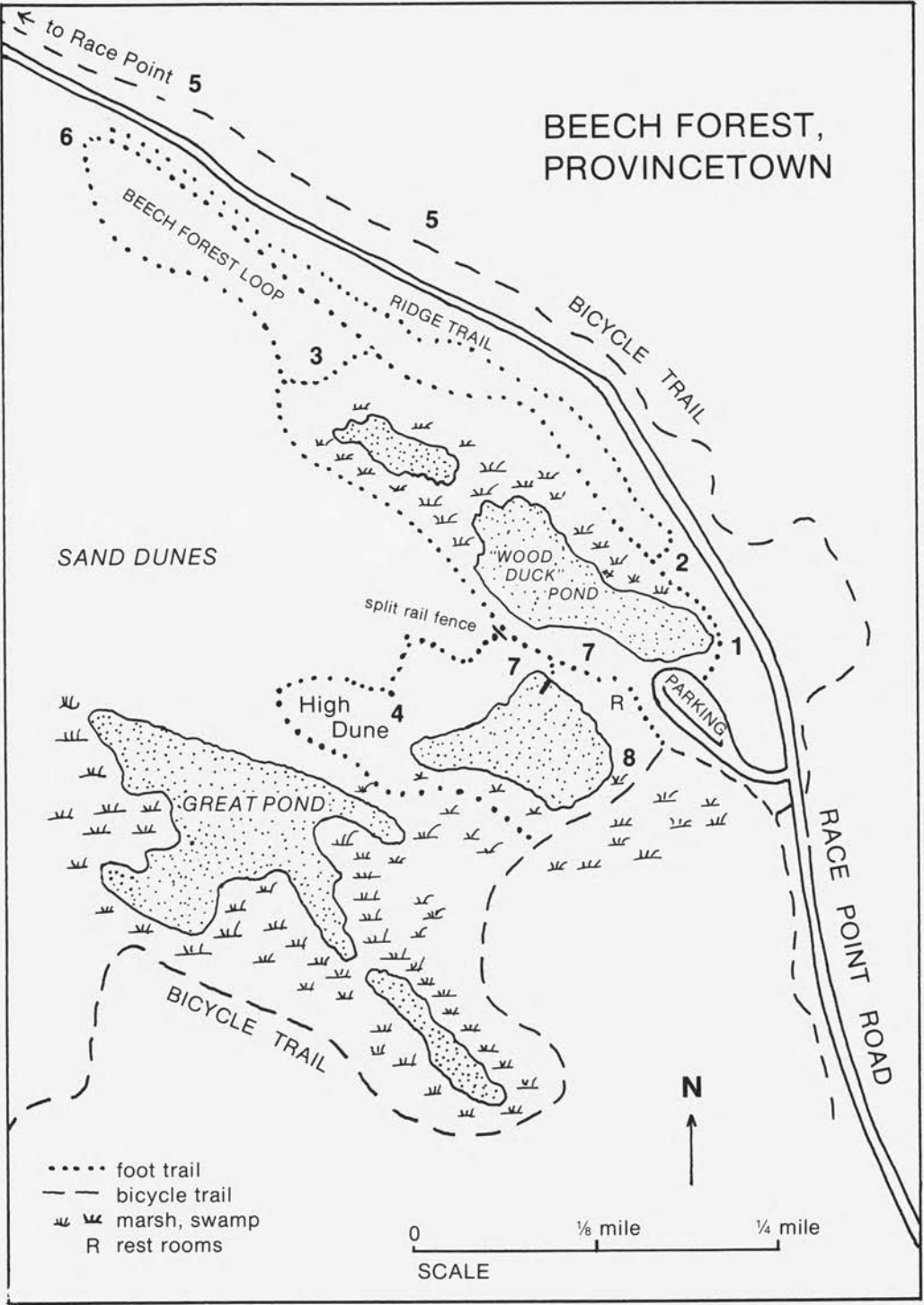
Provincetown Dump. If there are any vultures or eagles in the area, they are apt to frequent the dump, and the gulls should be checked for white-winged and possible Lesser Black-backed Gull. Access is from Race Point Road, a short distance from the Route 6 lights.

Beech Forest. This unique area is without a doubt the finest spot on Cape Cod to witness the spring passerine migration and is also worth checking in the fall, particularly from late August to late September when the warblers are passing through. It is an oasis among the dunes with small marshy ponds surrounded by beeches, alders, six species of pines and, most notably, oaks. Spring migrants are most likely to be encountered where oaks predominate, whereas fall migrants are more widespread and are apt to be found anywhere. Accordingly, the following remarks pertain primarily to the spring season when the location of the birds is more predictable according to habitat. Species to be expected include all of the typical eastern Massachusetts migrants. Some of the better spots in the Beech Forest are the following (numbers correspond to those on the accompanying map).

"Wooden Bridge." (1) This area adjacent to the parking lot is among the most consistently productive. If there are any birds around at all, there is apt to be a pocket of them here. Check the oaks on the opposite side of Race Point Road as well.

"Ridge Trail." (2) This ill-defined and unmaintained trail branches off from the main trail approximately a hundred yards from the parking lot. After passing a small stand of Scotch and Austrian pines on the right, bear right up the steep

BEECH FOREST, PROVINCETOWN



sandy slope and onto the trail along the top of the ridge. This is one of the highest spots in the Beech Forest and is usually good for warblers, vireos, and some of the shyer species such as thrushes. It seems to be more active during the late morning and latter part of the season (last half of May). One advantage of this trail is that the birder is at treetop level, where observation is easier. It also offers refuge from the nonbirding and often noisy weekenders.

Far end of "Wood Duck" Pond. (3) This section of the trail with its large oaks and beeches is the most consistently satisfying, particularly early in the morning. It is sheltered from most of the raw ocean breezes and catches the warmth of the rising sun. Several "layers" of birding potential are present here, from the moist hollow below to the tops of the highest trees on the hillside above. On a good day it's difficult to decide whether to look up, down or straight ahead!

"High Dune." (4) This is one of the better locations in P'town from which to see spring hawks. To reach it, watch for a section of split-rail fence on the south side of the main trail. Turn south here (away from "Wood Duck" Pond) and follow the sandy trail through the scrub pine to the highest vantage point. A clear view is available in all directions, and most of the town can be seen. It seems that sooner or later most of the hawks present in the area on a given day will pass by this dune as they mill about, and the birder is often afforded excellent looks. All of the common raptors of the northeast can be expected here, and some of the accidental southern species (e.g., kites and Black Vulture) have been recorded as well.

Other spots in the Beech Forest that are worth checking for migrants are (5) the bicycle trail on the northeast side of Race Point Road, (6) the oaks at the far (northwest) corner of the forest, (7) the main trail from the split-rail fence to the restrooms, and (8) the bicycle trail from the rest rooms south between the ponds.

During weekend afternoons the parking lot and main trails become cluttered with weekenders who are often noisy and can hamper birding efforts; try to arrive early to beat the rush. Access to the parking lot is off Race Point Road.

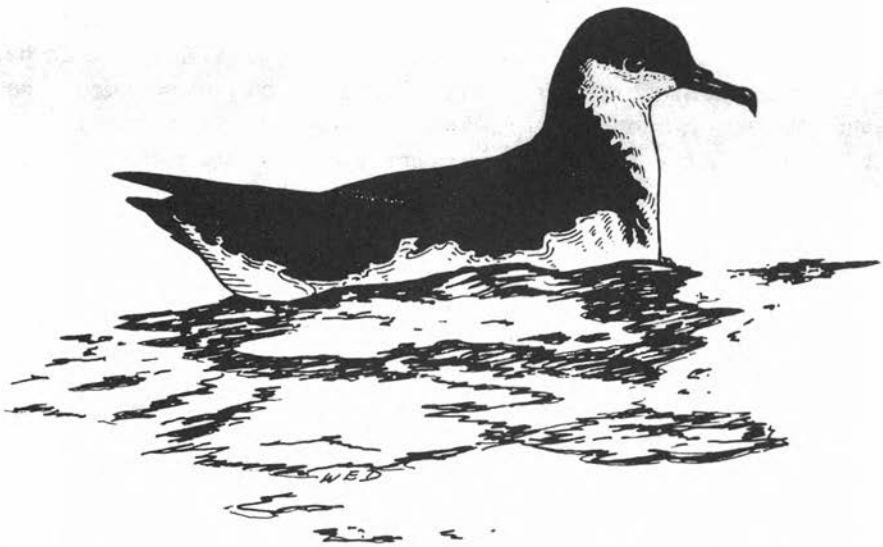
National Seashore Visitors Center. This is another good hawkwatching site; however, the light is often a problem here. Viewing can be done from the parking lot or, better, from the observation deck at the top of the building, where the outer dunes can be watched for falcons and accipiters.

Airport and vicinity. This area is mainly of interest in the fall, when the many thickets attract numerous passerines, and accipiters and falcons frequently pass over. Park at the Race Point parking lot and walk back to the airport (the airport parking lot is reserved for customers). From here one may proceed southwest following the line of wet thickets that extends from the parking lot to the end of the runway. But keep well away from the runway! If you are ambitious and continue far enough, about 1.25 miles, you will end up at Hatches

Harbor (see below). The complete route, although arduous, is well worth the effort on a good day. A recommended alternative is to walk down the outer beach from the Race Point parking lot and walk back along the airport (or vice versa), a loop which combines the possibilities for both seabirds and landbirds. Another walk where passerines can be abundant begins across the road from the airport and follows the densely vegetated ravines that run eastward through the dunes for about two to three miles. With the passage of a cold front in the fall this entire area may be hopping with migrants and offer some lively birding. During the late fall and winter, Northern Harriers, Rough-legged Hawks and Northern Shrikes (in flight years) can often be found here.

Race Point parking lot. One of the finest locations in eastern North America to watch for seabirds, this site offers the potential for a diverse and exciting array of pelagics, particularly from late August through February. All of the regular northwest Atlantic pelagics have been seen here, and the commoner species can be seen with some regularity and occasionally in great numbers when conditions are favorable. Exactly why these birds occur with such consistency in this vicinity remains uncertain, though a variety of factors are likely involved. Undoubtedly P'town's location, thrusting prominently toward the Gulf of Maine, results in many seabirds being intercepted by this land mass as they move southward during the fall. The rich Stellwagen Bank, host to an abundance of marine birds and mammals, lies just a few miles to the north and certainly contributes to many of the sightings here. Another important factor appears to be the presence of water that is deep (over a hundred feet) close to shore in this area. Presumably this sharp dropoff results in some upwelling and, in conjunction with the strong rips and currents characteristic of the region, provides a plentiful source of food. If the sea is fairly calm, the deep-water line (where the shallow, light blue water turns to a deep, dark blue) can be seen from the parking lot some eight hundred yards out from shore. Farther to the west this line comes progressively closer to shore and is closest, roughly two hundred yards out, just north of the tip of Race Point itself (see map).

Generally the best weather conditions are cloudy skies with light to moderate northeast winds, although during the peak season (September to November) a few birds can usually be found under almost any conditions. When the winds are strong (40+ mph) from the northeast, viewing is very difficult, particularly if it is raining. The dunes in front of the parking lot have built up to the point that it is nearly impossible to see the water from the comfort of your car, making it necessary to brave the elements. Both the bathhouse and the old Coast Guard station can afford some protection from the worst of the weather. Viewing pelagics from land is rarely a comfortable endeavor at any location! Strong northwest winds following a northeast storm can provide a good show as the pelagics that were blown into Cape Cod Bay by the storm



Shearwater

Illustration by William E. Davis, Jr.

stream back out into the open ocean. During the warmer months fog may bring the birds in, but one must be on hand at the precise moment the fog clears, since little if anything can be seen before and the birds move out rapidly as visibility improves.

There is probably no finer place in the northeast to see jaegers; on any day from mid-August through October, with a little patience and a sharp eye, one can usually expect to see at least two or three jaegers and at times counts of fifty or more are possible. Parasitic is by far the most common, but Pomarine is possible and Long-tailed is reported very rarely. Impressive numbers of shearwaters are also possible, with counts in the hundreds and even thousands not uncommon, especially after storms. Greater Shearwater is the predominate species, but Sooty is very possible during the summer and early fall, and this is an excellent spot to look for Manx Shearwater from August through October.

While scoping for birds, keep an eye out for the distinctive spouts of whales, which are present throughout the year, with largest numbers generally during the spring and fall. Fin and Humpback whales are the most common, but Minke and Right whales are possible and White-sided Dolphins are seen on occasion. "Have you seen any whales?" is a question often hurled at the scope-wielding birder.

Race Point. When conditions are favorable, this point is unsurpassed for close observations of pelagics from land. Deep water is less than two hundred yards offshore here and alcids, shearwaters and other seabirds can often be seen feeding at remarkably close range. Much of the information above on the Race Point parking lot pertains to this area as well. During the winter months guillemots, Razorbills, and murrens have been found regularly along the outer beach between the point and the parking lot. A calm sea at this time of year is best, since these alcids can often be seen sitting and feeding along the deep-water line. Unfortunately, access is only by foot or four-wheel drive from the Race Point parking lot.

Hatches Harbor. As its name indicates, this area once served as a harbor but has since sanded in, a fate for which every body of water in P'town seems destined. It now consists of a small patch of salt marsh and some tidal flats separated from the bay by a spit of sand. On the east it is bordered by the remains of a man-made dike; to the east of the dike lies the airport with its border of wet thickets. The flats and spit attract large numbers of gulls year round and terns from July to October, and occasionally the rarer members of their clan can be found. Lesser Black-backed Gull has been found here with some regularity in the fall. A few shorebirds are also usually present in season. Harbor Seals frequently haul out on the spit during the winter. Although the habitat is limited here, the land's-end location makes it the type of spot where almost anything is apt to drop in. Access is by foot or four-wheel drive.

Herring Cove. This is another vantage point for viewing seabirds, but because the observer is at a very low elevation and the birds are usually at a considerable distance from shore, it is generally less fruitful than the Race Point area (which is visible to the north). Poor light can also be a problem during the afternoon. Large numbers of terns feed here from late summer to early fall and often attract jaegers into easy viewing range. Various sea ducks are common during the colder months.

Shank Painter Pond. This swampy pond is one of those places that looks as if it should be full of birds yet rarely has any. Wood Ducks are sometimes present and night-herons occasionally fish the edges, but otherwise there is little to be said about the area. It is easily checked from Route 6, however, and should not be passed by without a quick look.

Vesper Sparrows may nest in the dunes in this part of town and the grassy edges of the highway should be watched for sparrows during migration. The thickets, as elsewhere, may harbor migrants.

Wood End, Long Point and dike. Located at the west end of Provincetown Harbor, this area consists of a typical barrier beach with salt marsh and mudflats on the inside, and scrubby thickets in the dune hollows. Black-crowned Night-Herons have nested here, as have a few Common and

Least Terns. The mudflats attract small numbers of shorebirds in season and the thickets may have a few migrant landbirds in the fall. During the late summer large flocks of terns roost on the flats at low tide and generally include good numbers of Roseate Terns. Summering Black-legged Kittiwakes (invariably immatures) have been regular here in June and July, as have immature Arctic Terns. Small numbers of pelagics are sometimes seen off the beach in summer and fall.

It is possible to park at the west-end rotary (but get there early in the summer) and walk out the dike to Wood End, but this should be done cautiously and only at low tide. Be very aware of the tide, because the higher tides can cover the dike. A young woman drowned here once when she became trapped by an extreme tide.

Provincetown Harbor. This is one of the best known and most frequently birded locations in P'town. It is primarily of interest in winter when it attracts white-winged gulls, kittiwakes, alcids (particularly after storms), cormorants, and a variety of sea ducks. There are several vantage points from which to check the harbor, all accessible from Commercial Street. The best of these is McMillan Wharf which extends well out into the harbor and offers the opportunity for excellent looks at many of the birds. Alcids, when they are present, are often very close to the wharf, even underneath it, so be sure to look over the edge! Photographers will find this an exceptional place to photograph several species of birds that can normally only be approached from a boat. During the winter it is possible to drive out to the end of the wharf.

A couple of public parking lots elsewhere off Commercial Street also provide good views of the harbor. The best is toward the west end (see map), adjacent to the Provincetown Center for Coastal Studies. From here, guillemots can be seen in some years out near the center of the harbor. There are extensive mudflats along the east end of the harbor at low tide but they are rather barren of birds.

Although I have described some of the more profitable birding locations in P'town, keep in mind that the dunes throughout town are full of wet, swampy thickets that are apt to have birds during a good wave. Keep an eye out for pockets of birds as you drive around the area, and be prepared to do a little exploring of your own. Be aware, however, that parking on the side of the road is prohibited along Race Point Road, Provincelands Road, and sections of Route 6. This ban is strictly enforced and with good reason, so stick to the designated parking areas.

Because parking is rather limited and many areas are not accessible by paved road, considerable walking is necessary to cover the region well. Another means of transportation you may wish to consider is the bicycle. There is an excellent though rather rigorous bicycle trail that covers much of the town and

many of the areas outlined above are readily accessible by bicycle. Those with a four-wheel drive vehicle can obtain a permit to drive the beach out to Race Point at the National Seashore headquarters on Race Point Road. Access to the dune trails is tightly controlled and becoming increasingly restricted, so be sure to obtain the proper permits before venturing onto any of them.

If you find that some of your old birding spots are getting a little too predictable and you're ready for a change, give Provincetown a try. I think you'll find it always intriguing, often exciting, occasionally disappointing, but rarely predictable!

BLAIR NIKULA, regional editor for *American Birds* and an authority on the birds of Cape Cod and Monomoy, has produced with members of the Cape Cod Bird Club a manuscript soon to be published about birding spots on the cape.

FOR SALE: Plates from *Jardines Naturalist Library*. Published in 1835, the 4 x 6 inch hand-colored plates are of Raptors, Owls, Grouse, Rails, Herons, Shorebirds, Ducks, Geese, Loons, Auks, and Gulls. Price is \$5.00 to \$7.50 per plate. For a complete list, send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to Tad Lawrence, Department of Biology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1048 or call 313-334-1216 (evenings).

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