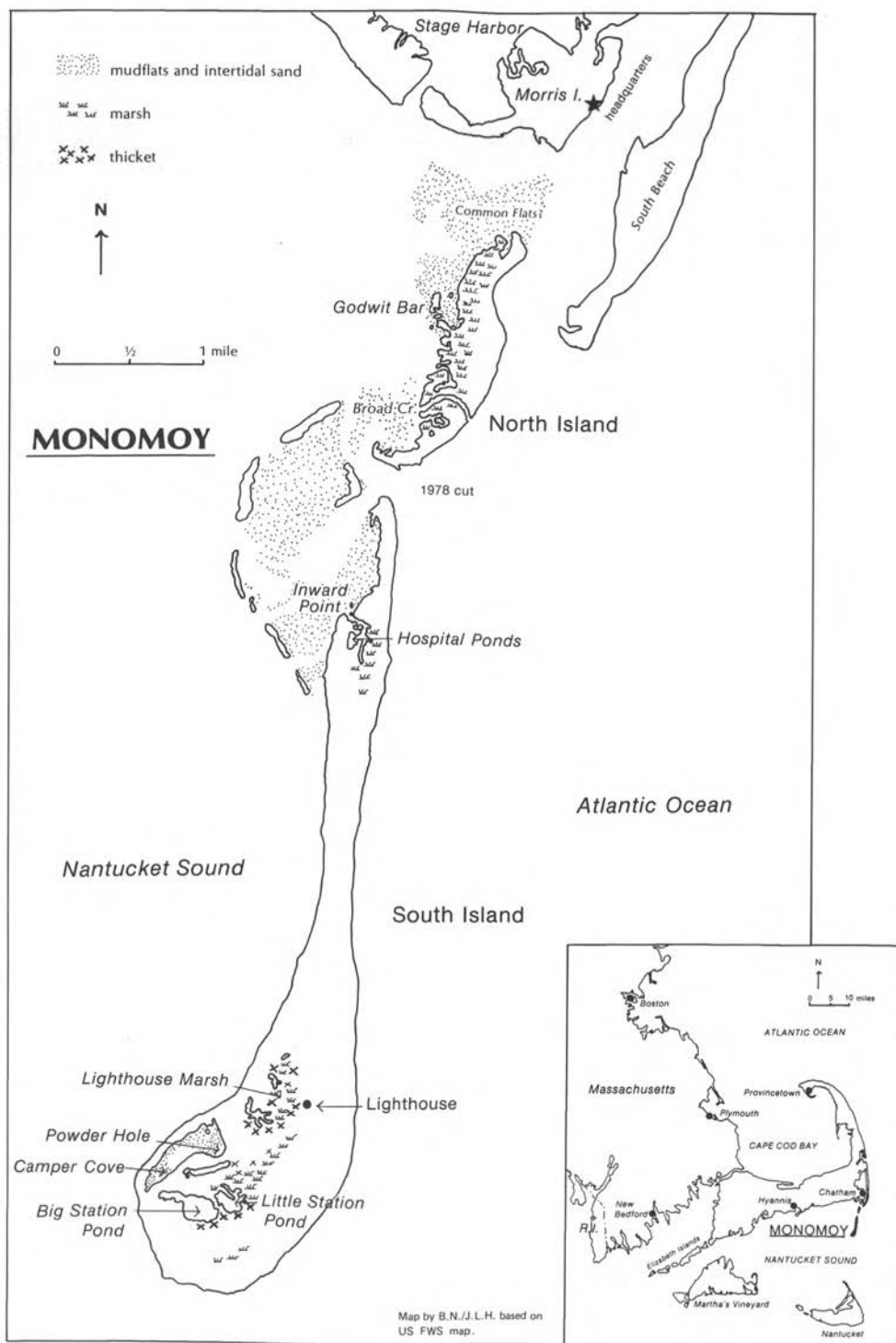


map of monomoy goes on this page



## WHERE TO GO: MONOMOY

by Blair Nikula

Located within the township of Chatham at the elbow of Cape Cod, Monomoy is the most northeasterly of a series of islands that fringe New England's south shore. Unlike the other islands, which are glacial formations resulting from the Pleistocene ice sheet, Monomoy is entirely a creation of the sea, composed of sand washed southward from Cape Cod's eroding eastern shore. As such, it is a classic barrier beach comprising surf-battered dunes on its eastern shore that gradually flatten out to salt marsh and mud flats on its western shore. The ocean is continually reshaping Monomoy's approximately twenty-five hundred acres, and at various times in its history it has been a peninsula, an island, or a series of islands. For the first half of this century, Monomoy was a peninsula connected to the Chatham mainland at Morris Island and was accessible by beach buggy, a circumstance of which the great Ludlow Griscom and other birders of his time frequently took advantage. In 1958 an April storm "islandized" the peninsula by breaching the beach just below Morris Island and created the cut-through that still exists today. Local rumor has it that this April storm was aided and abetted by a few shovel-wielding local fishermen eager for a quicker route from Nantucket Sound to the ocean!

Twenty years later, in February 1978, a severe northeaster combined with extremely high tides "bi-islandized" Monomoy, creating a second cut-through just north of Inward Point, about one and a half miles south of the first cut. Consequently, Monomoy now consists of two islands: a shrinking, unstable north island approximately two miles long and a more stable and enlarging south island about six miles long.

For most of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Monomoy was inhabited by the citizens of a small but active fishing village located along the perimeter of what is now called the Powder Hole -- then a rather sizable harbor. During the last part of the nineteenth century, the harbor began to sand in, and by the turn of the century few year-round inhabitants remained. In 1944 Monomoy became a National Wildlife Refuge and in 1970 was afforded even more extensive protection with its designation as a National Wilderness Area. Since it has gained control of the island, the government has slowly but steadily been dismantling the old buildings so that now only the dilapidated lighthouse and a couple of rundown shacks remain standing.

Monomoy's ornithological history began during the era of the "sportsmen-naturalists" in the late 1800s. The hordes of migrating waterfowl and shorebirds attracted many of these gentlemen gunners resulting in the formation of the

Monomoy Brant Club in 1862. Though most of these men were primarily interested in hunting, there were some fine naturalists among them, and their records provide us with considerable information on at least a portion of the birdlife at that time.

Much more complete information on the island's birdlife resulted from Ludlow Griscom's interest in the area. Griscom was the first to exploit Monomoy's potential as one of the most exciting birding locations on the East Coast and during his lifetime made over three hundred trips down the (then) peninsula. Monomoy became separated from the mainland just a few months before Griscom's death in 1959.

It was during the 1960s that the ornithological coverage of Monomoy reached its apex. In 1960 the Massachusetts Audubon Society (MAS) under a cooperative agreement with the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service began conducting beach-buggy tours of the island to explore the wildlife. Led by a series of young guides with an insatiable passion for birds, these tours quickly became very popular and at times were being run almost daily during the peak summer season. During the late 1960s a banding operation under the direction of James Baird was conducted on the south end, based in the old lighthouse which had been purchased by Massachusetts Audubon in 1964. Consequently, for a few years Monomoy received a level of coverage that is not likely to be matched again. The designation of Monomoy as a National Wilderness Area eliminated vehicle access and, combined with changes in the physical structure of the island and surrounding waters, made the tours increasingly difficult to operate, and they were terminated after the 1975 season. However, MAS has since resumed walking tours of the island and offers trips to both the north and south islands. See Access below. A more detailed history of Monomoy is available in *Monomoy Wilderness*, a delightful booklet published by the Massachusetts Audubon Society in 1972 and now, unfortunately, out of print.

Birding on Monomoy is considerably different on the two islands. The north island is best visited from May through September when large numbers of shorebirds and terns are present, whereas the south island is best from August through November when migrant landbirds, raptors, waterfowl, and some of the rarer shorebirds can be found.

### **The North Island of Monomoy**

The north island consists entirely of dunes, salt marsh, and mud flats and attracts hordes of migrating and nesting terns, gulls, and shorebirds. The largest concentrations of birds are generally found at high tide along the edge of the flats and marsh in a quarter-mile stretch extending from the extreme north end south to Godwit Bar (see map). However, during periods of extreme high tides,

this area is flooded, and the birds are often forced farther down the island or over the South Beach to the east.

Until recently one of the largest (over three thousand pairs) Common Tern colonies in the Northeast was located in the dunes on the extreme north end of the island. The birds have been plagued with a variety of problems, however, and the colony now consists of only a few hundred terns, dispersed in small groups on marsh hummocks throughout the island. The future of Common Terns as nesters on Monomoy is at best very tenuous. Roseate Terns no longer nest, but a few can usually be found roosting on the flats during the spring and early summer, and large numbers of postbreeders are present from late July through mid-September. One or two pairs of Arctic Terns still attempt to nest each year, and a few migrants can occasionally be found in May. In recent years large numbers (up to several hundred) of immature Arctic Terns have been present during June and July. Least Terns nest sporadically, sometimes in considerable numbers, but their presence is completely unpredictable from year to year and even week to week. An additional six species of terns occur more or less regularly, and Black Skimmers are often seen in the late summer and have nested on rare occasions, one pair in 1985 and three pairs in 1986.

A colony of several hundred pairs of Laughing Gulls (one of only two in the state) was located on the north end of the island, but it too has declined recently, and only two pairs nested in 1986. In 1984 a pair of Common Black-headed Gulls nested among the Laughing Gulls, establishing a first record for the U. S. Nesting Great Black-backed and Herring gulls have overrun the remainder of the north island as well as most of the south island: a 1984 census of both islands yielded approximately twenty thousand pairs. Although the tern and Laughing Gull nesting areas are strictly off-limits, the observer is free to explore the gull colony, and this can be an interesting diversion in the rare event that birding is slow.

Nesting shorebirds are represented by a few Piping Plovers and a burgeoning population of American Oystercatchers and Willets. After an absence of a century or more, the latter two species both reestablished themselves as nesters in the early 1970s and are currently thriving with approximately ten pairs of oystercatchers and over twenty pairs of Willets occupying the north island. Spotted Sandpipers, once common, apparently no longer nest on the refuge. Two unexpected nesting occurrences involved the finding of a dead Least Sandpiper chick in the summer of 1979 and the discovery of a Wilson's Phalarope nest with eggs in 1980. Although Wilson's Phalaropes have been expanding eastward in recent years and their nesting on Monomoy is not too surprising, the apparent nesting of Least Sandpiper is best considered an accident. However, the odd and unexpected are almost routine on Monomoy.

Certainly the most spectacular avian event in the area is the shorebird migration, which peaks in late May and again in late July to early August, during which time more than ten thousand birds may be present. Even more impressive than the numbers is the variety, which is greatest from late August to mid-September. An incredible **forty-six** species of shorebirds -- from every corner of the globe -- have been recorded on Monomoy, including such exotics as **Eurasian Curlew** (second North American record), **Little Stint** (sixth North American record), **Wandering Tattler** (first East Coast record), **Rufous-necked Sandpiper** (first state record), **Long-billed Curlew**, and **Bar-tailed Godwit** along with the more routine **American Avocet**, **Wilson's Plover**, **Curlew Sandpiper**, and **Ruff**. The very local **Hudsonian Godwit** is another shorebird feature, and in recent years high counts during the August peak have averaged a hundred to a hundred and fifty individuals. **Buff-breasted** and **Baird's** sandpipers can also be found on occasion, though they are more regular on the south island.

Hérons are commonly seen in the marsh, and although Snowy Egrets and Black-crowned Night-Herons predominate, all of the regularly occurring northeast herons are seen from time to time. The only appearance in Massachusetts of **Reddish Egret** was here in May 1958.

Although the waterbirds provide the main attraction on the north island, there are a few other species worth looking for. Sharp-tailed Sparrows are common nesters throughout the marsh, and in some years Seaside Sparrows can be found along the tidal creeks. Horned Larks and Savannah Sparrows are common nesters in the dunes where the observer might also flush a Short-eared Owl at any season. During migration one should constantly be on the lookout for passing falcons and accipiters, and occasionally a few landbird migrants can be flushed from the grass.

### **The South Island of Monomoy**

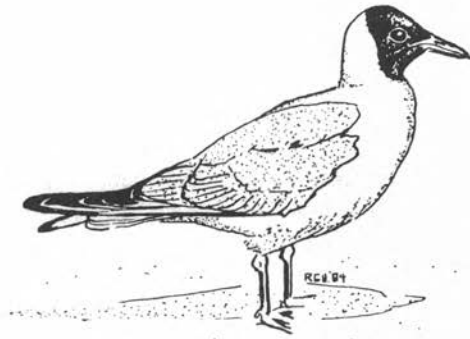
Most of the south island comprises scantily-vegetated dunes, and the birdlife, with the exception of nesting gulls, Horned Larks, and Savannah Sparrows, is sparse indeed. Toward South Monomoy's northern terminus there is a small area of salt marsh, now largely sanded over -- the so-called Hospital Ponds just inside Inward Point -- that has nesting Sharp-tailed Sparrows and possibly nesting Willets. At least two to three pairs of oystercatchers nest along the beach here. Formerly one of the finest landbird thickets on the island, Wildcat Swamp, was located on what is now the northeast corner of the south island, but this wet swale, which provided the only cover for a couple of miles in any direction, has been claimed by the sea, leaving only a few dead and dying shrubs and pines. A short distance to the south of Inward Point there is a small colony of Black-crowned Night-Herons and Snowy Egrets.

In contrast, the south end of South Monomoy has freshwater ponds and marshes and dense wet thickets of bayberry, Beach Plum, and Poison Ivy (everywhere!), providing the primary attraction for both birds and birders. During the fall migration and more rarely in the spring when conditions are right, this area offers some of the most exciting and challenging birding on the East Coast. The hub of avian activity here is the so-called Station Ponds that lie approximately a half mile south and southwest of the lighthouse -- Big Station Pond to the west and the smaller, more marshy Little Station Pond to the east. Numbers of ducks, herons, and shorebirds frequent these ponds, and the numerous dense thickets ringing their perimeters attract great numbers of migrant passerines on good days. Just to the west of the lighthouse is the Lighthouse Marsh, actually a group of very small shallow ponds interspersed among more dense thickets and a few scrub pines -- some of the very few trees on the island. These ponds are also good for ducks and herons and the thickets for migrant landbirds. To the north of the lighthouse are extensive hudsonia moors (plants similar to heather in the rockrose family) that are worth checking in the early fall for Buff-breasted and Baird's sandpipers, Lesser Golden-Plover, and Whimbrel. Southwest of the lighthouse lies the Powder Hole, which usually has a few shorebirds. Adjacent to the Powder Hole on the southwest corner of the island is Camper Cove, a good spot for terns and shorebirds. Until recently this cove was tidal, but sand washing around the point has now closed it off; the Station Ponds were formed by this same process. South and southwest of Big Station Pond are a series of thickets, many of which border small damp grassy "sedge-flats."

An attempt to list all of the species that can be expected on the south island on a good day would be tedious and serve little purpose. Most of the typical northeast fall migrants can be found, and on a good day a list of over a hundred species is quite possible. However, a few species that are regular or even common on nearby Morris Island are scarce or absent from Monomoy. This group consists primarily of those birds that are very reluctant to cross water or that are rather sedentary. Black-capped Chickadee, Blue Jay, Cardinal, House Finch, White-breasted Nuthatch, Hairy Woodpecker, House Sparrow, and the *buteos* are all very rare at best, and Tufted Titmouse has yet to be recorded.

It is, of course, the rare and unexpected -- the vagrants -- that excite most birders, and South Monomoy has a vagrant track record that is unsurpassed, despite very limited coverage. Among the more spectacular have been Whistling Swan, Purple Gallinule, Wandering Tattler, Sooty Tern, Bridled Tern, Burrowing Owl, Brown-chested Martin, Cassin's Kingbird, Say's Phoebe, Western Wood-Pewee, Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, Bewick's Wren, Painted Bunting, Le Conte's Sparrow, and Henslow's Sparrow. Some of the more typical fall vagrants such as Red-headed Woodpecker, Western





*Common Black-headed Gull*

*Illustration by Robert Humphrey*

**Kingbird, Yellow-headed Blackbird, Blue Grosbeak, Lark Sparrow, and Clay-colored Sparrow** are all more or less regular.

In any coastal migrant landbird trap, the weather is critical to an observer's success, and nowhere is this more evident than on the south island. When the weather is favorable (clear skies and light northwest winds), the birding can be unbeatable, but on a poor day it can be as dull as anywhere. Unlike many other coastal traps, there is a distinct lack of landbird habitats here, resulting in a quick exodus of most of the individuals that may be present immediately after the passage of a cold front. Fortunately, the waterbird habitats are more consistently productive, and some decent birding can often be salvaged on even the poorest of days.

If you are fortunate enough to get to the south end on a good day, you'll have no problem occupying an entire day. Check all of the thickets slowly -- those around the Station Ponds, to the east of Little Station Pond, around the Lighthouse Marsh, between the Powder Hole and Big Station Pond and especially those on the extreme southwest corner of the island. It seems that many southbound birds tend to build up in these last thickets before leaving the island in a southwest or westerly direction, and there is a constant turnover here. Always keep an eye on the sky as accipiters, falcons, and harriers pass through in some numbers during the fall, as do many other diurnal migrants. Short-eared owls nest in the dunes and might be flushed almost anywhere at any season. The west end of Big Station Pond and the south and east sides of Little Station Pond are the best spots for shorebirds, particularly during dry years. During wet years, the series of damp "sedge-flats" south of the Station Ponds are the best bet for shorebirds. **Buff-breasted and Baird's sandpipers** can often be found here in season (early fall) as well as Wilson's Phalarope, Stilt and Pectoral sandpipers, and Long-billed Dowitcher. Pelagics can sometimes be seen off the south point.

Although the birds are the primary attraction on Monomoy, the observer who visits and sees only birds has experienced only a portion of this unique and fascinating natural community. Several species of mammals are present on the islands, most as year-round residents. White-tailed Deer are common and rather

conspicuous on the south island and seem to thrive despite a severe shortage of winter food. From November to May, Harbor Seals are present in large numbers with counts of over a thousand in recent years, and they are often joined by several individuals of the much rarer Gray Seal. Muskrats are common around the ponds on the south island and are present also on North Monomoy where the only source of fresh water is below ground! Meadow Voles are abundant and can often be seen scurrying through the meadow grasses. The Spring 1987 issue of *The Cape Naturalist* features an article, "The Mammals of Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge" by D. W. Holt, R. C. Humphrey, and J. P. Lortie (15: 63-69). Butterflies are conspicuous in the late summer and early fall, and it is possible to see several species in a day. For the botanist, over a hundred and sixty species of plants have been identified, most around the freshwater habitats on the south island.

### Access to Monomoy

When planning a visit, contact the Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge headquarters to obtain the current information about permission and restrictions and about boating and weather information. The address is Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge Headquarters, Morris Island, Chatham, MA 02633 (telephone: 617-945-0594).

Monomoy can be reached only by boat and is not always an easy place to visit. For those not fortunate enough to have a friend with a boat, the easiest way to reach the islands is either on a guided tour or with one or more private ferry services operating from the Chatham mainland. Those visiting for the first time would do well to take one of the frequent guided tours conducted by Massachusetts Audubon Society (MAS), organized by the Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary. These tours, led by experienced naturalists, are offered both to North Monomoy and to South Monomoy regularly from April through November and infrequently during the winter. Call or write the MAS Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary, South Wellfleet, MA 02633 (telephone: 617-349-2615) for a current schedule and rates.

For those preferring to explore the islands on their own, there are private ferry services available. John McGrath of Chatham (telephone: 617-945-9378) operates a ferry service (Art Gould's Boat Livery) to the north island and to South Beach. This service will drop you off and pick you up at the times you prefer. If his schedule permits, trips to the south island can be arranged also. Similar services are offered by Jeff Russell (telephone: 617-945-0681). Information can also be obtained through the Birdwatcher's General Store in Orleans. Jeff Russell's boat leaves from Morris Island -- the foot of the stairs below the Monomoy refuge headquarters.



For those with a boat of their own, the nearest public boat ramp is located on the north side of Stage Harbor on Bridge Street across from the Stage Harbor Marina. From the rotary in the center of Chatham, turn south on Stage Harbor Road for about one mile, then left on Bridge Street. Conditions change in the area continuously, and anyone boating to the island on their own should first check with the Monomoy Refuge headquarters for the latest information on weather, restrictions, and the best location for anchoring.

An increasingly popular means of reaching North Monomoy is by canoe or kayak from the beach below the Monomoy refuge parking lot on Morris Island. It's a short paddle to the island (though the current can be strong) and reasonably safe but should be attempted only by experienced canoeists and only when the weather is favorable, i.e., little or no wind and little possibility of fog. When beaching your canoe on the island, be certain it is well above the high-tide line. A floatable, waterproof container for your optics is also advisable.

Anyone attempting to take his own craft to Monomoy should be an experienced boatsman, familiar with the local waters and constantly alert for changes in weather conditions. The weather in the area is very unpredictable and can change suddenly and dramatically. Fog is especially prevalent during the warmer months and can develop literally in a matter of minutes. Do not attempt to take a small boat around the south point, as there are treacherous rips there under certain conditions.

Visits to the north island should be scheduled to coincide with high tide when the shorebirds and terns are concentrated. The tide has little effect on the birdlife of the south island. Whichever island you visit, you should keep in mind that there are no restroom facilities and on the north island practically no cover except low scrub or dunes. So attend to personal needs before embarking. Bring water or fruit to relieve thirst and a snack and some sort of protection from the sun, because there is no shade. There is use for a cover to protect your optical equipment and yourself from salt spray during the boat ride. A lightweight poncho works well and then can be used to sit on when resting or lurching on the island. Be prepared to wade to and from the boat, although this may not be necessary if you take one of the MAS guided tours. Old sneakers are generally the recommended footwear during the warmer months, but to insure safe footing on the very slippery mud flats you may want something with a sole that can grip securely. The temperature is generally several degrees cooler than the mainland, and there is no shelter from wind or blowing sand on either island, so dress accordingly. On the south island Poison Ivy is virtually everywhere, growing in loose prostrate carpets throughout the dunes and in five-to-six-foot-high bushes in the thickets. It is impossible to bird the area effectively without some contact with the sinister weed. It is well to bring along your favorite ointment if you are very allergic to Poison Ivy, and rubbing alcohol will diminish the effects if

applied to exposed skin shortly after contact with the plant. Old hands often swear by washing exposed portions of the skin with salt water prior to leaving the island, but each person should be fortified with a personal remedy. On occasion, ticks and mosquitoes can be a nuisance on the south island also. Beware especially of the tiny deer tick which is a carrier of Lyme disease. On the north island, the only insect problem occurs during July and August when man-eating greenhead flies are on the prowl. Insect repellents will help, and long pants are recommended for protection against all these forces -- wind, sun, insects, and Poison Ivy.

When visiting Monomoy, particularly the north island, during the breeding season (May to early August), keep in mind that there are birds nesting everywhere the length and breadth of the island. Some of the primary nesting areas are posted and off-limits, but no matter where you are, except portions of the outer beach, you are probably keeping birds off their nests. The best strategy to minimize disturbance is to keep moving and not linger too long in any one place. Certain portions of the refuge are closed during the nesting season and visitors should always contact the headquarters ahead of time for current regulations (telephone: 617-945-0594).

If you are fortunate enough to visit Monomoy some day, take a few moments to reflect upon this dynamic, unspoiled natural community. There is much more to be found here than just a few checks on your list. Every trip is a voyage of discovery, for not only the avifauna but the island itself changes continuously. This is a land of many changes and contrasts, whether it be the dramatic creation of a new break through the island or a subtle change in the soft contours of the summer berm, the sudden, energy-packed arrival of thousands of resident terns in the spring or their subdued, almost imperceptible departure in the fall. This is truly a place where "one can stand and put the world behind him" (Thoreau), a place where events still follow a natural and rational course. In our increasingly irrational and unpredictable world, it is no small comfort to know that a few -- precious few -- such pristine areas still exist.

**Acknowledgments.** My thanks to Robert Humphrey and Dorothy Arvidson for their useful comments and suggestions.

**BLAIR NIKULA**, who has kept track of the birds on Monomoy and Cape Cod for nearly twenty years, has been responsible for sighting or confirming many of the rare vagrants observed there. His other pursuits involve regional editorship for *American Birds*, leading birding tours at home and abroad, New Jersey birdathoning for Manomet Bird Observatory, officer of Cape Cod Bird Club, active membership in Nuttall Ornithological Club, and contributing to a manuscript on where to bird on Cape Cod.

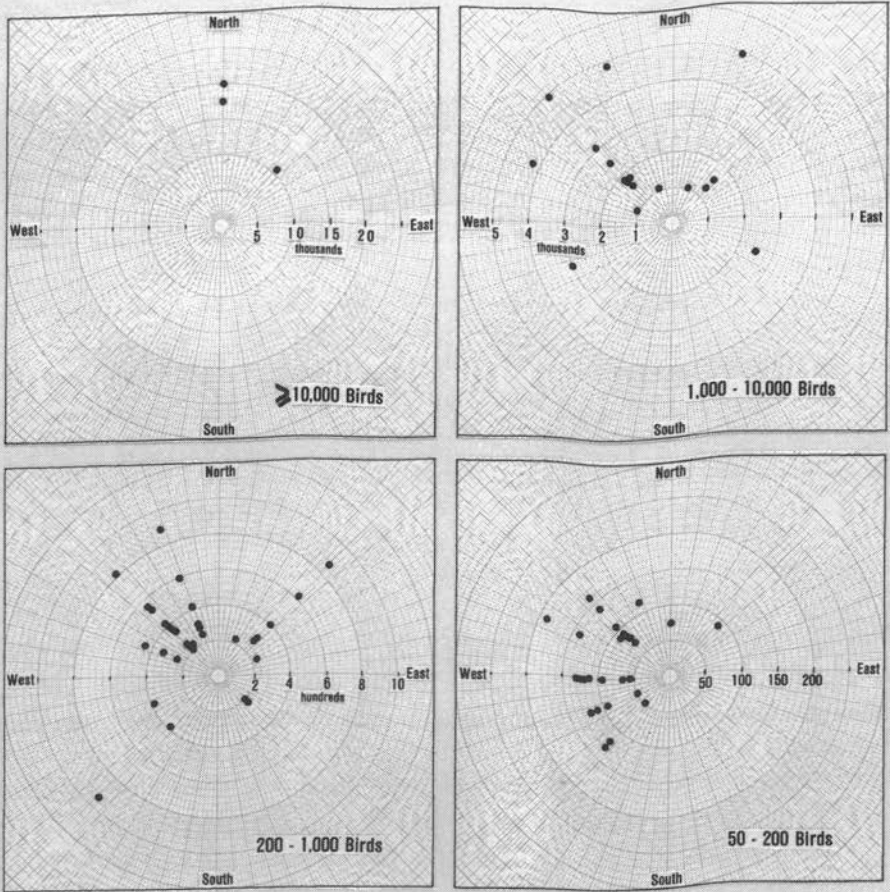


Figure 1. The distance of a dot from the center indicates the size of a day's Broad-wing flight, relative to the scale in each frame. The position of the dot circularly indicates the average direction of the wind on that day. Notice that the pattern of dots shifts westward (counterclockwise) as the flights become smaller.