



WHERE TO FIND BIRDS AT BELLE ISLE MARSH, EAST BOSTON

by Jane Cumming

Belle Isle Marsh is two hundred and seventy-five acres of tidal wetlands located along the boundaries of East Boston, Revere, and Winthrop. Belle Isle Inlet runs south out of the marsh into Boston Harbor separating Winthrop from the city of Boston, and its fingers almost reach the ocean below Revere Beach where a causeway attaches Winthrop to the mainland (except on the stormier winter tides, when seawater floods across the road and into the marsh by the back door). Created by a glacier whose drumlins still surround it, this is the largest salt marsh left in the city of Boston, a remnant of the vast marshes that dominated the area three hundred years ago. At different seasons, it is home to a wide variety of salt marsh plants, animals, birds, and fishes. Even with the towers of downtown Boston lining the horizon and planes screaming in low to Logan Airport just across the harbour, this urban wilderness can seem a world away from the city. Here too can be found some of Boston Harbor's best birding.

It is probably most quiet in winter, when Short-eared Owls and Northern Harriers quarter the marsh, and an occasional Snowy Owl drifts over from the airport to try out the hunting. American Black Ducks line the creek where other dabbling species and Hooded Mergansers may join them in November and March. Buffleheads, Greater Scaup, and Red-breasted Mergansers bob and dive in the channel. Brants from the harbour fly back and forth over the marsh to Revere Beach, as do other coastal species such as loons. It is worth scouring the marsh and sparsely vegetated areas in the Metropolitan District Commission (MDC) Park for Ipswich Sparrows, which are scarce but regular at Belle Isle in winter.

Red-winged Blackbirds return first, their raucous songs filling the marsh with the sound of spring. They sometimes arrive early enough to provide a target for a hungry Snowy Owl, which can be seen terrorizing the blackbird flocks as it hunts over the reeds. April brings the breeding herons back to the harbour islands and into the marsh to feed. Snowy Egrets and Glossy Ibis visit throughout the summer, but April and September are best for variety. Clapper Rails regularly turn up on migration but are frustratingly more often heard than seen.

A regular hawkwatcher, Soheil Zende, has found a steady stream of accipiters, harriers, and Ospreys, though not many buteos. This seems to be typical of the Massachusetts coast. Peregrines show up regularly but may be either migrants or the introduced birds that are breeding in downtown Boston. I have kept a successful hunting Peregrine in my telescope view as it carried a

shorebird off across the airport, over the harbour, and in amongst the city buildings, presumably to its nest, since this was in July. Flyovers in the fall are more likely to be genuine "wild" falcons, but immatures lingering into the winter are probably the local city-bred birds.

The marsh has few trees or bushes and is rarely any good for passerines except for sparrows, which can be found in some numbers during migration. Sharp-tailed Sparrows breed, and Seaside Sparrows have also nested; Marsh Wrens have tried. Bobolinks and Eastern Meadowlarks linger in April and September to November, but the only other landbirds commonly seen are Northern Flickers and swallows. Migrant Belted Kingfishers spend months here in spring and fall but do not stay to breed.

Common Terns have nested for several years on a pile of junk out in "Rosie's Puddle," a tidal pool behind the railway yard where Least Terns also come in to feed. Caspian and Forster's terns have been found here in the fall. Blue-winged Teal summered in 1987 and probably nested somewhere in the marsh. Most of the herons will be here at high tide when there is also a shorebird roost consisting mainly of yellowlegs, peeps, and dowitchers. Both yellowlegs species hang around all summer with only a couple of weeks separating the two migration seasons, but Hudsonian Godwits fly north over the Great Plains and do not appear on the coast before July. Spotted Sandpipers turn up along with the godwits, giving way later in the summer to occasional Whimbrels, Willets, and Wilson's Phalaropes. A Marbled Godwit spent nearly two months here in the fall of 1982. Snipe are among the last to leave (and the first to arrive in spring), but both yellowlegs species will also hang on here well into November.

Like most coastal spots, Belle Isle has a better hawk flight in the spring, but with enough patience, a good fall migration day can also be witnessed, especially when the wind is blowing from points west. On October 10, 1987, there were thirteen Ospreys, four Sharp-shinned Hawks, two Northern Harriers, and two Peregrine Falcons seen during a three-hour hawkwatch.

Later in the year, bitterns and rails move out to the salt marsh after their freshwater haunts have iced over. Common Black-headed Gulls loaf at Rosie's Puddle or feed over the tidal waters in the creek, mainly from October until the puddle freezes. They then repair to Lewis Lake in Winthrop, joining the gulls roosting on the ice there at high tide. October has brought some of the best oddities, as various as Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Marsh Wren, Bald Eagle, and Snow Goose. But rarities have turned up at all seasons. One of the strangest records is a White Pelican that was seen flying over the marsh by Soheil Zendei in May 1983.

Belle Isle has had a chequered history in recent years, but for the time being seems to have been saved from most of the plans to develop it. One section in

East Boston used to be a drive-in cinema until mosquitoes and low-flying aircraft finally drove away the clientele. Many of its neighbours have been expanding their boundaries into the marsh and erecting around the edges structures that are illegal. A housing development has been planned for the area behind the Revere Beach Causeway, despite local protestors' arguments that it would be flooded out by every big tide. Finally, after years of plans that evaporated before they could be put into effect, 168 acres in East Boston were declared an MDC reservation in 1986. Cinder paths were laid out, the hillock was mown, trees were planted, and park interpreters were hired to introduce the public to the natural inhabitants and explain the natural history of the marsh. It seems less likely at last that the area will suffer the fate of nearby Wood Island Park, which was wrecked by bulldozers one night while East Bostonians slept.

One of the attractions of Belle Isle is that you do not need a car to get to it. You can take the Blue Line "T" from Boston to Orient Heights (nearest station to the puddle), Suffolk Downs (MDC Park main entrance), or Beachmont (within walking distance of the Summer Street pool). All these stations are on Bennington Street, East Boston.

To reach Belle Isle by car from downtown Boston, follow signs to Logan Airport and drive north on Route 1A past the airport exit. Take the next exit, signposted to Orient Heights and Winthrop, and keep straight on at the bottom of the ramp. You will merge into Bennington Street. Follow it for a mile to the junction with Route 145, go straight over, and you will see the Orient Heights station on your right just after the junction.

From the north, follow Route 1 south through Saugus and past the Route 99 exit; then take Route 60 exit, signposted to the airport. Follow Route 60 east until it ends in Revere; and then take Route 1A (and the airport signs) south past the Suffolk Downs racecourse on the left. There is a large crucifix on the hilltop beyond. Just over the brow of the hill you will see the Orient Heights turn on the left. Turn left here, and follow the road, bearing left at the small rotary until it meets Bennington Street at a big junction with traffic lights. Turn left again onto Bennington Street, and you will then see Orient Heights "T" station on the right.

To get to Rosie's Puddle from here, walk or drive two hundred and fifty yards north from Orient Heights on Bennington Street to the New England Casket Company on the right. The factory and the railway yard behind it are private (though they generally tolerate birders), but the dirt road to their left is not. Walk fifty yards down it for a view of the puddle; this is Palermo Street.

Next, if you are driving, follow the edge of the marsh up Palermo Street, Lawn Street, Leverett Avenue, and Bennington Street to the main entrance of Belle Isle Marsh Reservation (gate, signpost, and drive-in parking lot) to investigate the salt marsh. There is a grassy hilltop where the cinema used to be, a lookout tower, and paved walks with seats, all of which does more to

encourage local joggers and kite-fliers than birds, but from this park you can head out into the marsh to explore less domesticated territory. If you are walking, you should approach this area across the marsh rather than by road; look for a beaten path through the bushes at the corner of Lawn and Leverett, where the high fence starts. If you clap your hands while you are walking through the tall phragmites, you will flush the night-heron roost. No one has found a Yellow-crowned Night-Heron with them yet, but it has to happen one day. Farther in, the shorter reeds surrounding dried or muddy pools may hold the two marsh sparrows. Listen for Marsh Wrens here too.

Then, if you have a car or the energy to walk another mile around the perimeter of the marsh, try the other tidal pool at Summer Street. This one seems to be preferred by Glossy Ibises and some of the shorebirds, possibly because it is the least disturbed part of the marsh. Go up Bennington Street to the big junction at Beachmont and turn right over the hill. This is one of the glacial drumlins. Summer Street is not well marked, but there are stop-signs on all the roads that cross it. Turn right to follow it down to the dead end at the marsh, where there is parking for about three cars in front of a metal gate, and walk into the marsh. There is a circular dike around the pool, which consequently is known by local birders as the Donut (or the Key). The south end of this pool takes in so much seawater at high tide that it rarely freezes early in the winter; it produced a Virginia Rail for the 1986 Christmas Count.



Belle Isle Marsh

Photo by Jane Cumming

Finally, try the Winthrop side of the creek, especially in fall and winter. From Orient Heights, take Route 145 (Saratoga Street) across the inlet into Winthrop, and turn left at the first traffic light after the bridge. This will lead you to Morton Street; scan the creek from the boat yard. You might try the Winthrop dump, which has been closed for some years now, at the other end of Morton Street. It affords an excellent view over the marsh and used to be good for sparrows (including a Grasshopper Sparrow for the 1984 Christmas Count), but nothing much has been found there since it was bulldozed level and all the bushes were burned. There are plans afoot to turn it into a cemetery eventually, which could prove very beneficial from a birding point of view, so keep an eye on developments there.

Meanwhile, raptors and owls enjoy the vantage point and can be flushed from its lunar landscape, usually between September and March. If you don't want to trudge up there, you can scan the top of the dump while walking around the Donut. It is still worth checking the sparrow flocks near the dump's entrance in October, when typically there should be Field, Chipping, and perhaps White-crowned sparrows around for a week or two. A Northern Shrike here on January 1, 1988 was the first recorded at Belle Isle.

The Friends of Belle Isle Marsh (FBIM), in cooperation with the MDC interpretive staff, run a program of free guided walks, heron censuses, marsh clean-ups, and other activities. For more information, contact FBIM president John Kilmartin, P.O. Box 575, East Boston 02128 or MDC public information at 727-5215. For birding information, call Soheil Zendehe (to whom I am indebted for help with this article) at 628-8990. Soheil keeps a computerized bird list for Belle Isle that I hope will eventually be published for the benefit of visitors to the Park. So if you see anything unusual during your visits to the marsh, please let him know.

JANE CUMMING has birded since childhood in Britain and elsewhere in Europe, but her introduction to North American birding was a spring 1981 trip to Point Pelee on Lake Erie that produced two hundred species in three weeks. The following year she took a computer programming job in a Boston financial house in order to get to know the Nearctic avifauna better. This transatlantic vagrant expected to find her way home within a year or two but instead formed a pair-bond with a native and has been resident in Winthrop since 1982. After March 1988, Jane's mailing address will be 172 Kent Farm Road, Hampstead, New Hampshire 03841.

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