

NANTUCKET, PART I

by Marcia J. Litchfield

Nantucket Island is a veritable birder's paradise. In any month of the year, a great variety of specialties may be found, many of which are difficult to see so easily elsewhere in New England. The Nantucket checklist sports 354 species including 53 accidentals. And there are few places, if any, left in eastern Massachusetts that are as strikingly beautiful, refreshing and endearing as the Gray Lady, with her heathlands, rolling moors, and open skies or the endless dunes, long beaches, and wild surf.

Thirty miles offshore, Nantucket has much to offer the adventurous birder. Getting here takes some planning and arranging, but it is all well worth the effort. By far the most exciting season with the best weather is the fall. Although true fall migration begins in late July with shorebirds and terns and continues on through August and September with landbirds and raptors, the peak period for fall vagrants is mid-September to mid-October, when exciting numbers of Blue Grosbeaks, Western Kingbirds, Indigo Buntings, Lesser Golden-Plovers, and Peregrine Falcons may be noted. Yellow-headed Blackbird, Dickcissel, Lark and White-crowned sparrows are regulars. The accidental list includes Western Reef Heron, Black-necked Stilt, Brown Noddy, Allen's Hummingbird, Say's Phoebe, Fork-tailed and Scissor-tailed flycatchers, Eurasian Jackdaw, and Chestnut-collared Longspur.

Birders also come to see some of the rare or endangered species confined to breeding strongholds on Nantucket. The Short-eared Owl, Northern Harrier, Least Tern, and Piping Plover breed in healthy numbers. American Oystercatchers and Savannah Sparrows are abundant. Other species are present in consistently high numbers, including hundreds of migrating Roseate and Common terns, Common and Red-throated loons or hundreds of thousands of wintering Oldsquaws, Red-breasted Mergansers, and Common Eiders. The large concentrations of white-winged and Bonaparte's gulls and the fancier species like Lesser Black-backed Gull for which Low Beach is famous, the crisply handsome wintering seaducks of Nantucket Harbor and Madaket, or the windblown western vagrants are but a sampling of what draws birders to this avian gold mine.

Although it's best to allow yourself a full week to thoroughly cover the Island, it CAN be done over a two- or three-day weekend. The eighteen locations listed here represent five general areas: Nantucket Harbor and Town, Polpis/Siasconset (pronounced "Scon-set") and the east end, the farms and south shore, Madaket and the west end, and Coskata-Coatue (Cos-kay-ta-Co-too) Wildlife Refuge and Great Point. Obtaining a good map in advance is highly

recommended. The Nantucket Conservation Foundation's map of conservation lands is excellent (118 Cliff Road, Nantucket, Massachusetts 02554, telephone 1-508-228-2884), or a USGS Topo map is fine (Nantucket and Siasconset quadrants). It's also best to bring or rent a vehicle to get around the island, which measures roughly seven by fifteen miles. A four-wheel drive (FWD) vehicle is needed to drive over the five miles of barrier beach out to Great Point. Also, having a warm, comfortable FWD vehicle makes counting seaducks or gulls in cold, rainy, or windy weather much more pleasant and allows for much greater mobility around the island. There are unfortunately no public camping facilities on Nantucket. Visitors should make reservations in advance or obtain information about accommodations upon arrival at the Nantucket Information Bureau at 25 Federal Street.

Although it is very easy to get turned around in downtown Nantucket, the three main routes out of town are clearly marked. The island newspapers (available free on the ferry) that have Nantucket street maps as centerfolds are helpful. Here are the basic routes out of town. To head east from Steamboat



Northern Saw-whet Owl

Illustration by Robert C. Humphrey

Wharf, take a left onto South Water Street, cross the base of Main Street (cobblestoned), and follow signs to the rotary (there's only one). There will be signs to Siasconset and Polpis.

To head south from Steamboat Wharf, take a left onto South Water Street, then right onto cobblestoned Main Street. Follow Main all the way to the upper (Soldiers and Sailors) monument. Here, taking a left will lead you onto Milk Street, which becomes Hummock Pond Road leading to the farms and Cisco. Or, heading straight towards this monument will lead you to Madaket Road and the west end of the Island.

To head west from Steamboat Wharf, take a right onto South Beach Street and then left onto Easton Street. Take the next right onto Cliff Road, which leads to Madaket Road and the west end.

If you arrive by air, island newspapers are available free at the airport, or ask the ticket or car rental agent for a road map. Mopeds are not recommended to birders due to their unstable nature and limited carrying capacity for fragile optics and camera equipment. They also do very poorly on the many sandy or unpaved roads. Bicycles are certainly a pleasant and quiet way to get around, particularly in the fall, but also have limited carrying capacity.

The numbered locations that follow offer some of the best birding spots on the island. They can be visited in sequence in a series of loops taking several hours or several days, or each site is excellent on its own. Birders will appreciate the fact that almost every place described here offers something of interest to look for in nearly every season. And when the birding is slow, the aesthetics make up for it. (This falls under the definition of paradise.) Be sure to pick up a Nantucket Bird Checklist at the Maria Mitchell Science Center, 2 Vestal Street, telephone 1-508-228-9198, and a local tide chart at Harbor Fuel or Hardy's Hardware before you head out. Also check the local newspaper, *Inquirer and Mirror*, which carries a weekly column, "Island Bird Sightings," written by the author.

Nantucket Harbor Flats, The Creeks, and Consue Springs (1). Follow Washington Street to Washington Street Extension, pass Nantucket Shipyard on the left, and park anywhere out of the way near the salt marsh and dunes. A walk along this small barrier beach allows for viewing of the Nantucket Harbor Flats and The Creeks. At low tide, look for a wide variety of shorebirds, gulls, terns, and waders. In winter, this is a great place to count upwards of eleven Barrow's Goldeneyes with other expected seaducks. Other specialties here include Peregrine Falcon, Lesser Golden-Plover, Stilt Sandpiper, Pectoral Sandpiper, Little Blue Heron, Sharp-tailed Sparrow and Seaside Sparrow. Walk along the marsh edge towards Union Street to kick up sparrows, rails, and shorebirds in marsh pools. You will come to the old railroad bed (raised dike). Off to the right is Consue Springs Pond (pronounced "Con-soo"), where the

resident Mallards may have visitors like Pied-billed Grebe, Common Moorhen, Wood Duck, or Eurasian Wigeon. Great Blue Herons, Green-backed Herons, or Black-crowned Night-Herons may be flushed.

The Jetties, Brant Point, Bird Sanctuary, and Nantucket Town (2). From Steamboat Wharf, take a right onto North Beach Street, cross Easton Street and stroll 0.4 mile to a right turn down to a large pavilion. This parking lot serves as the Town's scallop shell dump in the winter and becomes host to hundreds of gulls, best viewed from the vehicle. Here they are easily photographed. The flock has included Iceland and Glaucous gulls. Walk or drive over the sand to the base of the western jetty where the shallows become available at lower tides to shorebirds and seaducks. This is the best place on the Island to look for Harlequin Ducks in winter along with Barrow's Goldeneyes, King Eider and huge rafts of Common Eiders, Common Goldeneyes, and Red-breasted Mergansers. A few Purple Sandpipers and Dunlin may be seen along the eastern jetty. Northern Gannets and Black-legged Kittiwakes are often noted just outside the jetties in winter. The jetties are covered with hundreds of Harbor Seals in winter, too, and occasionally the larger bull Gray Seals may be spotted among them. It's also worth a glance across to the western tip of Coatue, where a Snowy Owl may be spotted on the beach or in the cedars.

In summer and fall, the channel is full of feeding terns, which loaf on the exposed rocks of the jetties in their off-hours. Expect to see exciting numbers of Roseates, with the possibility of a Black, a Royal, or a Sandwich Tern. Late Common Terns may be seen here or elsewhere in the lower harbor. The jetties at this time will also have migrant Ruddy Turnstones, an occasional Red Knot, upwards of a dozen American Oystercatchers, Snowy Egrets, and Black-crowned Night Herons. While sailing past on the boat at night, you may note some of these by their calls.

To get to the Nantucket Conservation Foundation's Bird Sanctuary, walk back to North Beach Street, where a large maroon sign marks the overgrown path. This 0.9 acre lot is an overgrown thicket below the Cliff and can be good during landbird migration. The small pond has a bench and is a quiet spot where skulking warblers or lingering landbirds like Winter Wren, Northern Waterthrush or Orange-crowned Warbler have been seen.

The narrow lanes, lovely gardens, and quiet courtyards to be discovered around Nantucket Town are sometimes loaded with migrant landbirds during migration. Some spots are good to check in early winter for lingerers, too. Obtain one of the Nantucket street maps and walk the following route, which is at its best in late May. Start at the intersection of Gull Island Lane and West Chester Street. Turn right along Lily Street to visit the Lily Pond Conservation Area. Continue along Lily Street into Liberty Street until you reach Brock's Court on the right. Return to Liberty Street and follow it (the street makes a left

turn) until you can enter Walnut Lane on the right. Cross Main Street to follow Ray's Court to Fair Street and then return to Main. Turn left, walk west (away from the harbor) on Main Street to the Soldiers and Sailors Monument, and go left onto Milk Street. Take the first right onto Vestal Street to reach the Maria Mitchell Science Center. Check the gardens around and behind the Science Library. Return to Milk Street and cross it to follow New Dollar Lane to Mill Street. Turn left here, then right onto North Mill Street until you can enter Angora Street on the left. Turn right at the end of Angora Street and follow South Mill Street to the Old Mill. Cross Prospect Street to Mill Hill Park, which is the end of this walk.

Bartlett's Ocean View Farm and Miacomet area (3). From the Soldiers and Sailors Monument on upper Main Street, go left on Milk Street, which becomes Hummock Pond Road, and travel to Bartlett's Farm Road on the left. Enter the first dirt road on the left and park well off the road. This area is notorious for the many fancy fall migrants seen here over the years. It is best covered on foot early in the morning. You may wish to time your visit to coincide with a high tide, at which time many of the shorebirds that feed on the flats are believed to fly inland to these farm fields to roost, to preen, and to continue feeding in the freshly tilled fields.

All of the farmland and moors within view are PRIVATE PROPERTY owned by Phil and Dorothy Bartlett. Although they have been most tolerant over the years, birders are now asked to obtain permission before wandering around the borders of their farm fields and vineyard. The Bartletts may be found at the farm stand at the end of the road.

Most of this rich area can be covered very adequately from the public roads. Once parked as above, walk north on this dirt road towards Somerset Road. The hedgerows along both sides of the road are some of the best places to kick up fall sparrows, including Grasshopper and Lark, as well as Blue Grosbeaks, Indigo Buntings, Dickcissels, Orange-crowned Warblers, and Western Kingbirds. Check any open farm fields for large flocks of Lesser Golden-Plovers and Black-bellied Plovers. Here is where Buff-breasted and Pectoral sandpipers, Killdeer and Upland Sandpipers roost and feed regularly. Keep your head up for Peregrine Falcons, Merlins, American Kestrels, and Sharp-shinned Hawks cruising through, and for Northern Harriers, especially the pale-colored males, quartering over the fields. The roving flocks of blackbirds may have a Yellow-headed among them, and any loafing gull flocks in the fields should be scanned for Lesser Black-backed Gull. One November a Sandhill Crane was present in these fields, poised in a flock of Canada Goose decoys!

Once you have reached Somerset Road, retrace your steps back to Bartlett's Farm Road, and you will be facing the other hot spot where the above birds may occur. A Chestnut-collared Longspur was banded and photographed here in the

fall of 1979, when it stayed October 12-16. Check in particular rows of flowers and corn going to seed. The grape arbors are usually very active, too. Go all the way to the farm stand and find still more farm fields out to the south which may have Lesser Golden-Plovers and other shorebirds. These fields can be viewed easily from a dirt road which winds southward past a field with cows and horses where the ocean just comes into view in the distance, hence the name Ocean View Farm.

Still on foot, retrace your steps along Bartlett's Farm Road to Hummock Pond Road. Along the way, note a small, hidden sedgy pond off to the right near the pines where a Henslow's Sparrow was once seen in October. The pines may have warblers, waxwings, blackbirds, etc. Go left on Hummock Pond Road and you will find more hedgerows (belonging to Mt. Vernon Farm), a friendly bird carver Pat Gardner, and many open fields from the Bartlett's Farm Road until you reach a small farm with horses and a small pond on the left. This will be just on the edge of Larrabee Swamp on the topographical map. Enjoy!

The Miacomet Raceway is the last known breeding site of Grasshopper Sparrows on Nantucket, where they were historically common. It is just a short distance east of the dirt road on which you have been parked. Go right on Somerset Road. Listen for them in early- to mid-June among the many new houses in the area. Continue on Somerset and then bear left towards the Miacomet Golf Course. These dirt roads are all right for most vehicles. All fields in this area are good for more Lesser Golden-Plovers, Upland and Buff-breasted sandpipers. Head straight southeast toward Miacomet Pond, where you may again park anywhere off the road. A stroll southward will provide views of the pond and the vast, colorful moors. You will eventually reach the ocean, where Surfside Rip may be visible off toward the east.

Once back in the car, drive over your steps southward towards the ocean, and then continue on the dirt road around a loop back towards a radio tower, the golf course, and the farms. You are now in prime Short-eared Owl nesting and wintering habitat. This is also an excellent spot for Rough-legged Hawks in the winter.

Cisco, Mothball Pines, and Ram Pasture (4). Take Hummock Pond Road to its very end, where there is a parking area above the beach. Pelagics may be seen from here in May and September, migrating seaducks and loons occur in high numbers, and feeding flocks of Northern Gannets occur through the winter. However, the Mothball Pines to the west are most noted as an exciting landbird trap in both spring and fall. Ornithologist Edith Andrews operates a bird-banding program at one of the small cottages from late August to October. Walk down the dirt road listening intently for migrating birds in the pines. Most of the cottages will likely be vacant in the migration months.

Eventually, you will see the south end of Hummock Pond and Ram Pasture. Here you may see Short-eared Owls hunting, Osprey nesting atop a platform, and Rough-legged Hawks, meadowlarks, and hundreds of fresh water ducks in fall and winter.

"Nantucket, Part II" will appear in the December issue.

MARCIA J. LITCHFIELD visited Nantucket for the first time in the fall of 1976 with the South Shore Bird Club. She was instantly captivated by its natural beauty and the abundance of birds to be found. She moved to the island in 1979, leaving only to complete her B.S. in biology at the University of Massachusetts in Boston. Born into a family of birders and interested in birds from childhood, Marcia has had varied experience in field ornithology. She has been the Voice of Audubon for Massachusetts Audubon Society, worked on the state Breeding Bird Atlas and for Manomet Bird Observatory's seabird project. She is a member of the Nuttall Ornithological Club, has led bird trips for the Maria Mitchell Science Center, is the Nantucket Tern Warden for the Trustees of Reservations, and writes a column, "Island Bird Sightings," for the "world's largest newspaper," *The Inquirer and Mirror*.

The pen-and-ink portrait of a saw-whet owl was created by **ROBERT C. HUMPHREY**, a regular contributor of articles and drawings to *Bird Observer*. Bob is also a watercolorist and an award-winning photographer. He has a master's degree in wildlife biology with thesis research on the range expansion of American Oystercatchers in Massachusetts. Bob has worked for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for several years, three of them as manager of Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge.

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