

## BIRDING AT SANDY NECK

by Robert F. Pease, East Sandwich

From early September through November, Sandy Neck in Barnstable can be an exceptional spot for bird watching. During prolonged northeast storms virtually every hour spent in this area can be guaranteed its reward.

To reach this location from Boston, come south on Route 3 and cross the Cape Cod Canal over the Sagamore Bridge. Take Exit number 4 onto Chase Road. At the first fork (after less than a mile), bear right over a small railroad bridge, and continue for another mile until you reach Jones Lane. Turn left onto Jones Lane and then right onto Route 6A. After only a couple of hundred yards on 6A, turn left at the Sandy Neck Motel. This road leads directly to the parking area for Sandy Neck Beach.

The east-west coastline of Sandy Neck is an excellent spot from which to observe pelagic birds which have been pushed shoreward by northeasterly storms and then trapped by Cape Cod Bay's peculiar three-sided land configuration. Since most coastal storms in the fall involve high winds, rain or snow, fog, blowing sand, and bitter cold, Sandy Neck's location is ideal in that one can park his car facing due north. The elements will strike the right side of the car, which can be kept closed, while the observer, in relative comfort, looks left over a ninety degree arc of water. This positioning is especially good since most birds tend to move from west to east along the shore, in clear view as they approach the parking lot. Should a high tide coincide with the period of watching, many of the most exciting birds may pass within a hundred yards of one's car, often at eye level, or just below it.

Birds seen with great frequency during the storm conditions just described include jaegers (often in flocks!), Gannets, Black-legged Kittiwakes, phalaropes and shearwaters. The Manx Shearwater is especially regular off Sandy Neck, while Leach's Storm-Petrel has a long-established reputation for regular occurrence in late September and October. With these numbers of pelagics present on occasion, it is not surprising that such local rarities as the Northern Fulmar, Long-tailed Jaeger, and Common Puffin have been recorded. Numbers of alcids have been seen during storms in late fall or early winter.

For those who are equipped to travel the beach, the seven-mile trip out to the point of Sandy Neck can prove very worthwhile. The outer beach has breeding Piping Plovers in the summer, and the American Oystercatcher has also summered there in several recent years. At a rocky inlet about one mile from the point (on the bay side) is a fine area for observing terns and shorebirds (about two hours before high tide). Ruddy Turnstones, Red Knots, Dunlin and Sanderlings are among the common species to be expected, but one may also see flocks of Black Terns or of Sooty Shearwaters in season, and such specialities as the American Avocet have also been recorded.

The adjacent sand dunes and thickets offer fine pockets for fall migrating landbirds, and the Pitch Pines hold breeding Pine Warblers and Great Horned Owls. Early mornings following cold fronts and northwest winds in September are best for these thickets. In the cold months, flocks of Snow Buntings are common in the exposed areas, especially near the parking lot. With patience, Savannah (Ipswich) Sparrows can be found in the same area.

The marshes behind the dunes cover many square miles and are a major breeding area for Sharp-tailed Sparrows. Clapper Rails, Short-eared Owls, and hundreds of Brant and waterfowl can often be seen here in proper season. In September, Snowy Egrets and Great Blue Herons are a common sight. On the right of the entrance road, just before reaching the point at which the parking fee is collected in the summer, there is a new development called Point Hill. If you drive into the development and take the second left, you will reach a superlative vantage point overlooking all of the marshes as far as Barnstable Harbor. This is the best vantage point from which to observe the marshes when they are flooded by storms.

The Sandy Neck region is varied and extensive and well deserves the increased attention it is beginning to receive from birders.