

## COASTAL BIRDING IN RHODE ISLAND

by Alan E. Strauss

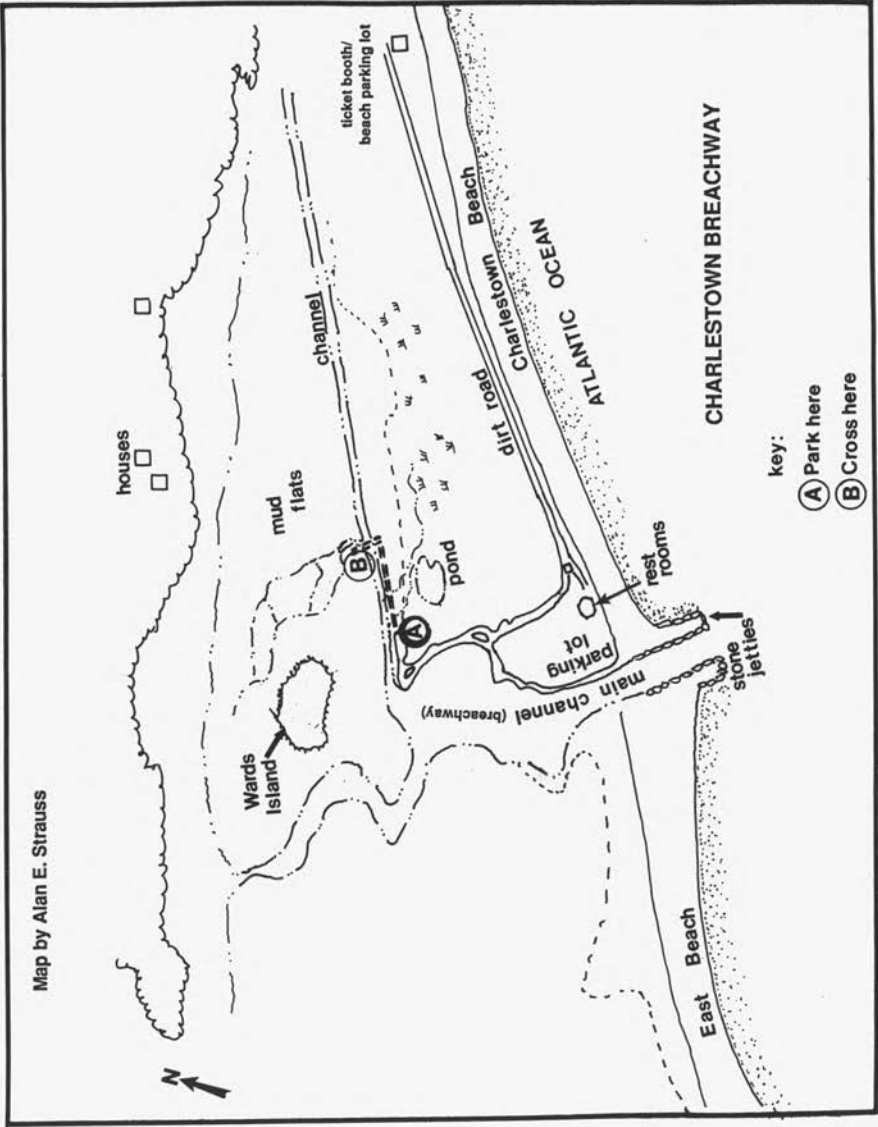
The coast of Rhode Island offers many birding locations. This article focuses primarily on the Charlestown Salt Pond Breachway, with shorter descriptions provided for other areas along Rhode Island's coast. To reach the breachway, take Route 95 south to Route 4 south (exit 9). Route 4 will merge with Route 1. Follow signs for Route 1 south. Watch for a sign, "Entering Charlestown." The next sign is for the Charlestown Breachway; exit from the left lane onto Route 1 north. From Route 1, exit at the Breachway sign. Proceed one hundred yards to a stop sign, and continue straight on Narrow Lane. At the next stop sign, go left on Schoolhouse Road, and follow signs to the breachway. Take the next right onto Charlestown Beach Road (a bakery and a deli are on the corner). In 1.3 miles, cross the Green Hill Pond bridge; Charlestown Pond is to the right, and Green Hill Pond is to the left. Bear left around the first beach parking lot, and follow the dirt road west along the barrier for about a quarter of a mile to the Charlestown Breachway ticket booth.

### Charlestown Breachway

Charlestown Salt Pond, approximately 1,711 acres, is the largest salt pond in Rhode Island. The breachway is a channel that runs between the Atlantic Ocean and Charlestown Salt Pond. The surrounding environment includes a barrier beach about four miles long (Charlestown Beach), a low dune ridge, vegetated back barrier flats, and a lagoon and tidal mud flats. Only a few localities in Rhode Island offer mud flats to migrating shorebirds. Consequently, Charlestown Breachway, one of the most extensive mud-flat areas in the state, acts as a magnet to birds traveling along the coast. Over seventy-five species of birds have been recorded in the area including Least Bittern, Golden Eagle, Marbled Godwit, Long-billed Curlew, Baird's Sandpiper, Little Gull, and Caspian Tern. From August through September the numbers of shorebirds can be astounding, and the birder often finds at least one good species.

The breachway area is owned and operated by the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management; much of the adjacent estuarine basin is part of the Ninigret National Wildlife Refuge. This marine environment serves as a multipurpose recreational facility for fishing, bathing, boating, camping, and birding. Beginning in June, many camper-trailers and recreational vehicles are found in the parking lot. Note that on hot summer days the parking lot can be filled by 9 A.M.

A ticket booth, open twenty-four hours a day, is located at the entrance to the park. Fees in 1991 varied from four dollars (resident, weekday) to ten dollars (nonresident, weekend).



Because one must cross a channel in order to reach the mud flats, it is important to know that the low tide times at the breachway are often one to two hours later than the advertised low tides for the Newport area. The channel can be crossed when the tide is ebbing, but unless you like wading in waist-deep water, it is best to wait for the tide to go out even farther. In all cases, however, one must be willing to get wet, because if you cross at low tide and stay on the flats any length of time, the return crossing will necessarily be at a slightly higher tide. Hence, you might want to wear a pair of sneakers, shorts or a bathing suit, and a lightweight shirt while birding the breachway. You are also likely to walk in soft sand or mud while negotiating the flats.

Once you have passed through the ticket booth at the breachway entrance, follow the dirt road to the right past the trailers to the end of the parking lot. If you do not mind a bumpy ride, drive down the road as far as possible. Those who do not want to drive the last little leg can park just before the access road leaves the parking lot. Walk or drive along the main channel, which will be on your left, as you proceed north from the parking area.

It can take between two and three hours to bird the entire area carefully, including inspection of all the side pools, the beachgrass areas for sparrows and bitterns, and the mud flats out to the edge of the deeper water. The birder not wanting to cross the channel can walk along the edge and set up a scope at various points, which will provide views of the mud flats but will not permit detailed examination of the peeps and smaller avian species.

Table 1 shows a bird list for the breachway. Most of the shorebirds can be found regularly in the summer and fall. Sea ducks, gulls, and owls are found in winter. Those birds that are rare or have been found only a few times are so indicated in Table 1.

Directly across from the end of the access road is Ward's Island. Look across to the wooded island for roosting Great Egrets, Snowy Egrets, and night-herons. Watch the skies for hovering kestrels, Merlins, Ospreys, Sharp-shinned Hawks, and harriers as they cruise over the wooded and grassy areas. To the right you will find low bushes that surround a small pond. You can occasionally find American and Least bitterns (uncommon) at this pond.

In order to reach the mud flats you must first cross two small inlets that will be in front of you as you leave the end of the access road. Look for the shallowest and sandiest sections, and wade across in the knee-deep water. Your goal is to walk along the channel for about five minutes until you reach the fording area. If you are birding during August or September, there will probably be sandpipers on the small mud flats where you cross the first small inlet. I recently photographed an immature Yellow-crowned Night-Heron about five feet from me at the first inlet crossing.

A narrow path skirts the channel. Make pishing noises when you come to the first clump of shrubs between the path and the channel. Here you should be

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**Birds of the Charlestown Breachway Area**  
**Compiled by Daniel Finizia and Alan Strauss**

Red-throated Loon	Least Sandpiper
Common Loon	White-rumped Sandpiper
Horned Grebe	Baird's Sandpiper
Red-necked Grebe	Pectoral Sandpiper
Northern Gannet	Dunlin
Great Cormorant	Stilt Sandpiper
Double-crested Cormorant	Short-billed Dowitcher
American Bittern	Long-billed Dowitcher
Least Bittern (rare)	Wilson's Phalarope
Great Blue Heron	Laughing Gull
Great Egret	Little Gull (rare)
Snowy Egret	Bonaparte's Gull
Green-backed Heron	Ring-billed Gull
Black-crowned Night-Heron	Herring Gull
Yellow-crowned Night-Heron (rare)	Iceland Gull
Mute Swan	Great Black-backed Gull
Canada Goose	Caspian Tern
Green-winged Teal	Royal Tern
American Black Duck	Roseate Tern
Mallard	Common Tern
Common Eider	Forster's Tern
Black Scoter	Least Tern
Surf Scoter	Black Tern
White-winged Scoter	Sandwich Tern (rare)
Red-breasted Merganser	Black Skimmer
Osprey	Rock Dove
Northern Harrier	Mourning Dove
Sharp-shinned Hawk	Short-eared Owl
Red-tailed Hawk	Belted Kingfisher
Golden Eagle (1985)	Northern Flicker
American Kestrel	Willow Flycatcher
Merlin	Horned Lark
Peregrine Falcon	Tree Swallow
Black-bellied Plover	Bank Swallow
Piping Plover	Cliff Swallow (1991)
Killdeer	Barn Swallow
American Oystercatcher (rare)	American Crow
Greater Yellowlegs	Fish Crow
Lesser Yellowlegs	Marsh Wren
Solitary Sandpiper	European Starling
Willet	Tennessee Warbler
Whimbrel	Yellow-rumped Warbler
Hudsonian Godwit (rare)	Sharp-tailed Sparrow
Marbled Godwit	Seaside Sparrow
Long-billed Curlew (1991)	Savannah Sparrow
Ruddy Turnstone	Song Sparrow
Red Knot	Snow Bunting
Sanderling	Red-winged Blackbird
Semipalmated Sandpiper	Common Grackle
Western Sandpiper	House Sparrow

able to find resident Seaside and Sharp-tailed sparrows. In August 1991 I found seven Sharptails and four Seasides, some of which were immature. These sparrows can also be found in the grass to your right. There are small wet pools in the grass so your feet will get wet again if you venture into the marsh. Farther to the right you will see more inlets with adjacent mud flats and pools, where you will likely find shorebirds, egrets, and herons. Watch for soaring Barn, Bank, Tree, and occasionally Cliff swallows over the low bushes and on electric wires in the distance.

The channel soon forks: one branch continues straight, and the other goes left. There are large rocks in the water at this point. This is the fording point to reach the mud flats. To cross the channel, wade carefully across on the shallowest sandbars. The crossing point is only a few yards wide, but you should return while the tide is still low to avoid wading in chest-deep water. The fording area itself is quite interesting. Watch for blue crabs as they scurry along the bottom and schools of small fish, including flounder, as they swim through the channel. A total of forty species of juvenile and adult fish were collected by fisheries biologists in Charlestown Salt Pond (Stolgitis et al. 1976).

Across the channel there should be birds everywhere. Scan with your scope or binoculars to find the most promising and interesting species, and then head toward them for a closer look. Least and Common terns with young are numerous, as are Least and Semipalmated sandpipers and Semipalmated Plovers. Baird's Sandpipers and Wilson's Phalaropes often are found here. The mud flats are one of the best places in the state to find Black Skimmers and a variety of interesting terns. In September 1986 Caspian, Royal, Forster's, Least, and Common terns were seen. Black Terns can be found occasionally through August and September. Sandwich Terns are found on rare occasions after hurricanes.

Ever-changing braided shallow streams, usually filled with small fish,periwinkles, and hermit crabs, cross the mud flats. Look for razor clams, quahogs, soft-shelled clams, and scallops in addition to schools of small fish. Archaeological studies indicate that in the area at Foster's Neck, Native Americans harvested oysters and other shellfish some one thousand years ago.

The deeper water at the end of the pond usually has dowitchers, Stilt Sandpipers, and yellowlegs. Check the drier areas for Western Sandpipers. Unusual birds sometimes show up in the area. In February 1985 a Golden Eagle was found, and in August 1989 a Little Gull was seen. In 1991 a Long-billed Curlew flew over the mud flats. The mud flats allow very close views of birds that are often seen at a distance. I have photographed Baird's Sandpiper, Wilson's Phalarope, Black Skimmer, and Marbled Godwit within five to ten feet.

In the fall, scan the ocean for all three scoters, loons, grebes, mergansers, and cormorants. Yellow-rumped Warblers and Willow Flycatchers can be found

in the thickets during migration, and Short-eared Owls have been found in the winter. The colder months produce a greater variety of birds on the ocean side including Oldsquaw, eiders, gannets, Horned Grebes, Common Goldeneyes, and Common and Red-throated loons. Occasionally on easterly winds during a storm, a Razorbill or Dovekie might whiz by.

### Other Coastal Birding Localities

**Quonochontaug Breachway.** Quonochontaug Breachway is located farther south from the Charlestown Breachway along Route 1. Because Route 1 is a divided highway, you must go north on Route 1 from the Charlestown Breachway and turn south at the next crossover. Watch for the signs for Quonochontaug (accent on first syllable and the "ch" pronounced like a "k").

Quonochontaug has an extensive wet marsh of low-growing marine grass. There are soft spots and numerous water-filled holes and gullies. Be careful if you choose to venture out into the marsh; it is easy to fall into a mud-filled hole. Birds can be seen from the end of the parking lot where people launch boats and dig for bivalves. Common shorebirds similar to those at the Charlestown Breachway are found here. American Bitterns might be more frequent here than at Charlestown, and Sharp-tailed and Seaside sparrows also occur. Rare birds have made an appearance at "Quonie" in recent years, including American Avocets and Boat-tailed Grackles. Birds sighted in the 1970s include White Ibis, Smew, Curlew Sandpiper, and Black-necked Stilt (Conway 1979).

**Napatree Point.** Another good birding spot is Napatree Point, a mile-long, narrow spit of sandy beach at the southwest tip of Rhode Island. To reach Napatree, continue along Route 1 south to Route 1A, where it goes left just inside the Westerly town limit, and follow signs to Watch Hill. You can park for two hours at meters along the street or pay five to ten dollars for all-day parking. Walk through a large parking lot reserved for beach club members adjacent to a seawall and small yacht club marina. At the far end of this parking lot, you will find a small sign for the Napatree Point Wildlife Sanctuary. One can walk either along the beach on the ocean side or along the shoreline on the bay side. Due to the popularity of this recreational area in the summer, you should arrive early in the morning. It is a twenty-five minute walk to the end of Napatree Point. Look for the Osprey nests about halfway down the beach. The Ospreys occur regularly in this area and can often be seen feeding young and fishing. Watch for shorebirds, especially along the bay side once you pass the moored boats.

In the summer Napatree has a variety of birds that can usually be viewed at close range. These include Roseate, Common, Least, and Black terns, Black Skimmer, Buff-breasted Sandpiper, Marbled Godwit, Whimbrel, Curlew Sandpiper (rare), Piping Plover, and American Oystercatcher. Like shorebirds at the Charlestown Breachway, many of these can be studied at remarkably close range. This area is also the most reliable spot for oystercatcher in the state. You

can find them at low tide along the rocky shores at the outer edge of the end of Napatree Point. A host of other shorebirds such as dowitchers, Dunlins, plovers, Red Knots, Willets, yellowlegs, and most of the sandpipers can be found here as well. Remember to check the wrack line along the edge of the sand spit for peeps, as well as the Buff-breasted Sandpiper.

The area is also known for its raptor migration in the fall. In the winter look for Snowy and Short-eared owls. The grassy areas at the end of the point and in the surrounding areas often harbor Sharp-tailed and Savannah sparrows as well as occasional Ipswich Sparrows in winter. Warblers and migrating passerines can be found in the thickets on the higher ground that surrounds the marsh areas in season.

**Washington County.** A final birding area is Washington County (named South County by many locals), which provides a variety of interesting coastal birding localities where many uncommon species can be found with some regularity. Some productive areas are Weekapaug, Ninigret National Wildlife Refuge, Green Hill Beach, Trustom Pond National Wildlife Refuge, and Succotash Marsh in Jerusalem. You can also explore on your own at many other vantage points along Rhode Island's coast. With a little planning and some luck, you will not be disappointed.

#### References

- Conway, R.A. 1979. *Field Checklist of Rhode Island Birds*, Rhode Island Ornithological Club, Bulletin 1.
- Stolgitis, J., J. O'Brien, and M. Fogarty. 1976. *Rhode Island Salt Ponds Fisheries Inventory*, Rhode Island Coastal Resources Management Council, Department of Fish and Wildlife.

**ALAN E. STRAUSS** is currently studying nesting species. He would like to thank Daniel Finizia for his help on compiling a bird list for the Charlestown Breachway. Alan dedicates this article to his father, who encouraged him to observe wildlife from a young age.

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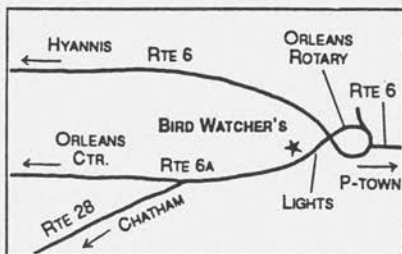
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