



LIGHTHOUSE POINT PARK

by Arnold Devine and Dwight G. Smith

Although small in size, Lighthouse Point Park in New Haven, Connecticut, is one of the most important birding sites in the state. Its 84 acres of level, gently sloping terrain jut south into Long Island Sound, serving as a natural funnel for songbirds and shorebirds migrating along the Atlantic Flyway. The park is also justly famous as one of the most important hawkwatch sites in New England, rivaling Cape May in the number and variety of raptor species that pass through each fall on their way south. Winter birding features offshore rafts of ducks, while gulls and crows patrol the sandy beaches, mudflats, and tide pools. During the peak of fall migration, serious birders may want to spend a weekend here.

Lighthouse Point Park is named for the lighthouse at the end of the peninsula. A lighthouse has stood on this site since 1804. The city of New Haven purchased the park in 1924 and now manages it for a variety of seasonal recreational activities. In addition to birding and recreation, the park has another claim to fame: one Sunday afternoon a young Babe Ruth hit a baseball far out of the ballpark and into a power line in a neighboring residential community.

Over the years birders have recorded more than 200 species at Lighthouse Point Park. Migratory songbirds, shorebirds, hawks, and waterfowl lead the list of specialties regularly seen. A variety of shorebirds make brief stopovers in spring and fall. Unusual raptors, such as Peregrine Falcon, Bald Eagle, and an occasional Long-eared Owl, are likely in the fall. Other rarities recorded at or near the park include Barrow's Goldeneye, King Eider, Buff-breasted Sandpiper, Red-headed Woodpecker, Western Kingbird, Boreal Chickadee, and Boat-tailed Grackle. A spectacular first state record of Tropical Kingbird was established here in November 1990.

To reach the park, travelers heading north on Interstate 95 should take Exit 50—Woodward Avenue, Lighthouse Pt. Turn right onto Townsend Avenue at the second light. Continue south on Townsend Avenue for about 2.1 miles to Lighthouse Road. Turn right on Lighthouse Road, which leads to the park entrance. Travelers heading south on Interstate 95 should take Exit 51—U.S. 1, Frontage Road, Lighthouse Pt., which merges with Frontage Road paralleling the interstate for about 0.8 mile. Turn left at the light onto Townsend Avenue, and continue as described above. From May into September a small admission fee is charged at the park entrance. The park road is a one-way counterclockwise loop with two spur roads, one providing access to the boat launch and the other to the hawkwatch area and the sandy beach that lies along the park's southern boundary (see map). For birders staying overnight, convenient lodging is available along Interstate 95 at Exit 46—Long Wharf in New Haven (southbound), or Exit 51 for East Haven and Branford (northbound).

Birding the Park

The park can be profitably birded in two or three hours at almost any season of the year. To begin, enter the park and follow the main road to one of the parking lots near the boat launch on the right. From here all of the park's birding habitats are visible. The oak, maple, and hickory woodlots that border the northern end of the park have been designated as a bird sanctuary to help protect migrating songbirds. Most of the rest of the park is landscaped, consisting of gently sloping expanses of grassy lawns, parking lots, and recreational fields ornamented with scattered pines, junipers, and deciduous growth. Morris Creek, with its fringe of salt marsh and reedgrass, forms the eastern border of the park. The shoreline features a rich variety of habitats along its brief length: small stretches of sandy beach, rocky and gravelly beaches, tidal pools, and bedrock outcrops all provide an abundance and variety of food, which attracts shorebirds and waterfowl. Warning: Take sensible precautions to avoid ticks, especially when walking through the grassy and marshy areas.

The Fall Migration

Shorebirds. The most important birding event at Lighthouse Point Park is the fall migration of songbirds, shorebirds, and raptors. Shorebird migration begins in late July and continues through October, with a few species lingering longer. Most springtime shorebird appearances are brief, and the increased recreational activity in the spring and summer months drives them away. September and October are best for shorebirds, especially during morning hours after Labor Day, when human disturbance is minimal. Species to look for include Semipalmated Sandpiper, Sanderling, Dunlin, and Ruddy Turnstone along the beaches and rocky shorelines; Black-bellied Plover, Killdeer, and the rarer Lesser Golden-Plover, Upland Sandpiper, and Buff-breasted Sandpiper resting or foraging on lawns and ball fields; and Greater and Lesser yellowlegs, Willet, and Semipalmated, Least, and Pectoral sandpipers near the marsh edge and mudflats along Morris Creek.

Songbirds and Waders. Lighthouse Point Park is an important staging area for songbirds during the fall migration, which runs from late August into November. During this time the birder should check the woods, lawns, thickets, and marshes, which can be alive with thousands of birds of dozens of species, all resting and refueling before continuing the southward journey. The best time to catch the songbird migration is during the early morning hours. The Blue Jay migration can be especially spectacular, with thousands of jays swarming in the air at one time. Flocks of Tree Swallows and blackbirds can number in the hundreds. Other migrant species to watch for overhead include the other swallows (Rough-winged, Barn, and Bank swallows, and occasionally Cliff Swallows and Purple Martins), Cedar Waxwing, Northern Flicker, Chimney

Swift, and American Goldfinch. Thousands of Bobolinks move through the park in September. During good flight years flocks of winter finches, mainly Purple Finch, Pine Siskin, and Evening Grosbeak, as well as occasional crossbills, Redpolls, and Pine Grosbeaks, add color and excitement to fall birding. Overhead, flocks of Canada Geese and Snow Geese (mainly in October) make their noisy way south.

To appreciate the variety and abundance of migrating songbirds, explore the woodland trails. The most productive trail begins near the park exit. Take the trailhead (unmarked but easy to find) on the east side of the road. The path leads to a loop trail through the woodland. About halfway around the loop a spur trail winds southeast and out along an elevated walkway above a reedgrass marsh on both sides. Some of the migrants that pause in the woods near the trail include Yellow-bellied Sapsucker; Ruby-crowned and Golden-crowned kinglets; Red-eyed, Solitary, and the rarer White-eyed vireos; and cuckoos, flycatchers, thrushes, warblers, and grosbeaks. The trail becomes more rugged as it continues south through the last of the reedgrass community to Morris Creek. An alternative is to return to the park road and walk a short distance south to where the trailhead comes out. You can enter here and hike along Morris Creek. Either alternative offers a view of the tidal marsh and the creek. The reeds and grasses along this stretch can hold Common Yellowthroat, Yellow and Palm warblers, and Sharp-tailed and Swamp sparrows. Peek through the reeds to spot marsh waders such as Great Blue Heron, Green-backed Heron, Snowy Egret, and, with luck, American Bittern. Other elusive inhabitants of the marsh grasses and sedges include Common Snipe, Virginia and Clapper rails, and an occasional Sora. Sparrows can always be found in the thickets and grassy areas and along the marsh border throughout October and into early November. Chipping, Song, Savannah, Lincoln's (uncommon but regular), White-crowned, White-throated, Vesper (uncommon), Tree, and occasionally Seaside sparrows are fairly reliable, and Clay-colored and Grasshopper sparrows have been recorded. Some other rarities recorded here are Blue Grosbeak, Lark Sparrow, and Boat-tailed Grackle. Dickcissel has also been observed consistently in September and October.

The thickets of willow, sumac, and knotweed along the park road and across from the hawkwatch station may harbor Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Gray Catbird, chickadees, wrens, and thrushes. These thickets may be the spots to find the real migration rarities: Connecticut, Kentucky, and Mourning warblers. Always check the chickadee flocks carefully for Boreal Chickadee, a rarity found occasionally from mid-October through November.

It is always worthwhile to check the trail network at the park's northwest corner. A few short trails traverse the woodland, shrub-thicket, and grassy environment. A longer trail leads from the park entrance along the shoreline, past the boat launch, and then down to the lighthouse. An assortment of

flycatchers, thrushes, warblers, and sparrows can be tallied along the trail. The large white pines may harbor Black-crowned Night-Heron or Great Horned Owl. The Tropical Kingbird was first reported from this section of the park.

Two other species found annually are Red-headed Woodpecker (September-October) and Western Kingbird (mid-October into November). Both species have been regularly spotted in the large solitary shade trees along the western and southern sections of the park.

Hawks. In addition to its other birding attractions, Lighthouse Point Park has one of the most active hawkwatching stations in all of New England. The best hawkwatching area is at the parking lot in the center of the park, between the lawn and the marsh. The lot is bordered to the northeast by deciduous woods and to the east by thickets and reedgrass. This site provides a clear view of raptors approaching from the east and flying overhead, and views of accipiters that may be slipping through or just above the woods.

In season, which extends from late August into November, the station is manned every day. On some days (mainly weekends) a hawk-banding station is also active. Hundreds of birders may gather on weekends to watch the parade of hawks. They are rarely disappointed. From dawn to dusk hawks of a dozen species fly by in a steady stream, sometimes only one or two at a time and at other times in kettles of several hundred soaring overhead. In recent years between 20,000 and 30,000 hawks have been counted during the fall migration. Sharp-shinned Hawks are most often seen—almost 9500 were counted in 1986—but American Kestrels, Broad-winged Hawks, and Ospreys are also frequently tallied. Given good hawk-flight weather (best conditions are the clear days following passage of a recent cold front, with falling temperatures and moderate north or northwest winds), a one- or two-day visit will produce most of New England's diurnal birds of prey: fifteen diurnal raptor species were recorded in 1991. The list of migrating raptors likely to be seen includes Turkey Vulture; Northern Harrier; Osprey; all accipiters; Red-tailed, Red-shouldered, and Broad-winged hawks; and the regular falcons (American Kestrel, Merlin, and Peregrine Falcon). Rarer species include Bald Eagle (about ten to twenty a year in September and October), Golden Eagle (a few per year, mainly in October), and Rough-legged Hawk (about five to six a year, mainly in November).

After mid-October, during a lull in the hawk flights, you can take the opportunity to check the scrubby evergreens along the short loop trail just northeast of the parking lot that winds through the nearby woodland, thickets, and marsh for Long-eared Owls and Northern Saw-whet Owls, both of which roost here concealed during daylight hours before renewing their southward migration at night. Great Horned Owls often overwinter, while Barred Owl is recorded annually during postbreeding dispersal. The Snowy Owl has been seen along the beach during November and December, and from November through

the winter you may see a Short-eared Owl hunting the marshes and fields. The Eastern Screech-Owl is a permanent resident and can sometimes be spotted in the northern woodlots of the park sunning in a tree cavity.

Winter Birding

Begin your winter birding tour at the boat launch at New Haven Harbor. From here you can walk the entire length of the shoreline in about a half hour. The common beach scavengers include the gulls and crows (American and Fish). Gulls expected throughout the year are the usual Great Black-backed, Herring, and Ring-billed gulls. In summer and early fall these species may be augmented by Laughing Gulls, while in winter, check for Bonaparte's and the rarer Black-headed, Little, Glaucous, Iceland, and Lesser Black-backed gulls. The short pier near the boat launch offers a vantage point to spot waterfowl on the waters of New Haven Harbor, which are somewhat quieter than those of Long Island Sound. Rafts of American Black Duck, Mallard, Greater Scaup, American Wigeon, Canada Goose, Mute Swan, and Common Goldeneye can be found in the harbor. Scout the rafts carefully for the less common Oldsquaw, White-winged and Surf scoters, Lesser Scaup, and Gadwall. Rarer waterfowl include Common and King eiders, Eurasian Wigeon, Redhead, and Barrow's Goldeneye. Small numbers of Red-throated and Common loons, Horned Grebe, and Great Cormorant are also regularly seen during fall and winter. The Red-necked Grebe is rare and occasionally observed during November, March, and April. Snow Buntings usually arrive in early November and are sporadic throughout the winter along the beach or around the gravel lots. Occasionally you may find a Lapland Longspur in a bunting flock, and you should find Horned Lark much of the year in the same habitats.

Upland winter species include permanent residents (Hairy, Downy, and Red-bellied woodpeckers, Black-capped Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse, White-breasted Nuthatch, Carolina Wren, Northern Mockingbird, Northern Cardinal, and House Finch) and winter visitors (Winter Wren, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Dark-eyed Junco, and Tree and White-throated sparrows).

Spring Birding

Spring birding at Lighthouse Point Park is best in late April and May during the songbird migration. While it is not as extravagant in numbers and variety as the fall migration, a two-or three-hour early-morning stroll through the park will turn up an excellent assortment of songbirds. Again, the best way to catch the migrant action is to take the looping trails that wind through the northeast woods and along the northwest border. Warblers are the featured attractions along these trails. Common Yellowthroat and Yellow Warbler are abundant in the tangle and shrub vegetation. Overhead the songsters are already practicing their melodies. On a good day, more than a dozen warblers can be heard along the

trails, including American Redstart; Magnolia, Black-throated Blue, Black-throated Green, Blue-winged, Chestnut-sided, and Black-and-White warblers; Northern Waterthrush; Ovenbird; Northern Parula; and Canada and, occasionally, Wilson's and Hooded warblers.

Other Attractions

Coincident with the fall bird migration, thousands of monarch butterflies stream by, slowly but steadily working their way south toward their eventual wintering quarters in Latin America. Also take note of the wild persimmon tree located near the carousel. It is the last survivor of a small clump of persimmon trees that had persisted at this spot for years, in spite of being far to the north of their normal range. The tree is an antique worthy of a second look. Taking the time to check out these additional attractions will add a little zest to your birding day at Lighthouse.

From Lighthouse Point Park birders are only a few minutes away from two other important shorebird sites, Long Wharf on the north end of New Haven Harbor and Milford Point a few miles farther south on Interstate 95. Birders may also want to visit Yale University's Peabody Museum, with its incomparable display of the birds of Connecticut and its famous dinosaur and early-mammal fossils.

ARNOLD "BUZZ" DEVINE is on the Connecticut Ornithological Association Board of Directors and is president of the Western Connecticut Birding Club. He works for the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection Hazardous Waste Management in Hartford. He and Dwight Smith are currently completing a birding guidebook for Connecticut.

DWIGHT G. SMITH is professor of biology at Southern Connecticut State University in New Haven. He has served on the Connecticut Ornithological Association Board of Directors and, with Arnold Devine, studied hawks and owls in Connecticut. His latest work involved placing satellite transmitters on cranes in Siberia and Harpy Eagles in Venezuela.