

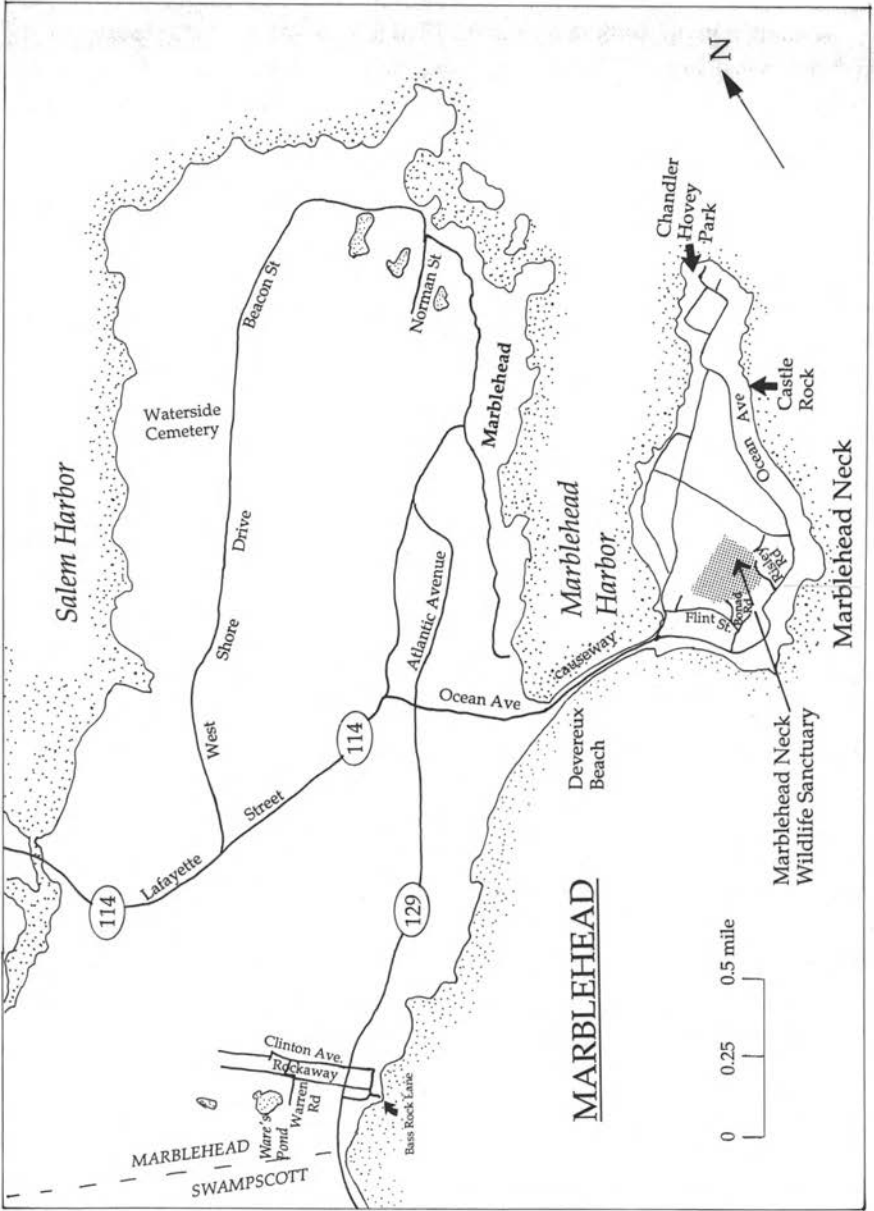
**BIRDING MARBLEHEAD:
MARBLEHEAD NECK WILDLIFE SANCTUARY AND BEYOND**

by Jan Smith

Although in most birders' minds Marblehead means the Massachusetts Audubon Sanctuary on Marblehead Neck, other locations in town hold interest for the persistent birder. Marblehead has justifiably established its birding reputation as a spring and fall migrant trap, but one can always see birds at other times of the year and at other localities in town. This article updates a previous article by Dorothy Snyder on the Marblehead Neck Wildlife Sanctuary (MNWS) in *Bird Observer* seventeen years ago (*Bird Observer* 6(5):157-165). Snyder's article had a comprehensive bird list and a delightful account of the sanctuary's history. The bird list provides a good basis for what species to expect, but the birding and the habitats have steadily changed over the years. After updating the MNWS area, I also suggest other locations to be checked for those with a little extra time and inclination.

Marblehead Neck Wildlife Sanctuary

Most birders engaging in a big day effort in May include a stop at the MNWS because the quality of birding can often be spectacular during migration. The sanctuary has always been undervisited, probably due to its off-the-beaten-path location. Access to Marblehead from the south is from Route 1A to Route 129, or from the north and west on Route 114, all of which can be very congested. Marblehead is a peninsula, and Marblehead Neck is basically an island connected to the mainland by a 0.4-mile causeway. If you are coming from the south, take Route 1A to Route 129 north. From the Marblehead-Swampscott town line, Ocean Avenue is 1.4 miles along Route 129. Coming from the north, Ocean Avenue is 1.4 miles along Route 114 from the Salem-Marblehead town line. From Route 114 (right at the fire station) or Route 129 (the second set of lights after entering town), turn right onto Ocean Avenue, go about 0.5 mile to the causeway, and cross the causeway. At the end of the causeway, as you enter Marblehead Neck, the road forks. Stay on Ocean Avenue, the right fork. After 0.5 mile, watch for Risley Road on the left, which dead-ends at the parking lot for the sanctuary. It is nice to report that a local police officer has taken up residence over a recently renovated garage next to the parking lot, and his presence appears to have almost eliminated the late night visitors who often deposited their garbage in the parking lot and often throughout the sanctuary itself. Occasionally a cord blocks the entrance to the parking lot in the very early morning, but there is no lock, and it is easily removed. Also, parking on the street is never a problem here. Once in a while a lazy neighbor will let their dog run loose in the sanctuary, but that is the only problem you are likely to encounter.



A bulletin board with a map of the sanctuary and other notices is located fifty feet into the sanctuary. On the back side of the bulletin board is a record book containing recent bird sightings. The basic layout of the sanctuary trails has remained the same over the years, but the trees and shrubs have steadily grown and closed in many of the trails over the last two decades. The large old red maples, some with nice snags, which reliably attracted and held Tennessee Warblers and Olive-sided Flycatchers, are almost all gone, felled by old age and storms. The birds still show up but move around more. The best view over extensive vegetation is from the shore of the main pond down the main trail, which goes left from the entrance. Rough-winged Swallows usually skim the surface. The few open areas have mostly filled in, so that Indigo Buntings, Field Sparrows, Eastern Meadowlarks, and Bobolinks seldom stop anymore. However, these species, especially Bobolinks, are still easily detected flying over. Dickcissels can also be seen; the sanctuary has several records annually, almost all in the fall. Alder swamps and multiflora rose tangles have become quite dense in places and annually attract Worm-Eating Warbler and other shy land birds. MNWS now houses four to five pairs of resident Carolina Wrens, formerly a rare visitor, and White-eyed Vireos, which also turn up every spring, nested somewhere in the multiflora rose in the late 1980s near the main sanctuary pond.

A second pond has been excavated on private property just off the north side of the sanctuary where the boardwalk ends. This area is also excellent for birds, but in 1994 the new owners posted no-trespassing signs where birders once had access around the pond with no objection from the previous owner. The pond can still be viewed from the end of the boardwalk, and most birds will still be within earshot. Prothonotary Warblers seem to turn up here almost annually.

Spring migration is variable and quite unpredictable. Cold and damp winds often make the MNWS a bleak place, but when the winds are right (usually west or southwest), land-bird numbers can be spectacular. On these days, in fact, the unexpected can turn up anywhere on Marblehead Neck. Migrant Louisiana Waterthrush start turning up in mid- to late April every year along the stream passing parallel to the main trail to the pond, and Yellow-rumped Warblers can occur in incredible fallouts, as in the early May morning a few years ago when, after a dull start to the day's birding, I witnessed a sudden rush of thousands of Yellow-rumps pour across the sanctuary, apparently coming in off the ocean. An hour later they were gone. Flint Street, just outside the west end of the sanctuary, goes over a hill and can be excellent birding over its entire length. Twenty-five years ago, twenty-five species of warblers were a regular spring occurrence for me, but the number averages closer to twenty species today. My records also indicate that overall numbers are lower. Still, almost anything can turn up, such as the cooperative Chuck-will's-widow, which sat perched on an

exposed branch for a day a few Mays back. Single Pine Siskins and Evening Grosbeaks regularly fly over in May even in nonwinter finch flight years. Late May and early June almost always result in a good showing of Empidonax flycatchers, including Acadian almost annually, and up to six Mourning Warblers at a time. Look for the Mourning Warblers anywhere near jewelweed patches. Philadelphia Vireos are annual in spring. Warbling Vireos are by far the rarest of the vireos to turn up here. Almost all of the "southern" warblers put in an annual appearance, some staying for weeks. Kentucky Warblers seem especially prone to hanging around in the dark understory for several weeks.

My strategy for birding the MNWS in spring is to get there early in the morning, with 5:30 AM being optimal, because I have found that many birds sing for a short while early before they start feeding and moving about. Song seems to increase again about 8 AM for those birders that have to come longer distances. The hill above the main pond always seems a good spot to listen and watch for flyovers.

From the middle of June to late July, the sanctuary generally has only common breeding species, which still include Wood Thrush, with occasional fall migrants (e.g., Tennessee Warbler, Swainson's Thrush) starting to appear by mid-July.

Fall migration, starting in August, seems more predictable than the spring migration. Shorebirds can be regularly heard migrating overhead in early morning in August, and land-bird migration starts in earnest in mid-August. Mid-September continues to be the peak and continues to be as good as ever. One September 19 about six years back was as good a birding day as I have ever had in Massachusetts, yielding twenty-one Philadelphia Vireos and many other large species totals. Birds of prey, especially Sharp-shinned Hawks, turn up in numbers also to enjoy the large numbers of migrants. The dense foliage makes it difficult to spot birds in the fall, but circling around the trails several times can continue to yield new finds. Of course, the bird for which the sanctuary is the most famous is the Painted Redstart, which was discovered in October 1947. Birding can be interesting through November and into December for late migrants like Connecticut Warbler, but generally it is pretty dull after mid-December--except for the winter of 1993-1994, when every winter finch except Red Crossbill turned up. Winter Wrens often survive the winter, and a Red-bellied Woodpecker often settles in for a few months.

Since Dorothy Snyder's article, several more species of shorebirds have been added to her sanctuary list, including Upland and Buff-breasted sandpipers. The status of many birds has also changed. Barred Owls are now almost annual in winter. Red-bellied Woodpecker is regular, and Carolina Wrens are resident. Other new species added to the sanctuary list include Common Raven, Fish Crow, Blue Grosbeak, Snow Bunting, and Yellow-headed Blackbird. Warbler numbers seem lower than twenty years ago, but the diversity still seems the

same. Some migrants, such as Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, have increased substantially.

Please remember to add any of your sightings to the record book on the back of the bulletin board.

Elsewhere on Marblehead Neck

On peak migration days, walking and listening on any of the residential streets, particularly Flint Street, can yield interesting species. Flint Street can be reached by walking straight out of the sanctuary on the main trail after passing the pond onto Bonad Road, which runs into Flint Street. A couple of boulders and some poles mark the boundary. This is the back entrance, which is gradually becoming more hidden every year by overgrowth.

Leaving the sanctuary from the main entrance on Risley Road, it can be worth turning left out on Ocean Avenue again for 0.7 miles to Castle Rock. Park on Ocean Avenue near the "castle," an impressive stone residence on the right. Walk down the public lane just to the left of the castle property for good views of the ocean. For big days in May, Castle Rock is a sure bet for Rough-winged Swallow, in case you missed it at the MNWS. The swallows nest in the cracks of the retaining wall for the castle's swimming pool on the right. Lingering seabirds such as loons, grebes, Common Eider, scoters, and mergansers can also be seen, as well as possibly Purple Sandpipers anywhere on the rocks. In winter, seabirds are plentiful, especially Common Eider, but Purple Sandpiper, Black Guillemot, and even Thick-Billed Murre have turned up.

In another 0.4 mile on Ocean Avenue, the northeastern tip of Marblehead Neck has a small public park with a lighthouse—Chandler Hovey Park. The park is also a good spot to check in winter, as well as for land birds during migration. A single Pine Grosbeak once flew in off the ocean in October here.

Retracing your route down Ocean Avenue, you probably will notice the great views toward Boston when you reach the end of the causeway. This section of the shore often contains shorebirds, including a Buff-breasted Sandpiper, which once spent ten days feeding in the wrack line in August, and a Semipalmated Plover in late January. An Eared Grebe once spent the winter just offshore, and even an orca (i.e., killer whale) turned up within one hundred yards of shore one May. In April and early May large flocks of Red-necked Grebe, up to 200 individuals, congregate here just offshore for a few weeks. In late May 1994 two Red-necked Grebes were still present in beautiful breeding plumage. Technically no parking is allowed along this stretch, but I have always been able to hop out and scope the water briefly without any problems. If the tide is out, the mudflats in the harbor can attract shorebirds, including the occasional Lesser Golden Plover. The beach parking lot (Devereux Beach) on the mainland end of the causeway is handy for parking and scoping the ocean (free entrance during fall, winter, and spring).

Other Spots

If you are heading back toward Boston on Route 129 (Atlantic Avenue), just after a set of lights where Atlantic Avenue crosses Clifton Avenue (1.2 miles after the junction of Ocean Avenue and Route 129), turn left on Rockaway Avenue, follow it to the end, turn right, and immediately look for a place to park (again technically not legal but I have never had any trouble with a quick stop), and walk out Bass Rock Lane, a short lane with a view from Bass Rock over the ocean at the end. Check for seabirds, because on a big day I have seen Common Eider, scoters, mergansers, and even a Harlequin Duck here. Returning down Rockaway Avenue in the opposite direction, cross over Atlantic Avenue, continue on Rockaway for a short distance, and turn left on Warren Road, a dead-end road. Park here, and look for an entrance to Ware's Pond, a conservation area with a trail around it. Herons and migrants are sometimes attracted to this area.

If you are heading out of town on Route 114 (Lafayette Street), stop at the Marblehead-Salem line at Forest River, which is at the bottom of a long hill where Salem Harbor comes into view. The road is wide here, and parking is allowed on the Salem Harbor side of the road, adjacent to the conservation land along a former railway bed, now a foot trail. A glance inland up the Forest River estuary may yield ducks such as Gadwall or Northern Pintail, or a kingfisher, which nests somewhere in the nearby bank, perched on a snag. If the tide is out (and the tidegates are open), shorebirds and herons feed on the flats. A scan of Salem Harbor can also turn up ducks and shorebirds in season, and possibly terns and herons. A walk along the foot trail toward Marblehead leads to an extensive conservation area called Wyman Woods. The beginning section is one of the last spots where Indigo Bunting nests in town. The woods on the right have several trails, and migrants can sometimes be observed anywhere along the foot trail. Winter, Carolina, and House wrens have all been observed along the foot trail in January. The trail continues across a major roadway (West Shore Drive) and passes several ponds and wetlands where Green Heron, Cattle Egret, Virginia Rail, and Solitary Sandpiper have turned up. This area is used by joggers and bicyclists, and you will likely have to share the trail.

If you enter Marblehead on Route 114, other spots to check during migration include Waterside Cemetery and Steer Swamp. From Route 114, turn left onto West Shore Drive at the first set of traffic lights (0.6 mile from Forest River). Continue straight through another set of lights (a little less than a mile), and after about another half mile, start watching for the entrance to Waterside Cemetery on the left (open sunrise to sunset). Drive in, and park almost anywhere. The plantings attract lots of migrants in May, especially the bigger trees near the edge of Salem Harbor.

Continue along West Shore Drive, which becomes Beacon Street in about 0.4 mile from the cemetery. Continue on Beacon Street as it becomes small and

winding, until you pass by a view of a small rocky beach and cove on your left, where there are sometimes ducks in winter (about 1.2 miles from the cemetery). The road bends to the right and changes its name again to Norman Street. At this point, watch on the right after about 200 yards for the entrance to Steer Swamp Conservation Area, with a small parking area. It is a wet area with several trails that often attract migrants, particularly in spring, when Prothonotary Warbler and other "southern" specialties have been seen. The best way out is to retrace your steps to Route 114 unless you have a good sense of direction, a good map, or a desire to get lost or go shopping in the densely settled historic part of town.

While the Marblehead Neck Wildlife Sanctuary remains the best and most reliable place to see exciting flocks of migrant land birds, other areas may yield exciting finds with regular checking, as the peninsular geography of Marblehead suggests.

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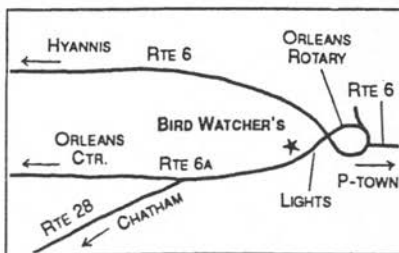
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