

BIRDING IN DARTMOUTH AND WESTPORT DURING FALL AND WINTER

by Michael A. Boucher

Dartmouth and Westport, Massachusetts, are great places to bird throughout the year. This article will discuss where to find specific species during the fall migration and winter along coastal habitats including beaches, salt marshes, coastal thickets, and woods.

Start from Interstate 195 east of Fall River, and take Route 88 south for eleven miles through Westport. Park safely along the road as soon as you pass the entrance to Horseneck Beach. Look toward the east, and you will see a large salt marsh with Osprey platforms, which have been erected over the years by Jo and Gil Fernandez. This is a good spot for lingering Ospreys in the fall. Continue about two miles, and take a right onto East Beach Road. After a short distance, you will come to a causeway that brings you to Gooseberry Neck. While crossing the causeway, look to your right at the large rocky formation just offshore. You may occasionally find Harlequin Ducks here in the winter.

Gooseberry Neck is a seventy-five acre island with a rocky shoreline and a small sandy beach. Its vegetation consists of beach rose, bayberry, sumac, and American beach grass, with a few cedar trees toward the middle of the island. One main path cuts through the center of the island, and a number of short paths branch off allowing access to the shoreline.

The last week in August and the entire month of September can be quite productive for shorebirds. At either high or low tide, the southern tip of the island can yield birds such as Ruddy Turnstone, Pectoral Sandpiper, Buff-breasted Sandpiper, and Red Knot. They can be seen working the wrack line in search of food. At low tide a rocky mudflat is exposed. Birds seen here can include Whimbrel, Willet, Black-bellied Plover, American Golden-Plover, and peeps such as Least, Semipalmated, and White-rumped sandpipers. At this time of year Common and Least terns can be seen from the causeway and the sandy beach adjacent to the parking lot. Gooseberry Neck is also a wonderful place to view wintering sea ducks, and by late September all three scoter species, Common Eider, and Red-breasted Merganser are present.

Late September through mid-October can yield a number of passerines during favorable migration weather, which is usually right after a cold front. Most of the vegetation is at eye level or below, with a few small trees, so viewing these birds is a real treat. Many areas along the path are productive for passerines. From the parking lot, walk past the metal gate and head south down the main path. The bushes on either side of the path for a few hundred feet will harbor a variety of species. Palm and Yellow-rumped warblers are good possibilities. When the thicket ends and the rocky path turns to sand, look for

sparrows such as White-crowned, Swamp, Savannah, and Chipping. Another sparrow of mention is the "Ipswich" Savannah Sparrow, which can be seen at the southern tip of the island from mid-October through the winter.

After a short distance the sandy path turns back into a more easily traveled road and goes for a few hundred yards. You will see two buildings at the center of the island, one of which is an observation tower built during World War II. In this area, which supports the few trees on the island, you might see Solitary, Red-eyed, and Yellow-throated vireos. Cape May, Black-throated Blue, Black-throated Green, Prairie, and Wilson's warblers, and Yellow-breasted Chat can be viewed at close range as they dart back and forth across the bayberry and sumac.

Gooseberry Neck is home to the area's largest Tree Swallow roost, which numbers in the tens of thousands. Another impressive congregation is that of monarch butterflies, which can also number in the thousands. By mid-October Peregrine Falcons and Merlins usually make an appearance along with Sharp-shinned and Cooper's hawks. At the center of the island next to the tower, a dirt mound over an abandoned concrete building affords a fantastic view of the entire island and surrounding Buzzards Bay. From this vantage point, any migrating raptors can easily be seen. Come late October, many Yellow-rumped Warblers are feeding on the remaining insects before turning to their winter diet of bayberries. In the area of the parking lot, American Pipits can be seen, and the first Dark-eyed Juncos appear.

From early November through the winter months, Gooseberry Neck is known for its abundance of sea ducks. As mentioned earlier, all three scoter species can be seen along with large rafts of Common Eider numbering in the thousands. Occasionally, King Eider is seen at the southern tip. Common and Red-throated loons are easily seen along with Horned and periodically Red-necked grebes. On November 14, 1993, a Western Grebe was sighted from the parking lot on the northern tip of the island. Shorebirds at this time of year can become scarce, but Gooseberry Neck usually has Dunlin, Sanderlings, Purple Sandpipers, and occasionally Ruddy Turnstones.

One of the most intriguing birds to arrive during the winter is the Snowy Owl. For the last nine years one has been on the island starting in late December, and it can be seen off and on until late February. Bonaparte's, Iceland, and Common Black-headed gulls usually put in an appearance along with Northern Gannets and Black-legged Kittiwakes. Oddly enough, alcids are quite rare and are not to be expected.

When you have finished birding at Gooseberry Neck, head back out over the causeway, and continue east for one-half mile along East Beach Road. On your left will be a large body of water locally known as The Let. A number of ducks, such as Canvasback, Common Merganser, and Common Goldeneye, can concentrate here in late fall. Mute Swans are also present and can number in the hundreds. Continue a short distance, and on your left you will see a tidal pool.

Shorebirds can be seen at low tide during the early fall. It is a good idea to check out the gulls that rest along the south side during the winter because you never know what will show up.

Continue down East Beach Road for a few hundred yards, and park at the sharp bend in the road next to the Massachusetts Audubon sign. This is the entrance to Allen's Pond, one of the area's premier birding spots.

Allen's Pond is a saltwater marsh with tidal flats. The Massachusetts Audubon Society (MAS) owns part of the property leading to Allen's Pond, but to get access to some sections, you have to cross private property, and the residents closely guard their privacy. Fortunately, two local groups have permission to bird these areas and conduct many field trips in the fall when birding is at its best. You can contact the Lloyd Center for Environmental Studies at 508-990-0505 and the Paskamansett Bird Club at 508-636-3954 for information on walks. The land owned by MAS still gives you access to areas where you can bird and view the pond itself.

The pond is bordered on the south by a barrier beach and on the north by forests and agricultural land. From where you have parked along the road, head east along the shoreline for a few hundred yards until you arrive at a large rocky outcrop. Once you have passed this formation, bear to your left, and head north for a short distance and up a rocky path to a dirt road. This road parallels Allen's Pond, and from this spot in late summer Clapper Rails have occasionally been brought in with tape recordings of their calls. Throughout the fall and winter, you can easily see a variety of ducks and usually a Great Blue Heron. Heading east, the road is bordered on both sides by thickets, which, in late September and early October, can harbor a variety of sparrows including Lincoln's and Vesper. Just south of the thicket is a rocky area where Horned Larks and Snow Buntings can be found quite easily during the winter.

A short distance down the road, you will come to a sign that states that the MAS property has ended and beyond this area is private property. Residents would appreciate anyone who wishes to bird beyond this area do so with people who have permission. To bird the rest of Allen's Pond, follow the road past the summer cottages; it turns into a grassy path at this point. The path soon forks slightly to the left, which is a good spot to look for Northern Harriers and Short-eared Owls in late fall and winter. Snowy Owls occasionally roost on top of the cottages, so keep your eyes open for this special winter visitor.

While walking east, you will come to a wide channel which has a path to the left side of it. Head north, keeping your eyes open for Seaside and Sharp-tailed sparrows, the latter being present throughout the winter. At the end of the path, you will come to an extensive mudflat which can be quite productive for shorebirds during fall migration. The best time to view them will be when the tide is low inside the marsh. This usually occurs about two hours after the time for the New Bedford Harbor low tide. Hudsonian Godwits, Long-billed

Dowitchers, Red Knots, and a variety of sandpipers can be seen along with Forster's Terns. This is a great area to find egrets, Little Blue Herons, and possibly a Yellow-crowned Night-Heron. Late fall can bring flocks of ducks and Canada Geese with the occasional Snow Goose. A few years ago a flock of Snow Geese came in that numbered over 150 individuals, with a few "Blue" Geese mixed in. In winter this is the spot where you might see immature Bald Eagles feeding on the remains of ducks and geese.

After you have finished birding this spot, return south along the channel to the end. Straight ahead on the beach you will see signs indicating that Least Terns and Piping Plovers nest, but by early fall all have fledged their young so trampling nests is not a concern. Early fall will bring a number of shorebirds and terns to this area. Walk east along the beach, and you will see a channel on your left. This is open to the ocean, and it is what keeps Allen's Pond from becoming a stagnant body of water. During fall migration, one might encounter Black Skimmers gliding low over the channel in search of a meal. On some occasions they fly so close that you can hear their bills slicing through the water. On the north side of the channel there is a sandy area with beach grass, where one might encounter a Buff-breasted Sandpiper foraging for insects. Farther down the beach, during late September, many species of shorebirds will roost during high tide. Whimbrel, Black-bellied Plover, and various sandpipers can be seen. Common and Least terns are still around at this time of year, and looking out toward the ocean will give you wonderful views as they dive for fish just offshore. Raptors migrating along the coast fly right over this area, and species such as Cooper's and Sharp-shinned hawks, Merlin, and Peregrine Falcon should be expected. Throughout October and into early November, most migrants will move out from this area and leave behind the winter residents such as gulls and Sanderlings.

When you return to your car from Allen's Pond, head north on Horseneck Road (East Beach Road ends at the MAS sign) for about 1.3 miles, and park along the road just past **Misti Brook Farm**. During the winter, large flocks of Red-winged Blackbirds and Common Grackles can usually be seen. For the last two years a Yellow-headed Blackbird has mixed in with the flock. The fields on both sides of the road are private property, but from the edge you can see Horned Larks and, preferably with a spotting scope, pick out the occasional Lapland Longspur. During mild winters Killdeer can be seen feeding in the fields.

A short distance past the farm, take your first right, and continue east on Horseneck Road. At the bottom of the hill, a small pond will be on your left. Wood Ducks are a good possibility here if the water is not frozen. Continue east for 0.9 mile, and take a right onto Allen's Neck Road. Stay on this road for a little less than a mile, and stop just past the farmhouse on your left. Thickets along the road here usually harbor White-crowned Sparrows from December

through March. During the winter of 1994, a Harris' Sparrow kept company with a variety of other sparrows a few yards down the road. Continue east for another mile until you reach the entrance to Demerest Lloyd State Park. Park along the side of the entrance, being careful not to block the gates.

Demerest Lloyd State Park comprises oak and pine coastal forests with two brackish ponds and areas of phragmites marsh with overgrown thickets and open grassy areas. Continuing down the road will lead to a large parking lot, just east of which is the shoreline. From the entrance, walk down the road, and stop by the small shed on your right. In the early fall during migration, this area will have warblers and vireos. A short distance past the shed is one of the best spots for wintering Rufous-sided Towhees. Carolina Wrens can be seen throughout the year on either side of the road.

A few hundred feet farther, you will notice a gate on your left. Beyond this gate is a weedy field occasionally used to grow corn. During late fall and winter, this is one of the best spots to find sparrows. Another field beyond the thicket to the west should be just as good for sparrows. Vesper, Grasshopper, White-crowned, and Chipping sparrows have been seen during the winter with Swamp, Field, and American Tree sparrows being quite common. A Dickcissel was seen here during the winter of 1994-1995.

After birding this section, continue down the road. After a short distance you will see a picnic area on the right. Brown Thrashers can be seen in fall, and when winter arrives Hairy and Red-bellied woodpeckers occasionally put in an appearance. At the south side of the picnic area is a path that leads to one of the brackish ponds. In early fall Pied-billed Grebes are usually present along with Gadwalls and various other ducks. If the pond is not frozen, Great Blue Herons and Belted Kingfishers can be seen.

As you return to your car and continue down the road, you will come to a large parking lot. The land bordering the parking lot to the west is sparsely grassed with a few trees. This can be a great area for flycatchers during early fall migration. Eastern Phoebes and Eastern Kingbirds can be seen along with the difficult *Empidonax* flycatchers. To the south you will see two buildings with a path between them. This path will lead you to the east side of the brackish pond. You will go through an area of pitch pine and tall grasses in which Ring-necked Pheasants and Northern Bobwhites can be seen. The trees bordering the pond on the ocean side are another spot in the early fall for migrating warblers and vireos. Early October will bring in large concentrations of Yellow-rumped Warblers and Golden-crowned Kinglets, both quite approachable.

Go back to the parking lot, and head toward the ocean, watching the grassy thicket before the beach for Eastern Meadowlarks. During the fall shorebirds can be seen at low tide. Both yellowlegs species are to be expected along with many Semipalmated Plovers. During the winter at low tide, Dunlins and gulls congregate on the sand flats. Be sure to study the gulls, as Iceland and Glaucous

have been recorded. At any time during the winter, Red-necked Grebes and Common and Red-throated loons are also present. All three scoter species and other sea ducks can be seen here.

When you have finished birding this area and you still have time on your hands, you should drive out to the **Lloyd Center for Environmental Studies**. Upon leaving the park, drive west for one mile, and take a right onto Barney's Joy Road. In less than a mile this road turns into Horseneck Road. Continue down Horseneck Road for 1.9 miles, and take a right onto Tannery Lane. Bear right at the stop sign onto Rock O'Dundee Road. Continue down this road for one mile, and take a right onto Potomska Road. Travel down this road for 1.7 miles, and take a right at the sign for the Lloyd Center. Go to the end of the gravel road, and follow the signs for parking.

The trails here are open from dawn to dusk and mainly traverse fifty acres of deciduous forest bordered to the south and east by a saltwater marsh. During the fall one might encounter a fair number of migrants, but the Center is known for the birds that come to its feeders during winter. Rufous-sided Towhees, Purple Finches, Red-bellied Woodpeckers, and Fox Sparrows usually put in an appearance at this time of year. The occasional Pine Siskin or Common Redpoll might show up at the thistle feeder. The bird feeders are placed close enough to the windows for easy viewing from inside. Eastern Screech-Owls nest on the property and might be seen roosting in one of the Wood Duck nesting boxes at the bottom of the hill near a small pond. The Center is open Tuesdays through Sundays from 9 AM to 5 PM. They have many exhibits on natural history, and the view of Buzzards Bay from the top floor alone is worth the trip.

MICHAEL A. BOUCHER has been birding for ten years and is a past president of the Paskamansett Bird Club. He is one of the coordinators of the New Bedford Christmas Bird Count and contributes to field sightings for *Bird Observer*. Mike would like to thank Ken Machado for his help in reviewing an earlier draft of this article.

SEVENTH ANNUAL MASSACHUSETTS BIRDERS' MEETING

The Massachusetts Audubon Society (MAS) and the South Shore Bird Club will cosponsor this year's Massachusetts Birders' Meeting to be held at Stonehill College, North Easton, on Saturday, November 18, 1995. The day's events include identification workshops, lectures, and an evening banquet featuring Pete Dunne as the dinner speaker. For further information or to register, call 617-259-9506, ext. 7401, or write to Birders' Meeting, MAS, 208 South Great Road, Lincoln, MA 01773.

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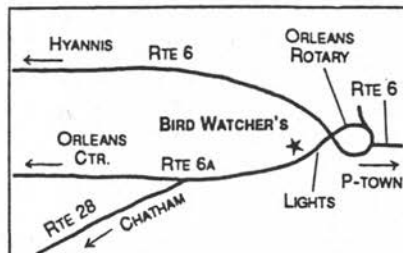
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