

BIRDING BIDDEFORD POOL

by Nancy McReel

This milewide tidal pool at the mouth of the Saco River is a prime hot spot for birding in Maine. A glance at the map shows why—water, water, everywhere. The highly configured shoreline is a delight everywhere you look with its islands, lighthouses, jetties, sand beaches, open uplands, rocky coast, harbor, fishing boats, sailboats, and gulls soaring and calling overhead. This is New England at its finest. Eight different habitats lie within a circle measuring two-and-one-half miles in diameter. It is largely accessible by car, with a couple of walks to get the kinks out of one's back and invigorate one's soul.

History

In historical times, the Sokoki Indians had a sizable village on the heights near the Pool. They were a settled people with permanent dwellings and cultivated fields of beans and corn. The English, under the command of Martin Pring, sailed into the Saco River in June 1603. Champlain later anchored in the river, recorded the name as Chouacoe, and wrote about the natives and their lifestyle. In 1616 Sir Ferdinand Gorges sent Richard Vines with thirty-two men to winter at the Pool in six cabins. For 150 years thereafter the area was called Winter Harbor. Although the initial English settlement was at the river mouth, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the settlers moved upriver to found the mill towns of Biddeford and Saco, leaving the Pool a rural, and, from 1850, recreational area. A nearby area, Old Orchard Beach, was eventually intensely developed thereby sparing Biddeford Pool from the same fate.

The Fletcher's Neck Life Saving Station is a rare surviving example of standardized but delightful stick-style buildings. This one, built in 1874, has dolphins on the gable ornamentation. It had a shed for the 1000-pound lifeboat on wheels, a room for the keeper, a dormitory for six men, and a general room. It was established to end the practice of "wreckers," who lured ships to shore with false lights and looted them when they ran aground. It operated from December 1 to May 1 during the period of severe winter storms, when ships were capable of running aground on their own. In the 1880s a volunteer ladies group supplied warm clothing and blankets for those rescued. During 1881 the five stations in Maine and New Hampshire helped in 287 disasters and saved 2268 people. Only twelve were lost. Three-quarters of the cargos were recovered. With the improvements in navigational aids and reduced marine traffic in the Saco, the station was closed and is now a private home.

Wood Island Light Station is now automated, and in recent years a Snowy Owl has found the roof of the lighthouse a convenient winter perch.

Geology

The soil of coastal southern Maine is mostly glacial outwash deposits of granitic sands and gravel over marine clay. Beneath this clay and the sand of the beaches are belts of folded bedrock running parallel to the coast and responsible for the position and direction of the islands as well as the straightness of the beaches. Cutting through the soft sands and clays are many rivers and streams. The larger ones supply the salt marshes, which are higher in biomass production than the best wheat field, and therefore high in food and shelter value for birds and other wildlife.

Natural Significance

For hundreds of years the tidal mudflats have been a key staging area along the Atlantic flyway as shorebirds annually stop to rest and restore their fat reserves during migration. No other staging area in Maine has such a diversity of species or such large numbers of individuals. Thirty-two species of shorebirds have been recorded here. Although waterfowl use Biddeford Pool throughout the year, most are seen in winter in the shelter of the Pool itself, or near the islands or shore.

Colonial nests of herons and egrets can be found on Wood Island. This seventeen-hectare island has a dense growth of small trees dominated by chokeberry and black chokecherry. It is the largest heronry in Maine, with four species: Black-crowned Night-Heron, Snowy Egret, Glossy Ibis, and Little Blue Heron, all at the northern edge of their range. Willets nest in the salt marsh, and Common Terns nest on Beach Island. In coastal southern Maine, American Black Ducks frequently nest within 250 feet of the shoreland zone, using tall grasses and shrubs as nesting cover. This habitat is abundant around the Pool. In 1979 there were 150 Common Terns and twenty-five Roseate Terns nesting on Beach Island, an eroding pile of loose stones offshore from the Fletcher Neck Life Saving Station. Today these species no longer nest on Beach Island. Recently, however, American Oystercatchers have started to return to the area, where they have not been reported in decades.

Finally, coastal peninsulas such as Biddeford Pool are often migrant traps for passerines because the birds hesitate to cross expanses of water when flying from land. Also, peninsulas are the first points of land to be seen by migrants coming in off the ocean. The Pool can be very productive anytime during migration.

Times to Visit

The best time to visit depends on the birds of choice. Mid-August to mid-September is the peak migration for shorebirds, although Whimbrels appear in July, and Sanderlings linger through October. In August one is likely to see

Semipalmated Sandpipers, both yellowlegs species, Willets, Spotted Sandpipers, Ruddy Turnstones, Sanderlings, Black-crowned Night-Herons, and Snowy Egrets. There are occasional sightings of Little Blue Herons and Western, Baird's, and White-rumped sandpipers.

October is best for sparrows: Chipping, Field, Savannah, Sharp-tailed, Lincoln's, White-throated, White-crowned, Song, and Swamp. Fall foliage, clear blue skies, seaside goldenrod, three-toothed cinquefoil, and monarch butterflies brighten the trip.

Raptors such as Merlin, Peregrine Falcon, Northern Harrier, and Cooper's Hawk are often scouting the Pool and marsh in fall and winter.

Wintering seabird numbers begin building up in November. Ducks that prefer fresh water pass through before the ponds freeze solid. On the ocean, numbers increase through December and remain high until April. Common Loons one year numbered fifty-two in December, twenty-three in March, and one in July. Other birds likely to be seen in winter are Common Eider by the hundreds, grebes, scoters, Oldsquaw, Common Goldeneye, Bufflehead, and Red-breasted Merganser. Occasionally one is elated by spotting a King Eider, a Wood Duck, a Hooded Merganser, a Black Guillemot, or one of the other alcids. In winter Horned Lark, Snow Bunting, Northern Shrike, or Short-eared Owl occasionally may be found in the marshy areas. In most winters one or two Snowy Owls take up residence around the Pool.

If you think it is cold standing there scoping for these seabirds, consider the divers from the fishing boats near shore, searching underwater for sea urchins to sell to Japan.

As for spring, 235 Black-bellied Plovers were seen one May day, but fall visits offer a greater variety of species. May is the best time for catching sight of vireos and warblers as they are held in the shrubs on this peninsula by the ocean. Then the weather can be delightful with the shadbush and dog violets in bloom.

Stops and their Habitats

Eight habitats can be found around Biddeford Pool: 1) tidal mudflat, 2) salt marsh, 3) open upland, 4) woodland, 5) shrub-land tangle, 6) rocky coast and ocean, 7) sand beach and dune, and 8) freshwater pond. The numbers on the map are indicators of these habitats. The marked stops are as follows.

Hattie's (habitats 1 and 2). Be at Hattie's for shorebirds three hours before or after high tide. If the tide is wrong, do East Point first, where the state of the tide is of little concern.

East Point Sanctuary (habitats 3, 4, 5, 6).

Fletcher's Neck Life Saving Station (locally called Coast Guard Station) (habitat 6).

Fortunes Rocks (habitats 6, 7, 8)

Far Pool (habitats 1, 3, 4)

Hills Beach jetty (habitats 6, 7)

Hills Beach tangle (habitat 5)

In order to see the maximum number of species in the shortest time, cover Hattie's and East Point Sanctuary.

Getting There

Take Interstate 95 to exit 4, Biddeford. Take Route 111 east to a traffic light at the junction with Route 1 (1.4 mile). Angle slightly across Route 1, and continue east on Route 111. At a traffic light (2.4 miles), pick up Routes 9 and 208 to Biddeford Pool. This is Pool Road, but it may not be marked by name. At 7.7 miles, turn left on Route 208, near a tall green water tower. This is Bridge Street. At 8.4 miles, by a bridge/culvert, there is room for two cars to park and for people to scan the pool and marsh.

Next turn left on Mile Road for 0.9 miles to Hattie's on the left, where one can park (\$5 fee in summer), snack, and walk out through the marsh, or do the marsh and beach on the ocean side 0.2 mile down the dirt road across the way. From mid-September to May parking is free at Hattie's and at the beach.

Continue along Mile Road bearing right on Main Street at the top of the rise, then on past the fire station. Shortly after on the right, 0.4 mile from Hattie's, there is room for two cars to park. Get out and scan the trees across Great Pond for Black-crowned Night-Herons.

Continue straight on Main Street to the ocean. Another 0.4 mile on the left is the gate for East Point Sanctuary, owned by the Maine Audubon Society. One may park on either side of the road but not along the ocean wall. Walk through the gate, and follow the trail past the golf course out to the point. Check the trails in the sanctuary among shrubs and trees for migrant songbirds. Yellow-rumped Warblers are usually seen every month, as there is an excellent crop of bayberries here. Yellowrumps are one of the few species that have evolved the enzymes to digest the wax coating of these berries. One can easily spend one to three hours in this sanctuary.

Return to your car, bear right for half a mile, and stop by the Fletcher's Neck Life Saving Station. There is room for about four cars. Cormorants are usually drying their wings on Beach Island, and seals haul out there at high tide. Scan here for the waterfowl of the season.

Continue in the same direction around the point. Drive slowly on this one-way street. There is little space for parking as you peer out over the beach and ocean. At the T after the one-way loop, turn left. Keep bearing left until you get back to Main Street. Then turn left, and go back down Mile Road toward Fortunes Rocks. Scan the three ponds on your right at 0.5 to 0.8 mile from the junction with Bridge Street. Park by the third pond, so that you may also check the beach and ocean. An Ipswich Sparrow was here in October 1993 and is probably a regular winter visitor to the Pool area.

Where the road bends close to the ocean 0.3 mile farther, squeeze off the road on the left to scan for Black Ducks and seabirds. A Barrow's Goldeneye appeared here in December 1992. A small freshwater marsh on the right had a Palm Warbler in January 1993.

In another 0.5 mile is the last little pocket beach. It often shelters shorebirds, and a pond across the road may have a Pied-billed Grebe in season. If you continue straight ahead, you will soon be back on Route 9. Turn right. It is two miles back to the junction with Route 208.

Angling across Route 208 at this junction will get you to Old Pool Road, which will take you to Hills Beach. Half a mile farther is a dirt road on the right (very unimproved) leading down through a field to the Pool. Most cars can drive down in summer and fall. There is plenty of room to park, get out, and scan the water for Buffleheads, the field for Horned Larks and hawks, and the mudflats for shorebirds.

Drive back to the paved road. Turn right, and right again at the next fork at 0.8 mile at the University of New England. This road leads to Hills Beach. The first street on the left (Seabreeze) ends by the jetty. There is room for two cars in fall and winter. The next road (Long Avenue) has the same amount of space.

Go back to Hills Beach Road, turn left, and continue past Buffleheads Store and Restaurant (another pit stop with food and drink) to the end of the road, peering left or right as water appears in view. The entire Hills Beach Road is 1.8 miles long.

At the dead end, turn around and head back, taking the first left (Sky Harbor) and, within a block, a right on a short dirt road (Goldthwaite). Stop where there is a little tangle of shrubs and trees to listen and look for passerines. The road loops back into Hills Beach Road, which runs back to Route 9 just past the University of New England. Turn right to return to Interstate 95 at exit 4.

The trip outlined here can take from a half day to a full day. Hattie's has been convenient for a snack or lunch and a pit stop. It is open from May to November. Buffleheads Store and Restaurant is the other alternative for these amenities, and it is open year-round. A scope is recommended for viewing the Pool and ocean. The wind off the ocean may vary from cool in summer to frigid in winter, so dress accordingly. The rare-bird alert for Maine is 207-781-2332. It is usually updated on Tuesday evening.

References

- Bennett, D. 1986. *Maine's Natural Heritage*, Maine State Planning Office.
Maine State Planning Office. 1987. *Nomination for the Official List of Maine Heritage Coastal Areas: Region 1: Cape Arundel/ Biddeford Pool*.

NANCY McREEL has conducted a survey of the birds at Biddeford Pool every month since August 1980, when volunteers were asked to help in a study for the Biddeford Pool Improvement Association. The information is now sent

to a Maine natural history consultant, who forwards shorebird information to the Manomet Observatory, and to Rachel Carson National Wildlife Refuge, at which she does two other bird surveys. Since 1988 she has been removing birds from the mist nets for June Ficker's banding program at the Wells Reserve. Responsible for all this was a small Yellow Warbler that flew by her window thirty years ago.



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