



BIRDING THE NOOKS AND CRANNIES OF NAHANT

by Linda Pivacek

A migrant trap skirted by rocky coastline, beaches, and mudflats—Nahant is a place for all seasons. During winter rafts of eiders and scoters are accompanied by many other seabirds. In spring and fall birders can enjoy migrating land birds and shorebirds on this tiny island and can always hope to turn up a rarity such as Painted Bunting, Franklin's Gull, or Summer Tanager, all of which have been reported in the past. With this article I hope to increase the reader's chances for a productive birding trip to Nahant by exploring the many nooks and crannies on the island.

The smallest town in Massachusetts, Nahant is a 1.2-square-mile island connected to the mainland by a mile-long causeway. Early maps show that it comprised three small islands: Little Nahant, Bass Point, and East Point. Today, the central area between these points is wetlands, occupied by a soggy golf course and unfortunately interlaced with drainage ditches. The current plan is to allow Lodge Park at East Point and Bailey's Hill at Bass Point to remain as natural and unspoiled as possible.

The first documented use of the island was as pasture land, where livestock could be protected from wolves by erecting a barrier across the narrow neck of beach extending to the mainland. In the nineteenth century Nahant became a seaside resort accessible by steamship, where Boston's elite summered on grand estates. Today some overgrown old gardens still provide food and cover for birds, but many old estates have been divided, and much of the open space has been developed for residential housing.

Getting There

The causeway leading to Nahant begins at a rotary on Lynn Shore Drive in Lynn, twelve miles north of downtown Boston. From the south, go north on Route 1A in Revere, cross the General Edwards Bridge spanning the Pines River from Revere to Lynn, and continue for two miles on the Lynnway, following signs to Nahant. Enter the Nahant rotary (the ocean will be in front of you), and take the first right onto the causeway. From the north, take Humphrey Street in Swampscott to Lynn Shore Drive in Lynn. After one mile, go halfway around the Nahant rotary, and follow the causeway to Nahant as above. From the west on Route 1 in Lynnfield, follow Route 129 east for 4.2 miles through a few curves and traffic lights to where Route 129 turns left. Continue straight onto Chestnut Street for 1.3 miles to a traffic light at Broad Street. Cross Broad Street at the traffic light onto Atlantic Street. After two blocks the road bears right and joins Lynn Shore Drive, less than a mile north of the Nahant rotary.

Parking in Nahant can be a problem. Nonresidents may be ticketed, especially for parking in lots that require stickers such as East Point and Short Beach. "No parking" signs are on almost all streets. In my experience, however, restrictions generally are not enforced except during beach weather, especially on weekends. If there is a field trip or birders responding to a "hot line" bird, notifying the local police has always worked for me.

Finding Birds in Nahant

Birding can begin immediately upon exiting the rotary: take the first right to the Metropolitan District Commission (MDC) boat ramp and park. You will need a scope to find the Purple Sandpipers on the rocks surrounding the channel marker. Scan for seabirds and shorebirds in Lynn Harbor. For wintering seabirds and migrant spring and fall shorebirds, carefully cross over the causeway to Lynn Beach near the brick MDC building. If possible, take advantage of the afternoon light, and plan to be here within two hours of high tide. There are more birds at this time, and you can get closer to them. To do this, you may want to visit this site on your way out of Nahant. If so, try parking at one of the free small parking lots on either side of the brick MDC building. This area is great for shorebirds and gulls due to the presence of *Pilayella littoralis* algae, a boon to birds and birders and a bane to beachgoers.

Fall brings the greatest number and variety of shorebirds, which feast on creatures associated with the decaying algae deposited on the beach with the receding tide. Search through the Semipalmated Sandpipers and Sanderlings for Red Knots and Buff-breasted, Baird's, and White-rumped sandpipers. Several Western Sandpipers are often present. Lesser Black-backed Gulls make annual appearances. Scan among the Bonaparte's Gulls feeding in the mats of floating algae in the sea for Black-headed Gull and Little Gull. Keep a sharp eye out for one of the Peregrine Falcons lured to this spot . . . like any other birder.

After driving across the causeway (1.4 mile) and passing Little Nahant on your left, take the first right onto Castle Road. Immediately, and carefully, turn left by the pharmacy, and park in front of the houses along Ward Road. Cross Castle Road opposite the pharmacy, and take the short path to the shore to survey the flats at Broad Sound. At high tide in the fall, move slowly and quietly over the dune as the shorebirds feeding at the wrackline come into view very suddenly. A sizable flock of Brant winters in the sound, and Harbor Seals lounge on "Seal Rocks" during low to midtide.

Before returning to your car, cross to the opposite side of Nahant Road, and take the path to the right of the Coast Guard Station to Short Beach. This is one of several vantage points on this trip to look for birds on the beach and in Nahant Bay. After returning to your car, proceed along Castle Road. For wintering seabirds, take the first right onto Wendell Road, which shortly dead-ends. Common Goldeneye, Bufflehead, Brant, and Red-breasted Merganser can

be close to shore at this spot. In late winter and early spring search for King Eider in the rafts of Common Eider.

Return to Castle Road, and go right. Take the third left onto Flash Road, pass the golf course on your right, and bear right onto Spring Road. For spring and fall migrants, take the second left onto High Street, and park at the end. This is the back gate to the cemetery, which is worth checking. Return to Spring Road, go left, then quickly right onto Emerald Road, and take the second right onto Willow Road, which shortly dead-ends. Park near the golf course clubhouse restaurant, and check the golf course edges for Ipswich Sparrow. The half-mile path to Bailey's Hill leaves from the far side of the "Oceanview" function hall on the beach. Try pishing along the hillside path to attract songbirds during migration. Keep bearing to the right, until you reach the gate where a small parking lot is located (chances of a parking ticket are high if you choose this lot). In the winter search the ocean across from the parking area for Barrow's Goldeneye among the sea ducks. A short hike up the paved road leads to the top of Bailey's Hill, where you should scan for ducks, loons, grebes, and other seabirds.

Retrace your steps, and drive back along Willow Road. After passing Tudor Beach and Town Wharf on your right, take the first left onto Furbush Road. After 0.1 mile, park in the Massachusetts Audubon parking area on your left (room for only two cars) to explore the area in and around the Massachusetts Audubon Sanctuary, known locally as "the Thicket." During spring and fall migration the Thicket and the surrounding residential streets are usually the best bet for warblers, vireos, thrushes, and other songbirds in Nahant. The sanctuary itself is very small and is minimally maintained. It can be very muddy and difficult to get through—watch out for poison ivy.

From the parking lot, continue on foot along Furbush Road, and go left onto Walton Road. The area across from the Thicket along Walton Road can be very productive; stop and listen. In this area and in the Thicket itself, Yellow-breasted Chat can be found in both spring and fall, and occasionally in winter. Orange-crowned Warbler has turned up here also. In late spring the Mourning Warbler is best located by its loud, clear song. Walk left onto Wharf Street, and proceed for about fifty yards to the path on the left entering the sanctuary, which is not marked well and is not maintained. In spring a White-eyed Vireo is sometimes singing near the entrance.

Stop and listen frequently along the path, which ends at a drainage ditch. Move quietly to view the ditch. Both Louisiana and Northern waterthrushes and other migrants frequent this area. An effort is underway to erect another "bridge" across the ditch. Past efforts have fallen prey to vandals. To approach the ditch from the opposite side, one must walk back around the sanctuary, and hunt for a path leading in from the other side, which in some years is more apparent than in others.

One can either walk or drive to East Point from the Audubon Sanctuary. Head back down Furbush Road, and turn left onto Willow Road, and left again onto Cliff Street. If you are driving, park on Cliff Street near the village church. Continue on Cliff Street and go right onto Nahant Road. Enjoy the ocean view and, hopefully, seabirds along the way to East Point. The Northeastern Marine Science Center will be straight ahead, and Lodge Park is the area on top of the hill. Stop and scan the ocean and coves at any vantage point. Walk through the pedestrian opening in the gate, and proceed up the asphalt roadway to the top. In winter sea ducks, Great Cormorant, loons, grebes, and Red-breasted Mergansers are usually present. King Eider is sometimes found in the rafts of Common Eider. Careful and patient observation may produce Black Guillemot or Razorbill. Take your time walking the periphery of this area, for there are lots of hidden corners to explore. Snowy Owls may go unnoticed sitting motionless on the rocks. Walk across the center of the grassy top to find Snow Buntings and Lapland Longspurs. This can also be a good spot for Ipswich Sparrow.

Upon leaving the East Point area, drive northwest on Nahant Road for 0.2 mile. The ocean will be on your right. Just before the road bends left away from the ocean, there is a small pull-out with a wooden platform. Stop and scan for seabirds. To avoid a parking ticket, do not venture far from your car.

Drive to Pleasant Street, the second prominent street on your right, and park beside the public library and playground. In spring listen for bird song; good birding can be found anywhere along these streets graced with old mature trees. Drive to Cary Street, one block beyond the playground, turn left, and take the next right onto Summer Street, which dead-ends. This is a good place to scope for seabirds. Return, and go right on Cary Street, which becomes Marginal Road. Stop along this road to get an excellent view of Nahant Bay. From October to May thousands of scoters and many other seabirds may be in the bay. Scan the scoters to find the smaller profile of the Harlequin Duck. Search for Barrow's Goldeneye. In May the Red-necked Grebes are fabulous in their breeding plumage. Common and Red-throated loons and Horned Grebes are often in good view from the road.

At the end of Marginal Road, go left onto Ocean Street, and take the fourth right onto Nahant Road. At 0.4 mile you will reach Short Beach. If you park in the business zone, you will be able to do some birding on foot. This is about the only place to get something to eat in Nahant. You can check Nahant Bay from this vantage point while you eat. Leave your car at the business zone while you bird the Lowlands area. Walk about sixty yards along Spring Road to the gated entrance to the composting and lobster trap storage area on the right. Follow the dirt road, and explore. Birding for spring and fall migrants can be good. In October look for Lincoln's, White-crowned, and Swamp sparrows. Dickcissel can sometimes be found.

Drive past the Coast Guard Station at Short Beach, and take the next right

onto Little Nahant Road. Take the first right onto Howe Road, and park after the road bears to the left. Walk back to where the road turned left, and follow the paved path to Short Beach. This is the end of the beach where the *Pilayella littoralis* algae collects and the shorebirds and gulls congregate. Little Gull has recently frequented this end of Short Beach, and Iceland and Glaucous gulls are possible. From a high point on the beach, scope the rocky shore of Little Nahant for another opportunity to see Harlequin Duck and Barrow's Goldeneye, which favor this shore.

After returning to your car, drive back up Howe Road, and turn right onto Little Nahant Road. When you reach the T, turn right, and go straight on Mills Terrace, where the road ends in 100 feet. Park along the road, and walk along the path for another good vantage point for Nahant Bay. At high tide the rafts of scoters will be in closer view. King Eider occasionally turns up here along with Oldsquaw, Common Goldeneye, Common Eider, Bufflehead, and Greater Scaup.

Return to Little Nahant Road, take a right, proceed to the crest of the hill, and bear left at the hairpin turn. At the bottom of the hill turn right onto the causeway. (The nearer right turn leads to the beach parking lot.) The causeway will lead you back to Lynn. If you wish to stop at the MDC building on the beach at the end of the causeway, try parking in one of the small lots on either side of the building. For both of these lots, which are more available when beachgoers are not around, carefully bear right when you reach the end of the fencing on the right side of the causeway. You will be at the first lot. If it is full, drive along the inner right hand road, and take the first right immediately after passing the building, and drive into the parking lot.

A Short Visit

Nahant Bay is the wintering site for large numbers of sea ducks. In most years a small number of Harlequin Ducks are present, and in some years King Eider and Barrow's Goldeneye can be found. The bay can be viewed from Marginal Road, Short Beach, and Little Nahant. Wintering Yellow-breasted Chats and Orange-crowned Warblers sometimes turn up at the Massachusetts Audubon Thicket and in Little Nahant. A winter route should include East Point for King Eider, Black Guillemot, Razorbill, Northern Gannet, Snow Bunting, Lapland Longspur, and Snowy Owl. The eastern coast of Bailey's Hill is a favorite wintering spot for Barrow's Goldeneye. Look for Purple Sandpipers on the rocky shores.

In spring and fall, with favorable weather conditions, the Massachusetts Audubon Thicket is the most reliable place for warblers, Philadelphia and White-eyed vireos, thrushes, and other migrants. The Lowlands composting area can also host a number of migrants—the October sparrows include Lincoln's and White-crowned sparrows and possibly a Dickcissel. One has a chance to see

Ipswich Sparrow at East Point and the golf course along Willow Road. Although the cemetery has not produced the numbers of migrants that it has in the past, Painted Bunting, Summer Tanager, and Cerulean Warbler have been found during spring migration within the past eight years. Impressive numbers of fall shorebirds congregate on Nahant/Lynn Beach near the MDC building. Look for Buff-breasted, Baird's, Western, and White-rumped sandpipers and Lesser Black-backed and Little gulls among the more common species.

Not considered by many birders to be a destination in itself, Nahant is convenient to several nearby North Shore birding spots. A great place for "drop-by" birding! Any of several areas could be included on your itinerary: Belle Isle Marsh in East Boston, Winthrop shore, Point of Pines in Revere, Marblehead Neck, and Salem Woods.

LINDA PIVACEK has resided and birded in Nahant for more than ten years. She pursues her birding hobby whenever and wherever she can, venturing as far as South America and Africa. Linda supports her habit by working as a biostatistician at Boston University School of Medicine.

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