

CAPE TIP BIRDING BY BIKE

by John C. Young

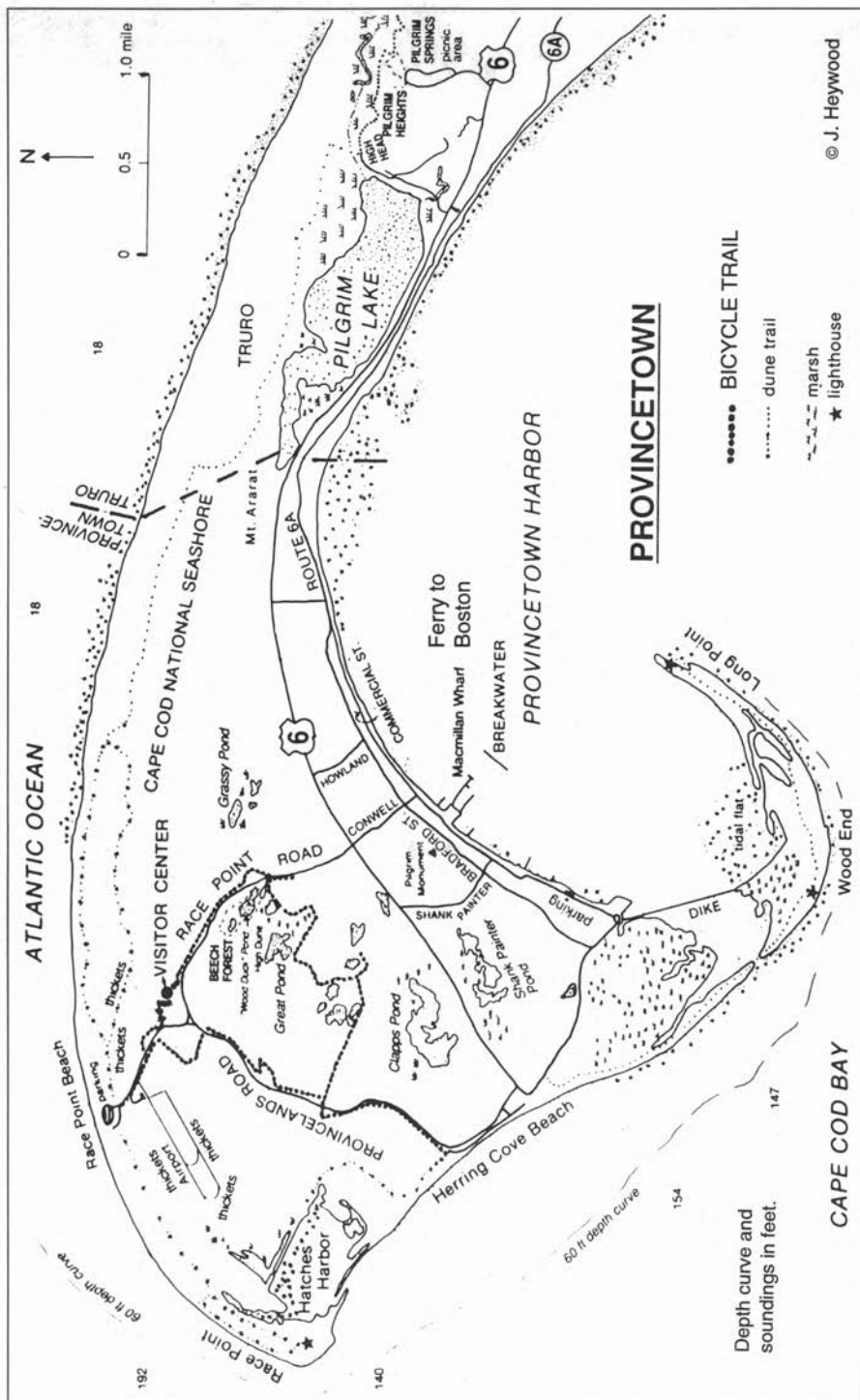
Bicycles have many advantages over automobiles when it is time to go birding. One benefit is the lower environmental impact. Driving way out to Truro counters this benefit; you will have to judge for yourself whether or not to venture out for this lovely ride.

The route described here is about twenty-five miles long including five miles on bike paths and several miles on roads with narrow shoulders. The route may challenge inexperienced cyclists because it is quite exposed to wind. A helmet is advisable, of course. On a good day, bicycling in Truro and Provincetown can be a great pleasure. The best times are late April to mid-June and September through November, and an early morning start is best.

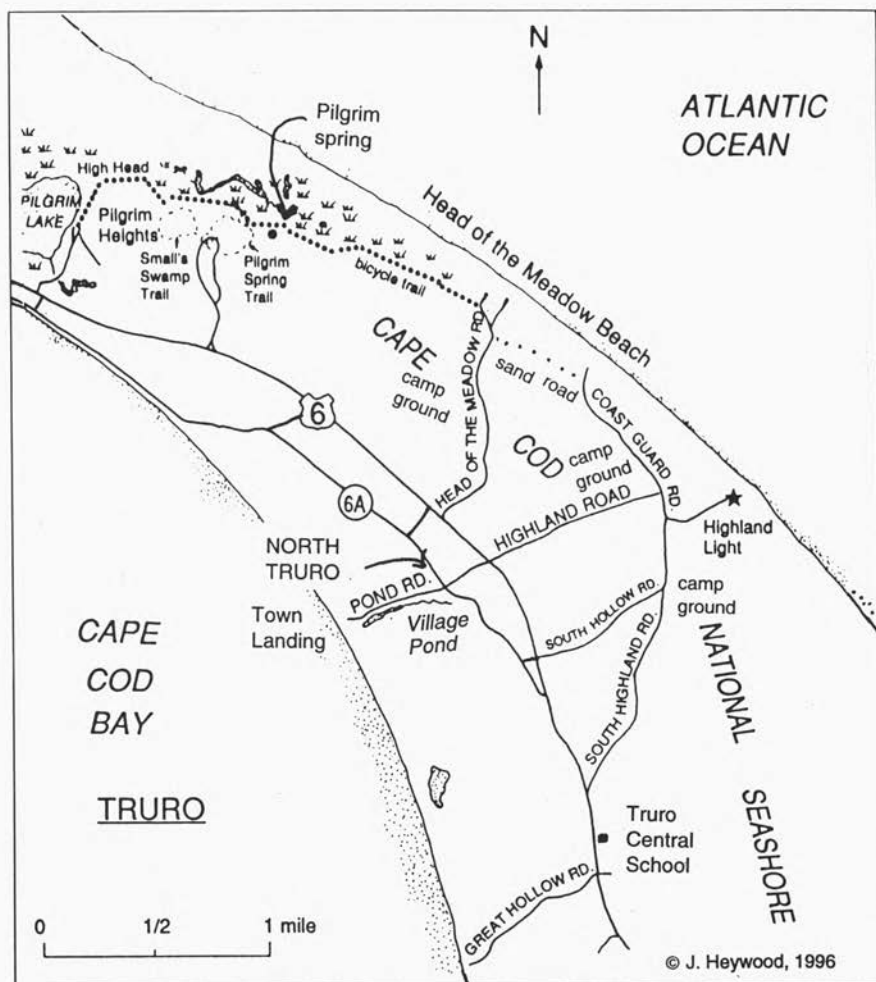
If arriving by car, follow Route 6 toward Provincetown. Just north of the Truro Central School, turn right on Highland Road. Assemble your bicycling gear at Highland Light (Cape Cod Light) where there is some parking. The lighthouse was moved back in summer 1996 to accommodate the loss to the sea of up to thirty feet of land each decade along the high bluffs. Bank Swallows nest out of sight along the top of the bluffs. Horned Larks and migrants such as Lesser Golden Plover can sometimes be seen before golfers tee up at the adjacent Highland Links.

Coast down the road past the golf course. Turn right onto Highland Road, and follow its bend to the left, passing through pitch pine woods with Pine Warblers, migrant kinglets, and Red-breasted Nuthatches. Instead of passing under Route 6, turn left up the ramp, and follow Route 6 north for a short stretch. The first right, at the information booth, will take you through continuous pitch pine forest to Head-of-the-Meadow Beach. At the end of the road, the right fork offers a handy low-level view of the ocean. Look for loons and scoters. At low tide the wreck of the Bark Francis is visible just to the north.

Just a short way down the other fork is the south end of the Pilgrim Springs bike trail. For two miles this trail follows a water-level route with short steep upward slopes on the left and swamp to the right. The waves of the Atlantic Ocean once crashed against land where you are now pedaling. Later, a barrier beach formed, dividing what became known as East Harbor (and later, Pilgrim Lake) from the ocean. The trail continues from the head of the former salt meadow to Pilgrim Lake, through highbush blueberries, shadbush, beach plum, and the like. This is an excellent place to see day-flying migrants, such as Tree Swallows, flickers, and accipiters. Close views of warblers are possible if they can be coaxed out of the dense thickets. The spring where the Pilgrims were so pleased to find fresh water is a good place to stop along the way and pish.



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At the end of the bike trail, turn left on the hard-packed road that leads out to Route 6. Keep checking for migrants. The hill to the left is known as High Head. It is the end of land deposited directly by glacial action. The land beyond was raised by wave and wind action alone. Carefully cross the highway, and take the adjacent crossroad (just to the left) to Route 6A. A right turn on Route 6A takes you to Provincetown, visible beyond the row of beach cottages. The best stop along this stretch is at the Holiday Inn in Provincetown. In August and September the commoner shorebirds often congregate here at midtide. Sea ducks are offshore in December and January.

For a change of pace, take the left fork (Commercial Street) into Provincetown. Here, the curious observer will find the human residents and visitors of greater interest than the motley urban birds. In the very midst of foot-

long hot dogs shacks and tee-shirt emporiums, go left out onto McMillan Wharf where fish, humans, gulls, sea ducks, and loafing alcids all meet. Catch a bite to eat as well in preparation for pedaling in the Provincelands.

Continuing out on Commercial Street, you will find that pedestrians have never given up the right of way to vehicles. Beware too, for the street is one-way for cars but not your bicycling brethren. If no other spots look enticing to birders, the breakwater at the rotary at the end of Commercial Street surely will. Extensive sand flats are visible at low tide with the breakwater offering access to their midst. But let us continue.

The road to Herring Cove cuts through a very attractive mix of sand dunes vegetated with grass, pines, and hardwoods contiguous to salt marsh. A short bike path diverges left to the beach. Continue along the beach, past the Winnebago habitat. Northern Gannets and Roseate Terns sometimes fish offshore here.

The great Provincelands network of bike trails can be accessed at the north end of the Herring Cove Beach parking lot. The bike trail rolls over dormant dunes, then skirts a natural cranberry bog. A dirt road, scarcely passable by bicycle, runs northwest from this point to the Hatches Harbor dike, through habitat favored by Vesper Sparrows. The cyclist selecting a shorter route will continue on the bike trail through an underpass and take the right fork toward the Beech Forest rather than turning left toward Race Point. At the peak of each hill, scan for hawks. Rarely, in May or September, hawks funneled to the tip of the Cape ascend in kettles, until they head off toward the distant Manomet hills.

Suddenly the trail dips from sun-baked and windswept sand dunes into cool shadowy woods. The trail winds from pond to pond through this refreshing greenery. Small bands of warblers and other night-flying migrants may be encountered all along this trail in May or September. If the warblers are promising, a walk around the Beech Forest trail may be a worthwhile digression.

Leaving the Beech Forest, turn right on Race Point Road, and return to the center of Provincetown. Go left on Route 6A (Bradford Street), and continue for several miles to the flashing light marking the village of North Truro. Through the Beach Point cottage colonies, you will be retracing your route from earlier in the day. At North Truro, a right turn can be rewarding. Check the thickets along Village Pond, and look out over the Cape Cod Bay from the former railroad embankment. A small group of Common Eider may be present at any season.

Returning to the light at North Truro, turn right again. Look for Orchard Orioles in the elms beyond the Christian Union Church. Turn left just beyond the South Hollow vineyards onto South Hollow Road (currently unmarked). This road crosses Route 6 and ends at Highland Road. Turn left. The small woods at the top of the hill might shelter one last species before you turn right back to the parking lot at Highland.

The circuit passes three campgrounds in North Truro, motels, and

innumerable cottages for those choosing to stay in the area. One may begin the circuit at any point and add or skip detours, but the fine view at Highland Light over the route traveled should not be missed.

JOHN YOUNG previously wrote an article for *Bird Observer* about his birding experiences on the South Dakota plains. Recently he started to use an MBTA bicycle pass to extend his range of car-free birding from his home base in Boston. Other resources available for the birder who bikes on Cape Cod include maps of bike trails available at the National Seashore Headquarters in Eastham and Provincetown; a booklet titled *The Cape Cod Bike Book: A Guide to the Bike Trails of Cape Cod* (by William E. Peace and published by The Nantucket Book); *Birding Cape Cod* (1990, published by the Cape Cod Bird Club and the Massachusetts Audubon Society); and the chapters about Cape Cod in *A Birder's Guide to Eastern Massachusetts* (1994, published by the American Birding Association).

Rip Ryder
MONOMOY ISLAND
FERRY
North & South
U.S. Coast Guard Licensed
Captain: KEITH LINCOLN
— Daily Trips — Sight Seeing
— BIRDWATCHING
(508) 587-4540 • (508) 945-5450