



BIRDING NAUSET MARSH, EASTHAM/ORLEANS

by Jackie Sones

For many people, the first experience of Nauset Marsh is the view from Fort Hill in Eastham: an expansive salt marsh protected from the powerful waves of the Atlantic Ocean by a thin strip of yellow sand. The view is impressive, and so are the many birding opportunities that this area offers. Nauset Marsh has a lot going for it: excellent habitat, good accessibility, and a tendency to attract interesting birds!

Records of birds in this area extend back at least to the seventeenth century, when Samuel de Champlain noticed Black Skimmers in Nauset Harbor in 1605 (in Forbush 1925). In the late 1800s Henry David Thoreau walked the Outer Beach several times; some of his avian observations appear in *Cape Cod* (Thoreau's "mackerel gulls" are today's terns). Henry Beston described the call of the Piping Plover in *The Outermost House*:

The bird I write of is the piping plover, *Charadrius melodus*, sometimes called the beach plover or the mourning bird. Its note is a whistled syllable, the loveliest musical note, I think, sounded by any North Atlantic bird.

Others who have recorded bird sightings in Nauset Marsh include Oliver Austin, Jr., Wyman Richardson, Ludlow Griscom, Wallace Bailey, and Norman Hill.

Bob Prescott wrote articles about where to go birding in the Nauset Marsh area in *Bird Observer* (October 1979, Volume 7, Number 5) and *Birding Cape Cod* (1991). Sightings during the past few years have prompted me to write again . . . to review some recent birding highlights and to introduce new birders to this exciting area.

All of the locations mentioned here are easy to find with a good map. Butterworth's *Cape Cod and Islands Atlas and Guide Book* is particularly helpful (about \$16; call 508-760-2000). It offers easy-to-read individual town maps, with symbols for town landings.

Parking is relatively easy in the fall, winter, and spring. However, beware of summer regulations. Some beaches require stickers or fees from Memorial Day through Labor Day. To avoid any surprises, check with the local town halls for current regulations: Eastham (508-240-5900) and Orleans (508-240-3700).

When looking for waterbirds (shorebirds, rails, waders, waterfowl), pay close attention to the tides. I recommend picking up a tide chart from a local marina to use throughout the year. (*Bird Observer* also publishes a tide chart each year in the December issue.) Remember to correct the times for the inner reaches of Nauset Marsh. This is somewhat challenging due to annual and

seasonal changes in water flow through Nauset Inlet. When consulting a chart with Boston tides, plan on the high tide being about one-half to one hour later at Fort Hill and from one to two hours later in Town Cove.

Coast Guard Beach, Eastham

From the Orleans rotary, follow Route 6 East toward Provincetown for about three miles until you see signs for the Cape Cod National Seashore's Salt Pond Visitor Center. Turn right onto Nauset Road. While driving east, watch the cedar trees for Cedar Waxwings. A careful observer may spot an occasional Bohemian Waxwing among them during the winter. Nauset Road eventually turns left, but stay straight on Doane Road, which will take you to the beach. Turn right into the Coast Guard Beach parking lot. The southern edge of the parking lot provides a sweeping view of the northern half of Nauset Marsh. For another view of the flats, walk down the path located at the southwest corner of the parking lot. You will eventually come to a wooden bridge that crosses a portion of the marsh. Whether at the parking lot or on the bridge, use a scope to scan the flats for feeding shorebirds (low or intermediate tides are best): Greater Yellowlegs, Black-bellied Plover, Dunlin, Short-billed Dowitcher, and Semipalmated Sandpiper are among the most common. In 1997 an American Avocet appeared here on August 22 and remained until at least the end of September, and a Marbled Godwit lingered through December.

To reach the beach, walk down the path just north of the old Coast Guard building. This is a terrific spot to observe Piping Plovers from late March through July. (Please note: access to some of the beach is restricted during the nesting season.) If you walk down the beach to the inlet, remember to watch for Forster's Terns (in fall), Caspian Terns (in spring and fall), and Royal Terns (in summer). At high tides shorebirds may concentrate near the southern tip of the beach. In fall, winter, or spring (and especially in late September and October), it's worth checking the Osprey pole in the marsh on the inside of the beach for Peregrine Falcons.

Salt Pond Visitor Center, Eastham

For another view of the northern edge of Nauset Marsh, park at the Cape Cod National Seashore's Salt Pond Visitor Center (at the intersection of Route 6 and Nauset Road), and walk the Nauset Marsh Trail (about 1.3 miles round-trip). It winds along the edge of the Salt Pond and eventually takes you to a great overlook from which you can scan the marsh and flats. Following the main trail back to the Visitor Center provides an opportunity to visit upland habitat dominated by grasses, Eastern Red Cedars, Black Oaks, and Black Cherries. In the spring and early summer, listen for Prairie Warblers, Field Sparrows, Eastern Towhees, Gray Catbirds, and Northern Bobwhites.

Fort Hill Area, Eastham

From the Orleans rotary, follow Route 6 East towards Provincetown for about 1.4 miles until you see signs for the Fort Hill Area. Turn right and follow the road to the upper parking lot. Birding is good here at any time of year, but my favorite season is the fall (September through November). At high tide (especially during full and new moons, when the tides range over eleven feet), a walk along the edge of the marsh may produce sightings of Saltmarsh and Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrows, Seaside Sparrow, Sora, Virginia Rail, Clapper Rail, and American Bittern. Since 1964, at least four Yellow Rails have been discovered among the dense grasses here; all of the sightings occurred between October 13 and October 26. Other autumn highlights include Black-crowned Night-Herons, good numbers of Great Blue Herons, and Eastern Meadowlarks.

Raptors frequent Fort Hill year-round. Northern Harriers tilt over the grasses, Red-tailed Hawks soar overhead, and American Kestrels hover in the wind. Migrants (Sharp-shinned, Cooper's, and Broad-winged Hawks, Merlins, and Peregrine Falcons) may also be seen in spring and fall. Once I saw a Northern Goshawk fly in with a Red-breasted Merganser in its talons! This is probably one of the most reliable places for Bobolinks on Cape Cod. They are most often seen during the spring, and may occasionally breed on the slopes of the hill. In winter the thickets provide ideal perches for Northern Shrikes and lingering songbirds. Fort Hill has also had its share of recent rarities: Northern Wheatear (September 15-18, 1992 and September 16-21, 1995), Scissor-tailed Flycatcher (October 24-29, 1993), and Sedge Wren (November 26-29, 1994).

Just north of Fort Hill, Hemenway Landing is often worth a stop. To reach it, follow Route 6 East for about a half-mile past the Fort Hill Area and turn right onto Hemenway Road. This site used to be known for its "heron show" — large numbers of wading birds flying overhead at dusk. Unfortunately, the "show" no longer exists, but smaller numbers of egrets and herons can still be found. Scan the salt marsh grasses for Snowy and Great Egrets, Black-crowned Night-Herons, Great Blue Herons, and Green Herons. Shorebirds and terns may also be visible. If you are here after sunset, listen for the deep hoots of a Great Horned Owl.

Town Cove, Orleans

Town Cove divides the towns of Eastham and Orleans. It may be accessed from several locations. On the west side, park in the dirt lot behind the Goose Hummock Shop. From the Orleans rotary, follow Route 6A West toward Orleans and turn left at the first set of lights. During the summer, scan for terns and Laughing Gulls hovering above the water or perching on boats or mooring balls. Winter waterfowl may include American Black Ducks, Buffleheads,

Common Goldeneyes, and Red-breasted Mergansers. One particularly strong northeast storm blew storm-petrels into Town Cove!

To explore the southern end of Town Cove, follow Route 6A West into Orleans, and turn left onto Route 28 North toward Chatham. (Yes, the sign does read north toward Chatham. To avoid confusion when using Route 28, pay more attention to the towns than to the compass directions). After 0.3 mile, turn left on Cove Road and follow it to the Orleans Yacht Club. This site is best known for its occasional wintering Common Snipe and Killdeer. To look for either one, walk slowly through the salt marsh along the northern edge of the Cove; they often flush before you can get a good look at them, so listen for their distinctive calls. While you're there, scan the marsh behind the Yacht Club, check the surrounding thickets for sparrows, and examine the trees for perched raptors.

Along the eastern shore, try Asa's Landing. Follow the directions to Cove Road, then continue along Route 28 for another 0.2 mile and turn left at the lights onto Main Street. At the next set of lights turn left onto Tonset Road. Follow Tonset Road for one mile to Gibson Road. Turn left and start looking for Asa's Landing on the left (about 0.4 mile). This is one of the only publicly accessible points along the eastern edge of Town Cove. During the summer and fall, Greater Yellowlegs and American Oystercatchers feed among the exposed mussel beds. Looking east you will see the western tip of Hopkins Island, a favorite hangout of the "Great White" Heron that appeared during the summer and fall of 1996.

Southern Perspectives, Orleans

Follow the directions toward Asa's Landing, but instead of turning left on Gibson Road, follow Tonset Road to the end (about 2.5 miles). Common Eiders gather here in the winter to feed on blue mussels. On quiet days you can hear them calling and watch their courtship displays. Eelgrass beds attract flocks of Brant in winter and spring. Throughout the year, shorebirds may be visible on the sandbars: look for Black-bellied Plovers, Semipalmated Plovers, Red Knots, Short-billed Dowitchers, Dunlin, and Greater Yellowlegs.

To reach Snow Shore Landing, follow the directions to Tonset Landing, but turn right off Tonset Road onto Brick Hill Road after 1.7 miles. Keep left, and at the top of a small rise, turn left onto Champlain Road. Keep left again, and after a strong bend to the right, turn left onto Snow Shore Road and follow it to a small dirt parking lot at the water's edge. At low tides in the late spring and summer, shorebirds (for example, American Oystercatchers and Black-bellied Plovers) feed on the exposed mussel beds and sand flats in front of the landing.

To reach Priscilla's Landing, follow Route 6A West into Orleans and turn left onto Route 28 North toward Chatham. After 0.5 mile turn left at the lights onto Main Street. Continue through the next set of lights, and then bear left at a fork with a small blue-and-white sign pointing to Nauset Beach. Just before you

get to the beach, turn left onto Nauset Heights Road. Drive 0.8 mile and turn left on Standish Road. Bend to the left on Iyanough Road, and then turn right on Priscilla Road. Follow it to a small parking area overlooking Nauset Harbor. From May through August, watch for terns, Laughing Gulls, and Black Skimmers searching for small fish. This is another great spot to look for rafting eiders during the winter months.

Thicket-birding in East Orleans can be very productive during the winter season. During Cape Cod Christmas Bird Counts, highlights from this area often include Eastern Towhee, Gray Catbird, Hermit Thrush, Winter Wren, Yellow-breasted Chat, Fox Sparrow, Brown Thrasher, and Ruby-crowned Kinglet. Harvey's Lane offers one of the more consistently productive thickets. To find Harvey's Lane, follow Main Street until the road forks left toward Nauset Beach. Bear right onto Pochet Road and then right again onto Barley Neck Road. Harvey's Lane is the third road on the left. (Please note: Harvey's Lane is not shown on the accompanying map.)

Nauset Beach, Orleans

From the Orleans rotary, follow Route 6A West into Orleans and turn left onto Route 28 North toward Chatham. After 0.5 mile, turn left at the lights onto Main Street. Continue straight through the next set of lights. Pass Fancy's Farm Stand (a great stop for fruits and vegetables, soups, and sandwiches), and stay left at the fork, following small blue-and-white signs for Nauset Beach. Park in the lot and walk east to the beach. Scanning the ocean during the fall, winter, and spring can be very productive. Look for Common and Red-throated Loons, Horned and Red-necked Grebes, Black-legged Kittiwakes, and Northern Gannets. At low tide, a few rocks are exposed to the north of the parking lot. In winter, scan the rafts of waterfowl for all three species of scoters, Oldsquaw, Common Eiders, and occasionally a King Eider or Harlequin Duck. Walking farther north to Nauset Inlet (about one mile) may bring sightings of Snow Buntings, Horned Larks, and, if you're lucky, a Snowy Owl. In summer Nauset Beach can be crowded, and large areas are roped off for nesting Piping Plovers and terns. However, if you can't explore the marsh by boat (see below), this is your best chance to see the birds associated with New Island.

Nauset Marsh by Boat

One of the best ways to experience Nauset Marsh is from a boat, be it a canoe, kayak, or motorized vessel. Only experienced paddlers should try these waters. If you're going to explore the area on your own, bring a map, be aware of tides, expect strong currents, and steer clear of Nauset Inlet. Ask a friend to join you and call the local harbormaster (Eastham: 508-240-5972; Orleans: 508-240-3755) to inquire about any recent conditions that paddlers should be aware of.

The Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary (508-349-2615) has been leading boat trips in the area for over twelve years. Trips run from May through early October. Experienced guides are aware of current bird sightings and work with Captain Dave Bessom, who adds local color with personal stories of growing up in Orleans. Trips visit different areas, depending upon the tides. A basic outing will include the following: (1) a stop at the northern end of the marsh to check on the nesting Osprey and to look for birds feeding or resting on the peat banks such as Red Knots, Ruddy Turnstones, and Semipalmated Plovers; (2) a cruise along the southern end of Coast Guard Beach, which often allows close-up views of four species of terns (Common, Least, Roseate, and Arctic), Black Skimmers, and Piping Plovers (Black Terns and Parasitic Jaegers may be seen in August and September); (3) a walk through the marsh and across the flats of New Island. Shorebirds can be abundant here from late July through September. Look for Willet, Whimbrel, Black-bellied Plover, Semipalmated Plover, American Oystercatcher, Greater Yellowlegs, Ruddy Turnstone, Red Knot, Sanderling, Semipalmated and Least Sandpipers, and Short-billed Dowitcher. Godwits (most often Marbled) and phalaropes (most often Wilson's) also appear on occasion. Especially noteworthy sightings during the last five years include a Sabine's Gull (July 1, 1993), Sooty Tern (dead, July 16, 1996), and Wilson's Plover (June 28, 1997). Rarities aside, New Island provides an ideal setting to study a variety of gulls, terns, and shorebirds. (It is also possible for small groups to arrange private charters with Dave; call 508-255-8262.)

In summary, Nauset Marsh offers exciting birding year-round. Whether you're interested in wading through the salt marsh in search of rails, walking the winter beach with hopes of spotting a Snowy Owl, scanning the flats for shorebirds, or cruising by the tern colonies and watching for a Parasitic Jaeger, Nauset Marsh is a fantastic place to spend some quality birding time.

Please note: For information about accommodations and restaurants near Nauset Marsh, contact the Eastham Chamber of Commerce (508-255-3444) or the Orleans Chamber of Commerce (508-240-2484). In Eastham you might try spending the night at the Overlook Inn (508-255-1886) or the Captain's Quarters (508-255-5686) and eating at the Eastham Lobster Pool (508-255-9706). In Orleans, call ahead to reserve rooms in the Nauset House Inn (508-255-2195) or the Nauset Knoll Motor Lodge (508-255-2364) and try the chowder at the Land Ho! (508-255-5165).

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