

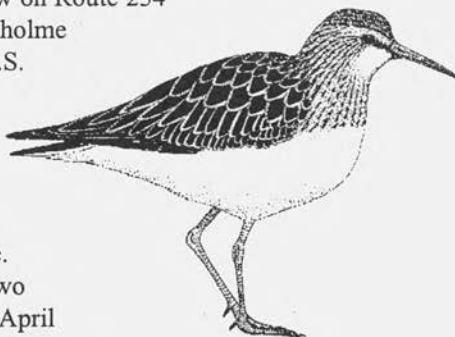
# Birding Barn Island Wildlife Management Area, Stonington, Connecticut

*Bob Dewire*

The State of Connecticut's Barn Island State Wildlife Management Area in Stonington is one of the better birding sites to visit in southeastern Connecticut. This area of close to 800 acres is a mix of freshwater and saltwater impoundments (mostly salt), with extensive salt marshes and channels that overlook Little Narragansett Bay. Between the impoundments are stands of upland oak forest with thicket edges. To the north of the impoundment system is an extensive area of woodland, both upland and red maple swamp. The mix of habitats provides a lot of opportunity for exploration.

To reach Barn Island, take Exit 91 off Interstate 95. If you are traveling southbound, turn left at the end of the exit ramp and then left at the traffic light. If you are traveling northbound, go straight through the traffic light intersection at the end of the ramp. In both cases you are now on Route 234 (Pequot Trail). Take your third right (Farmholme Road). Go two miles to where it ends at U.S. Route 1. Turn right, and there is immediately a traffic light. At the light turn left on Greenhaven Road. Only 500 feet down the road take a right on Palmer Neck Road; there is usually a sign for the Barn Island State Boat Launch here. Less than a mile from here you will pass two large fields on the right. If you are here in April or early May and it has been a wet spring, there are usually flooded areas in these fields, and they are worth a check. In recent years, several rarities including White-faced Ibis, White-fronted Goose, and American Avocet have shown up here. In addition, such birds as Blue-winged Teal, Pectoral Sandpiper, Common Snipe, and Cattle Egret are often found here. In April 2001 a flock of 57 Glossy Ibis was present. Continue to the end of the road, where you will arrive at the boat launch.

From here you can look out over Little Narragansett Bay. If it is a busy boating day, there won't be much to see. Look along the edges of the marsh for such species as Willet and American Oystercatcher. Brant will remain to the end of May, and Red-breasted Mergansers are often found all summer. Least and Common terns feed along here from spring to late summer and are occasionally joined by a Forster's Tern in late summer. Black Skimmers have been recorded a number of times. In September 1966 the parking lot hosted a Northern Wheatear for two days.



Once you have finished looking here, drive back up the road, and park on either side at the small parking areas where barricaded dirt roads go off in both directions. The main one to walk is the dirt road to the east, or on your right as you drive back up the road from the boat launch. At the parking area itself there is usually a White-eyed Vireo singing from late April into July. Also present here are Carolina Wren, Blue-winged Warbler, and American Redstart. The walk will take you down to the marshes of the first impoundment. The woodlands here and between the other impoundments are very good for migrant songbirds both in spring (mid-May is best) and in late summer (late August through September).

The first impoundment is an extensive area of salt grass on the right and a mix of salt grass and mud flat on the left. A sizable channel runs through the whole system. At low tide there is quite a bit of mud in the channel itself. There are usually plenty of waders here including both egrets and Glossy Ibis. In spring Barn Island almost always has one or two Tricolored Herons. They may be anywhere in the marsh system, but are often seen here. Little Blue Herons are also regular here. Shorebirds in spring include both yellowlegs, Least, Semipalmated, and Pectoral sandpipers, and Willets. In May 2001 a breeding-plumaged Ruff spent several days here feeding with the other shorebirds. On the inside of the impoundment along the edge of the channel there are nesting Seaside Sparrows. At least one singing male is usually perched in view in the salt marsh elder well into the summer. Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrows are also present, but more common in the marshes on the right side of the impoundment. Common and Least terns both use the channel for feeding, and Spotted Sandpipers are summer residents here.



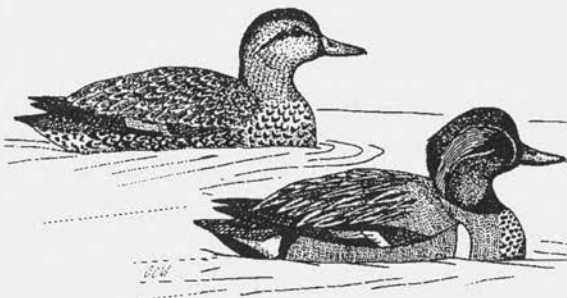
You then enter a wooded area and follow the trail bearing to the right where there is a split. The woodlands here have breeding Great Crested Flycatchers, Baltimore Orioles, and Eastern Towhees. This trail will take you down to the second impoundment, a much smaller area of marsh grass that is usually the least productive of the impoundments. The small channel that passes under the impoundment often has a Green Heron that will flush as you pass by. Continue across, and go through a larger woodland where migrant warblers are often found, and breeding Wood Thrushes, Veerys, Yellow Warblers, and Common Yellowthroats are present.

You will now come out to the large third impoundment. On the right is a wide channel with a lot of exposed mud at low tide. Tidal pools and patches of mud flat are scattered throughout the area on both sides. Shorebirds found here in migration include Least, Semipalmated, Pectoral, and White-rumped sandpipers, Short-billed Dowitcher, both yellowlegs, and Willet. The latter breed in the marshes here and are present from April through August. For rarities, King Rail, Curlew Sandpiper, and Wilson's Phalarope have been recorded here. In April 1986 a male Boat-tailed Grackle spent several days calling from the edge of the patch of woodlands at the

bend in the impoundment, and in 1993 a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher was at the same location. An Osprey pole with Ospreys present from April through August is on the right. The marshes in the vicinity of the Osprey pole have large numbers of shorebirds in the spring that use the area as a resting site during high tide. Flocks of Black-bellied Plovers (and an occasional American Golden), Ruddy Turnstones, Semipalmated Plovers, Red Knots, Short-billed Dowitchers, and Dunlins are usually present. American Avocets have been recorded in these marshes more than one spring.

The walk now bends 90 degrees around the third impoundment with marsh on both sides all the way. In late summer and early fall, large numbers of swallows are present; often some Cliff Swallows are there along with the more common species. You will now enter another woodland; follow the trail until you come to a right turn. Take this trail to walk along the fourth impoundment. The inside of this impoundment has large stands of phragmites when you first start into it, as well as small patches of cattails. Marsh Wrens and Swamp Sparrows are found here, and in the past few years Clapper Rails have possibly nested in this area. Both Soras and Virginia Rails have been recorded here in late summer and fall.

The right side of the impoundment continues to be an extensive salt marsh. Both Seaside and Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed sparrows are often seen sitting in view along this stretch. In the fall this is a good area for American Bitterns. A Sandhill Crane was here in spring 1992. As you walk down this long impoundment, the area on the left becomes more grassy and shrubby. Here you can find



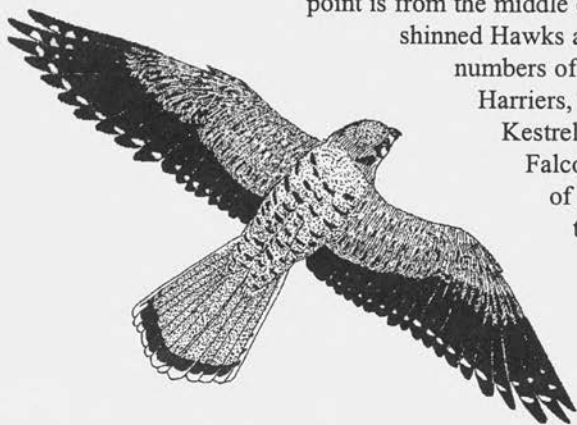
breeding Willow Flycatchers. Where the shrubs also begin to appear on the right side of the road, there have been nesting Purple Finches for several years—an unlikely-looking location. Also in this area are breeding Orchard Orioles.

There is one last open area of water on the left side of the road. Ducks usually congregate here, and in early spring include Blue-winged and Green-winged teal and Gadwall. Wood Ducks are uncommon but regular here. This area will have a large mud flat at low tide, and shorebirds can be numerous in August and September. White-rumped, Baird's, and Western sandpipers, and Wilson's Phalaropes have all been recorded here in the fall. The area is best viewed in the afternoon since the angle of the sun in the morning is bad. Three White Ibis spent several days here in 1970. A colony of Fish Crows nests on the island south of this area of the marsh (the "real" Barn Island) and they are often seen or heard between April and October.

From here the trail again enters the woods. Just before the woodland there is one last patch of salt marsh to look at on the right. Another Osprey pole is located here. You will now walk another quarter-mile through an area of woods and thickets before reaching a paved road. A short way up the road you can take a trail to the left that will loop around behind the fourth impoundment through the Stewart Farm, an area of second-growth fields, red maple swamp, and upland oak forest. This trail will come out at the junction between the third and fourth impoundments, although you can't see the impoundments from it. You have the option of doing this, or returning along the fourth impoundment the way you came. Total walking distance if you loop around the fourth impoundment is about 4.5 miles. If you return the way you came over the fourth impoundment without going past it, it is about 3 miles.

Walking behind the fourth impoundment increases the land-bird list considerably with such species as Wild Turkey, Black-billed Cuckoo, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Black and White, Blue-winged, Chestnut-sided, and Hooded warblers, Ovenbird, Scarlet Tanager, and numerous other summer residents, plus the always unknown migrant possibilities. The state releases Ring-necked Pheasants annually, and a few survivors are occasionally found. On late-spring and early-summer evenings, Whip-poor-wills will be calling, and Great Horned is the commonly found owl. American Woodcocks conduct their mating flights from the fourth impoundment.

There is a reasonably good flight of hawks in the fall on those days when the wind is from the north or northwest. The best vantage point is from the middle of the first impoundment. Sharp-shinned Hawks are most common, but good numbers of Cooper's Hawks, Northern Harriers, Ospreys, Merlins, and American Kestrels are present, and Peregrine Falcons are regularly sighted. Flocks of Snow Geese often pass over on these north-wind days, especially in early October.




Shorebird migration in fall is not exceptional because there are not large areas of open mud in the grassy marshes, except for the fourth

impoundment. Whimbrels are fairly reliable in August, especially along the sandy beach that can be viewed from the wildlife platform at the boat-launch parking lot. Marbled Godwits have occurred in the same area in August and September. Small mixed flocks of songbirds in the woodlands produce a good variety of warblers. Golden-winged is found most years in the late-August/early-September time frame.

From the parking areas where the trails begin, you can take a short trail on the west side of the road that leads to the mouth of Wequetequock Cove. Here a salt marsh stretches north, and you can walk along the edge of this marsh. This is a good

area for Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrows and nesting Willets. Egrets and herons, including Tricolored Heron, can be found here. The cove itself often has lingering waterfowl with May and early-June sightings of such species as Brant, Bufflehead, Surf Scoter, and Long-tailed Duck. During spring and fall migration, some shorebirds will be along the small strip of sandy beach, including Semipalmated Plover, both yellowlegs, and Semipalmated and Least sandpipers. The rocks to the south of the marsh may have American Oystercatchers and Spotted Sandpipers.

Some comments on Barn Island. This is a State of Connecticut hunting area, and from mid-October to mid-February it is very popular, even on weekdays, with hunters. No hunting is allowed on Sundays, so the area can be safely visited then. I have found that once the impoundments (and many years even Little Narragansett Bay) freeze, there is not much to be found until about mid-April, though in good flight years winter raptors such as Rough-legged Hawk and Short-eared Owl are recorded here sporadically. In mid-summer the combination of mosquitos, deer flies, and greenheads requires a lot of insect repellent. There are ticks, especially along the more grassy fourth impoundment.

Historically, much of the inside of the Barn Island impoundments was cattail marshes. In the 1960s and early 1970s such species as Least Bittern, King Rail, and Common Moorhen were regular nesters. Over time, phragmites came to dominate the area, and these birds disappeared. Then the state put larger pipes under the impoundments to increase the tidal flow. Now the phragmites have died back considerably, leaving the area in salt-marsh grasses. At the north end of the first impoundment, which is fed by fresh water, a substantial stand of cattail marsh still remains. Access to this area is by canoe or kayak, paddling up the main channel. One can put in at the boat launch and go up the first channel to the left of the launch. It is an easy portage over the walking road and then a wonderful paddle that winds its way far up the marsh and eventually to the cattail area. The ride is usually very birdy, especially early in the morning, with waders, shorebirds, and marsh sparrows all along the way. Late May and June would be the ideal time to attempt this and possibly locate one of those historical cattail nesters. 

*Bob Dewire has lived most of his life in southeastern Connecticut and has been birding there since 1958. He first visited Barn Island in 1960, finding his life Least Bittern on that trip. He has been compiler of the New London Christmas Bird Count since 1963 and is an active bird bander. Currently he lives less than a mile from Barn Island, one of his favorite birding sites.*

