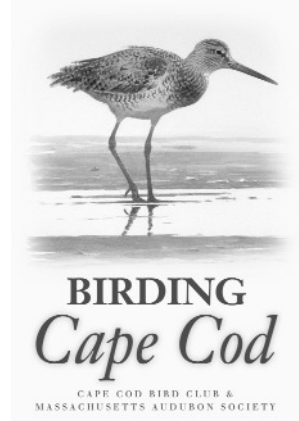
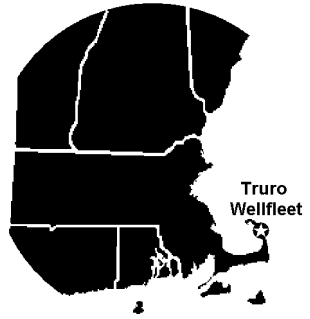


Birding Cape Cod: Wellfleet and Truro

***Editor's Note:** Cape Cod has something interesting to offer birders at every season of the year, and in recognition of this fact Bird Observer is pleased to reprint two chapters from the recently published Birding Cape Cod. This guide, which is a culmination of years of painstaking dedication to detail and unparalleled passion for the subject by a team of the area's best birders, is a new edition of the one originally researched and written in the late 1980s. It is produced by a partnership of the Massachusetts Audubon Society and The Cape Cod Bird Club. The volume includes breakdowns of the Cape into regions, towns, and favorite birding areas, along with a section on pelagic birding. Also featured are detailed maps by Janet Heywood and illustrations by Barry Van Dusen. It is copyrighted and reprinted with the permission of the publisher. Copies of the book can be obtained from the publisher at <<http://www.oncapepublications.com>> or at many local outlets, including Mass Audubon and the Cape Cod Natural History Museum. Page numbers cited for maps refer to the book, not this reprint.*

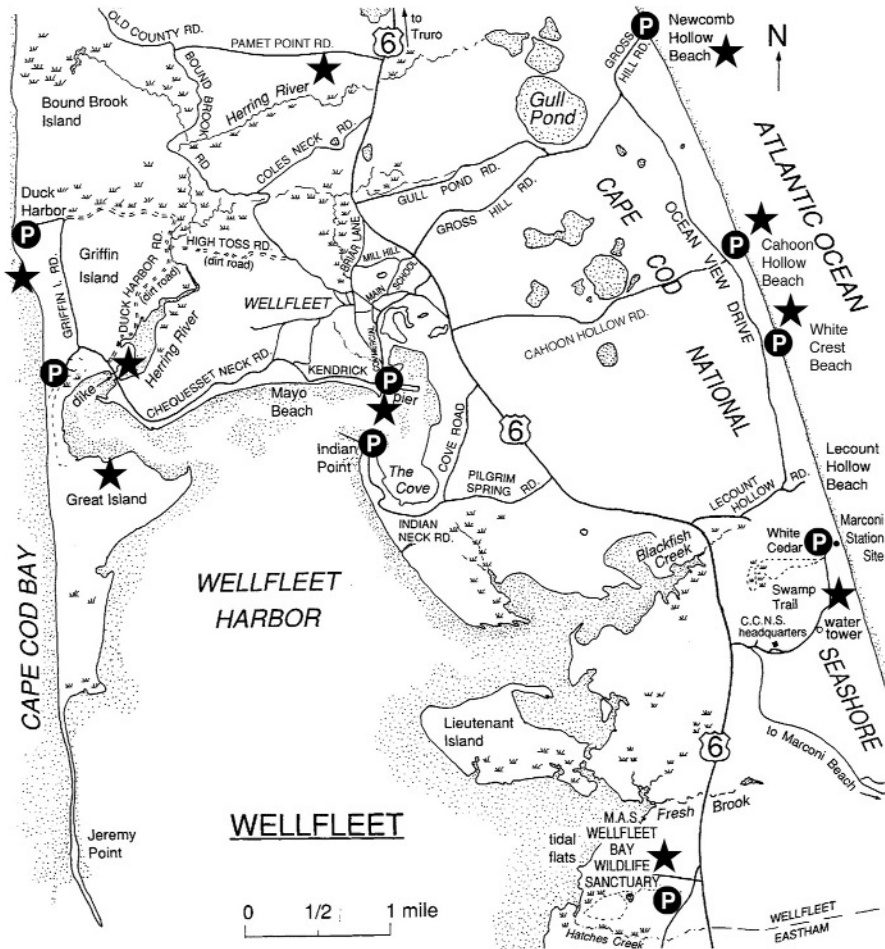


Birding Cape Cod. 2005. Massachusetts Audubon Society and The Cape Cod Bird Club. Yarmouth Port MA: On Cape Publications. 184 pages, paperback. ISBN: 0-9758502-2-9.

WELLFLEET

Wellfleet is dominated by its harbor and associated salt marshes and tidal flats. The uplands are a mix of pitch pine and oak woods and open bearberry heath. Freshwater kettle ponds cover an extensive area, as do the Herring River Valley and its associated freshwater wetlands and floodplain. Much of the town lies within the protected boundaries of the Cape Cod National Seashore. Wellfleet has something to offer the birder year-round, with several “must-visit” areas. Mass Audubon’s Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary (map page 114) is the first stop as you enter Wellfleet from the south on Route 6. This 1,100-acre sanctuary is a microcosm of the Cape in the variety of habitats that are found there. The pitch pine-oak woods, open fields, heathlands, freshwater ponds, salt marshes, tidal flats, and beaches offer a wide range of birding opportunities. All seasons can be productive. There is an entry fee for non-members.

In the spring, the best birding is along the Silver Spring Trail, which skirts a freshwater pond created by the damming of Silver Spring Brook. This is one of the



better warbler spots on the Cape—as many as 25 species have been seen in one day, though such a total is now very unlikely—and several of the rarer southern species have been seen here with some regularity. In addition, a number of other passerines including flycatchers, thrushes, vireos, tanagers, orioles, and sparrows may be found in the trees and thickets surrounding the pond. Wood Ducks are occasionally present on the pond.

Summer and fall, and spring to a lesser degree, are the best times to see shorebirds at the sanctuary. By following the Goose Pond Trail, you will reach Goose Pond, several salt marsh tide pools beyond, and eventually the beach, all good areas for shorebirds and herons. Patient perusal of the edges of the Goose Pond may produce a Virginia Rail or Sora during the fall. The best time to bird the tidal flats, which are reached by following the Goose Pond Trail past Try Island and taking the boardwalk across the marsh, is on an incoming tide, one to three hours after low tide. At that time the birds are close to the marsh and beach rather than spread out over the

extensive flats. In the late summer and fall, in addition to the numerous shorebirds, Common, Roseate, Least, Forster's, and Black terns often are present on the flats. Of special interest are the Whimbrels, which frequent the marsh to feed on fiddler crabs during July and August. During the day, a dozen or more birds can be seen, but as evening approaches their numbers swell as birds from elsewhere gather before departing for roosting areas to the south; counts as high as 200 have been recorded at this time.

In addition to the trails, the Esther Underwood Johnson Nature Center offers an excellent bird feeding station, informative exhibits about local wildlife, and a gift/book shop. Numerous natural history programs for adults, families, and children are offered year-round. These programs include guided bird walks, birding tours, boat trips, and field classes. Contact the Sanctuary for schedules and details (P.O. Box 236, South Wellfleet, MA 02663; telephone: 508-349-2615; email: wellfleet@massaudubon.org; web site: www.wellfleetbay.org).

The Marconi Station (map page 114) area of the Cape Cod National Seashore is located just north of the Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary on the east side of Route 6. The road into the site goes through a sparsely vegetated area where Horned Larks nest. This is one of the last areas on the Cape where Vesper Sparrows still breed; look for them around the headquarters building and along the road out toward the water tower. During the fall migration, a variety of sparrows can generally be found here, often including rarer species such as Lark, Clay-colored, or Grasshopper sparrows. It is also a good area to look for wintering Eastern Bluebirds. The observation deck at the Marconi Station is one of the better hawk-watching sites on the Cape, both in spring and fall, and the ocean overlook provides a great vantage to scope for seabirds. The White Cedar Swamp Trail typically has few birds during the day, but at night the intrepid birder may be rewarded with a calling Northern Saw-whet Owl or Eastern Screech-Owl, both of which have nested here. Whip-poor-wills are also resident during the summer, and in recent years Chuck-will's-widows have become regular and may be nesting; both species can often be heard at dusk from mid-May through July. LeCount Hollow Beach, White Crest Beach, Cahoon Hollow Beach, and Newcomb Hollow Beach (map page 114) all provide good views of the ocean and the possibility of finding gannets, sea ducks, gulls, terns, and occasionally pelagics.



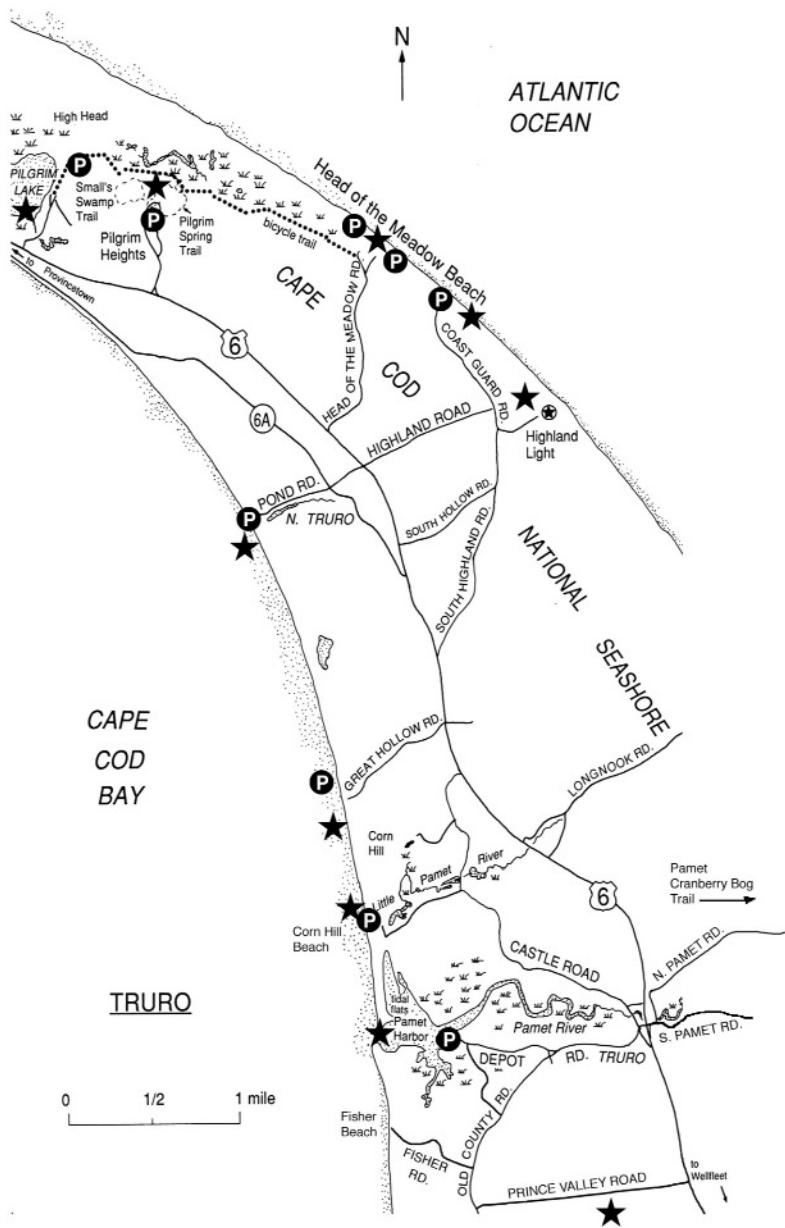
SNOW BUNTING BY BARRY VAN DUSEN

Wellfleet Harbor (map page 114), accessible from the town pier off Commercial Street, offers fine birding from late October into early January. During this time the birder is likely to see Red-throated and Common loons, Horned Grebes, Brant, eiders, Oldsquaws, and scoters. Laughing Gulls, Bonaparte's Gulls, and lingering terns are typically present during this season as well, and Common Black-headed Gulls have turned up with some regularity. Alcids also may be seen, particularly after storms; check around the pier for Dovekies, Razorbills, or murrens. Another good spot for checking Wellfleet Harbor is from Indian Point at the end of Indian Neck Road. The open area at the end of the road is a good place to look for Horned Larks, Snow Buntings, and sparrows, and a few shorebirds and gulls often roost on the breakwater at high tide.

The Chequessett Neck Road Dike (map page 114) is a good spot to check in any season. The Herring River flows under the dike and is often one of the few areas of open water in winter when everything else has frozen. At low tide, in season, a few shorebirds, herons, and gulls feed in the shallow water. Laughing Gulls, Bonaparte's Gulls, and terns are often present during the fall. At high tide in the spring and fall, ducks, predominantly Black Ducks and Mallards, come into this area to feed, giving the birder a good close look. In recent years, especially in the fall, as many as three or four Ospreys have been seen, just after the tide turns, feeding on menhaden and white perch. Duck Harbor Road, the dirt road running north along the west side of the river, and High Toss Road, which branches off to the right, can be good places to find migrant passerines and hawks. The junction of the two roads, where High Toss Road crosses the river, is one of the most productive spots. Virginia Rail and Sora are possible here during migration. The open areas can be good for Northern Shrike in flight years. Duck Harbor Road is closed to vehicle traffic, but it is possible to park at the south end of Duck Harbor Road or the east end of High Toss Road and walk in.

Great Island (map page 114) offers good birding potential for the ambitious birder willing to do some hiking. A well-marked trail runs south from the parking lot near the end of Chequessett Neck Road, providing access to the island, as well as Wellfleet Harbor to the east and Cape Cod Bay to the west. The rigorous hike is likely to produce a good variety and number of waterfowl during the colder months, shorebirds and terns from late spring through early fall, a variety of gulls year-round, migrant and wintering raptors, and a few songbird migrants in the pine woodlands in the fall. Duck Harbor (map page 114), the beach at the end of Griffin Island Road, is a good winter birding spot. Rednecked Grebes, eiders, scoters, goldeneyes, and Redbreasted Mergansers are likely here.

Pamet Point Road (map page 114), which runs west from Route 6, lies entirely within the bounds of the Cape Cod National Seashore and traverses some relatively undisturbed pine-oak woodland. A walk along the road in May or June will yield a good variety of nesting songbirds, including Eastern Wood-Pewee, Great Crested Flycatcher, White-breasted and Red-breasted nuthatches, Red-eyed Vireo, Brown Creeper, Hermit Thrush, Pine and Black-and-white warblers, Ovenbird, Scarlet Tanager, Eastern Towhee, and Baltimore Oriole. May also offers a good chance for



migrant vireos, warblers, and others, particularly along the western portions where the largest oaks line the road. Park anywhere along the road where there is adequate room to pull off.

TRURO

Truro, the smallest town on Cape Cod, is characterized by pitch pine woods and rolling bearberry moors, intersected by old outwash valleys such as the Pamet River Valley and Longnook Valley. The town, which has avoided most of the commercial development so evident elsewhere on the Cape, provides several locations to view the ocean and Cape Cod Bay, a good selection of pine-barrens breeding species, and some good sites for viewing migrating hawks and other migrants. A large portion of the town has been protected within the Cape Cod National Seashore.

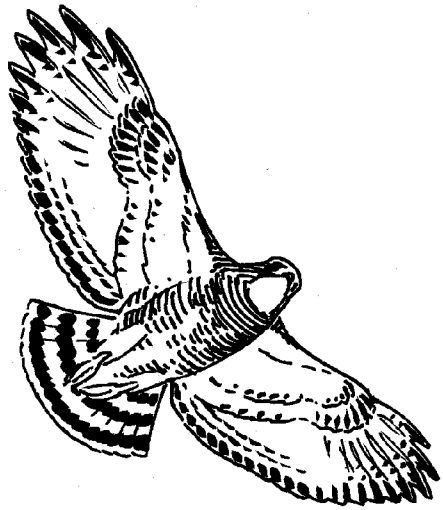
Prince Valley Road (map page 120) runs west from Route 6 through relatively undisturbed pine-oak woodland (much of it within the bounds of the National Seashore land) providing good access to breeding species such as Whip-poor-will, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Great Crested Flycatcher, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Brown Creeper, Hermit Thrush, Pine Warbler, Ovenbird, and Eastern Towhee. During May, pockets of migrant warblers are possible, particularly where oaks predominate. There are several places where you can pull off on the side of the road, park, then bird by foot along the roadside.

Pamet Harbor (map page 120) has sanded in rather badly in recent years and has deteriorated as a birding spot but is still worth a quick look if you're in the neighborhood. A few shorebirds and terns utilize the sandy flats during the warmer months while a few ducks and gulls are usually present during the colder months. The flats on nearby Mill Pond Road, when exposed, often host a few shorebirds in the fall, occasionally including an American Golden-Plover or Pectoral Sandpiper; the flats can be checked from the shoulder of Mill Pond Road. The Pamet Cranberry Bog Trail (map page 120), a Cape Cod National Seashore trail at the end of North Pamet Road, leads to a small cranberry bog and traverses some prime heathland habitat. A small dirt parking lot on the south side of the road, adjacent to the Truro NEED Center (National Environmental Education Development Collaborative) housed in an old Coast Guard building, provides access to the trail on the north side of the road. The more wooded portions of the trail leading down to the bog can harbor a few migrant songbirds in season, while the highest sections traverse extensive bearberry barrens, where expansive panoramas can be great for viewing migrating raptors.

The Cape Cod Bay (map page 120) shoreline of Truro is likely to yield many sea ducks during migration and winter. At times, thousands of Red-breasted Mergansers have amassed here, and Northern Gannets can occur in impressive concentrations during spring and fall movements. Pelagics are possible as well, especially after northeasterly storms. Access points for viewing the bay include Ryder Beach at the end of Ryder Beach Road, Fisher Beach at the end of Fisher Road, Corn Hill Beach off Corn Hill Road (the dunes south of the parking lot are good for Northern Harrier, Horned Lark, Lapland Longspur, and Snow Bunting in season), Great Hollow Beach at the end of Great Hollow Road, and the parking lot at the end of Pond Road in North Truro. Ballston Beach at the end of South Pamet Road, Longnook Beach at the end of Longnook Road, and Coast Guard Beach (not to be confused with the same named beach in Eastham) at the end of Coast Guard Road (map page 120) are good

locations to check the ocean for migrant and wintering sea ducks and the occasional pelagic species.

Highland Light (map page 120) is a good hawkwatching site, particularly in the spring. Park in the small parking area in front of the lighthouse and watch for hawks approaching from the south. Head of the Meadow Beach (map page 120) has been the most productive of the ocean-side beaches in Truro, affording a good chance for loons, gannets, sea ducks, gulls, alcids (primarily Razorbills), and occasionally shearwaters, storm-petrels, and jaegers in season. The bicycle trail at the north end of the parking lot runs north between the marsh and pine barrens, ending at Pilgrim Lake. It can be well worth exploring, particularly during migration, for land birds, hawks, and marsh birds, and affords a pleasant walk in any season. There are two parking lots: the southern provides the best view of the water but is town owned and requires a resident parking sticker in the summer; the northern lot is part of the National Seashore and is accessible in any season, though a fee is charged during the summer. Seasonal restrooms are available. The Pilgrim Heights (map page 120) area is the Cape's premier spring hawk-watching site. The Cape narrows to its thinnest width here, funneling most of the raptors into easy viewing range. The Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary has sponsored a systematic hawk watch here, documenting the passage of hundreds of raptors annually from late March through early June. In addition to raptors, many other diurnal migrants pass through the area, and, when the winds are favorable (i.e., out of the westerly quadrant), loons, swallows, blackbirds, and others can be expected. The patches of pines and oaks in the area, as well as Small Swamp itself, can harbor warblers, vireos, kinglets, thrushes, and other migrants from early April through early June.



BROAD-WINGED HAWK BY BARRY VAN DUSEN

Hawk-watching is best from the overlooks on the Small Swamp Trail, particularly the second, which is where the organized watch is conducted. If you bear right at the first fork in the trail, you will come to the first of two overlooks; continue down the trail a short distance and you will arrive at the second. The hawks appear out over the dunes, frequently right below the lookout, or they approach from over the woods to the southeast. They are often seen going both north, "outbound," as well as south on their return after reaching land's end in Provincetown. Most common are Turkey Vultures, Sharp-shinned Hawks, Broad-winged Hawks, and American Kestrels, with smaller numbers of Ospreys, Red-tailed Hawks, Merlins, and Northern Harriers. A Peregrine Falcon or Bald Eagle will occasionally spice up the day, and the site has

proven to be by far the most reliable spot in all of New England for southern vagrants such as Mississippi Kite (now nearly annual) and Swallow-tailed Kite. Northern Harriers nest in the dunes nearby, and in the early spring the males can be seen performing their remarkable courtship flights. Unlike hawk watching at inland sites, the birds at Pilgrim Heights are seldom just dots in the sky but often pass at fairly close range, sometimes strikingly close—photographers bring your camera! Scoping the ocean may provide distant views of migrating Northern Gannets or the spouts of whales.

The bicycle trail that winds along the edge of the marsh below the bluff can be a good place to look for warblers and other passerines. Follow the Pilgrim Spring Trail (east from the kiosk) until you come to the paved bicycle trail, which you can take in either direction. Be mindful of bikers; they have the right of way. On a good migration day, the thickets of shadbush, blueberry, and winterberry along the edges of the trail can be productive for migrant songbirds. Maps of the area are available at the trailhead and at the Cape Cod National Seashore visitor centers in Eastham, South Wellfleet, and Provincetown. Restrooms (closed in winter) are located off the second parking lot.

Pilgrim Lake (map pages 120, 126) is gradually sanding in and, though historically a good birding location, hosts few birds these days. You can easily and quickly check it, however, by carefully pulling off Route 6 onto the sandy shoulder. During winter, the flocks of roosting gulls will often include one or more Iceland Gulls and, more rarely, a Lesser Black-backed Gull or Glaucous Gull. Ducks, aside from the ubiquitous Black Duck, are usually few, but Common Mergansers can be numerous in the winter, and a few scaup may be present as well. Attempts are currently underway to increase the tidal flow into the lake; time will tell how this will impact the lake's avifauna. 🦆



LESSER BLACK-BACKED AND HERRING GULLS BY DAVID LARSON