



## WHERE TO GO ON NANTUCKET

by Richard R. Veit, Hull

Nantucket is an island of roughly 32 square miles, situated 20 miles to the south of Cape Cod. It, along with Long Island, Block Island, the Vineyard and the Cape represent the southernmost extent of the most recent Ice Age. Characteristic of this region, known as the glacial moraine, Nantucket's soil is predominately sandy. Consequently, the island vegetation, forced to compete in a rugged environment of acid soil, high winds and continuous salt spray, has become quite specialized. The southern third of the island is virtually entirely open moorland interspersed with ample patches of bayberry, blackberry and beachplum. The northern portions of the island are thickly wooded, both with scrub oak and Pitch/Japanese Black Pine forests. The outermost extremities of the island, such as Great Point, Coatue Beach and Eel point are entirely open sand dunes with sparse growths of *Rosa rugosa* and, on Great Point, an isolated patch of cedars. There are a number of fresh and brackish ponds, some of which contain cattail marshes in their northern extremities, which are protected from the sea.

Due to the nature of the island's vegetation, the number of breeding species is accordingly limited. Nantucket is therefore of most interest to the visiting ornithologist during the migration seasons, most particularly the fall. Its unique maritime location renders it an exceptional vantage point from which to observe oceanic species as well as an isolated stopover point for the multitude of migrant passerines, especially juveniles, which closely follow the immediate coastline during their protracted southward journey.

Cold fronts, usually accompanied by northwesterly winds, during the fall can drop literally hundreds of migrants upon the island. Following such weather conditions, the observer can frequently be overwhelmed by the abundance and variety of birds. Later in the fall, large numbers of waterfowl congregate in the various ponds on the island, which usually remain unfrozen late into the winter. In addition, Nantucket Sound harbors some of the largest concentrations of wintering scoters, eiders and oldsquaws in the northeast. A dawn or dusk flight of tens of thousands of oldsquaws between the sound and the ocean during December is an unforgettable spectacle. Northeasterly storms in late fall and early winter frequently sweep alcids (particularly Razorbills), gannets and Kittiwakes close to the eastern shore of the island, while southeasterly winds bring shearwaters and jaegers to the south shore.

As the migration in the spring is concentrated in the inland regions few birds reach Nantucket during this season, except during certain adverse weather conditions. Occasionally, following extended periods of fog, large numbers of warblers, vireos and other migrants do land on Nantucket. When this occurs, the birds concentrate in the planted shade trees in the town itself, to the virtual exclusion of all other areas. Apparently these trees offer the most readily available supply of food on the island.

When birding the island, one must bear in mind that the number of birds seen will be directly proportional to the amount of time spent on foot. In addition to the traditional localities which I will outline, unusual birds have turned up literally everywhere on Nantucket, from the elms of downtown Main Street to the outermost sandy reaches of Great Point. The author has frequently found it most productive to leave one's car as close to town as possible and to continue on foot to any of the localities, that have, over the years, proved continuously productive.

Most areas are accessible by conventional automobile, by bicycle, or on foot. The roads to Great and Eel Points are sand and limited to four wheel drive vehicles only although again, the author stresses the value of traversing even these remote areas on foot.

The following is a list of the most frequently visited areas on the island, and those which have been the most productive over the years. It is by no means an exhaustive list, as observers will doubtless find their own favorite thicket or cornfield, countless of which are scattered over the island.

**MADAKET:** To reach Madaket, follow the Madaket road from town for approximately six miles. This road is well marked and is easy to follow; it is simply a continuation of Main Street. The area is predominately open moorland, with several scattered thickets and small pine groves. These thickets should all be thoroughly checked for passerines and other migrants. At dawn, scan off the south shore at the end of the road for pelagic species during southeasterly winds. Eel Point, accessible via the Warren's Landing road (well marked right turn on the Madaket road) offers a good view of Madaket Harbor, in which terns with accompanying jaegers may be seen feeding. The sand flats at the end of

the point occasionally harbor shorebirds, including the resident Oystercatchers. Tucker-nuck and Muskeget Islands, located to the west of Nantucket, are privately owned and require special permission as well as an ample, seaworthy boat to visit. The North Head of Long Pond, clearly visible from the first bridge crossed coming from town, is the best place to observe waterfowl locally. European Wigeons, Whistling Swans and huge concentrations of Redheads are all regular here.

**HUMMOCK POND ROAD:** Follow Main Street to Milk Street, which becomes the Hummock Pond Road after 1/4 mile. Continue on this road until you see a road on the left marked Ocean View Farm, and turn left. The farmlands on either side of the road are reliable places for Western Kingbirds, Loggerhead Shrikes, Blue Grosbeaks, Lark and Clay-colored Sparrows. In August, these fields have, in the last five years, produced at least one, and as many as three Yellow-headed Blackbirds in one day each year. Go back and continue out the main road to the end (at the south shore). As well as offering another vantage point of the ocean, this spot is renowned for the grove of pines located immediately to your right, the Mothball pines, which serve as an isolated pocket for passerines as they come off the ocean. Warblers, vireos, thrushes and flycatchers form the bulk of the birds seen here during the fall.

**TOWN OF NANTUCKET:** Following a period of easterly winds and fog in May, the tall shade trees in town will frequently be productive. At this time, passerines will feed in these trees to the virtual exclusion of any other place on the island.

**STATE FOREST:** A large planted grove of White Pines amidst an extensive Pitch Pine forest. Follow the airport road from town until you reach the "This and That Shop". Turn right along a dirt road to the first dirt road on the right, and turn again. Proceed for 1/4 mile until you reach a clearing and the White Pines are clearly visible. Saw Whet Owls breed in this grove, and Barn, Long-eared and Saw Whet Owls may be found here in the winter.

**SIASCONSET:** Easily reached at the end of the 'Sconset Road. Turn right at the rotary in the center of town on Ocean Avenue and continue for 3/4 mile to the Coast Guard Loran Station. Park and walk out to the beach. After northeasterly winds, alcids, gannets and Kittiwakes may be seen in the late fall and winter. This is probably the best vantage point in the state to see Razorbilled Auks. Drive north along the road to the Sankaty Head Light, checking for shrikes and Western Kingbirds on the wires. Sankaty Head Golf Course is a good spot for flocks of Golden Plovers as well as Buff-breasted Sandpipers.

**SQUAM HEAD:** Follow the Quidnet Road from the Polpis Road to the end at a perpendicular dirt road. This road, which runs by Squam Head, is fine for migrants early in the morning.

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