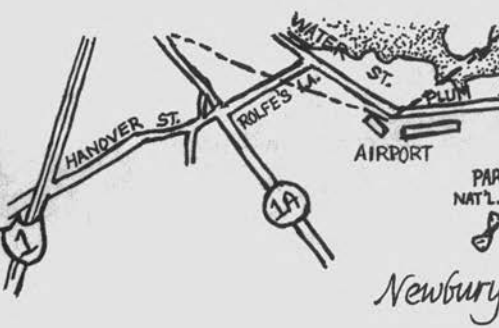
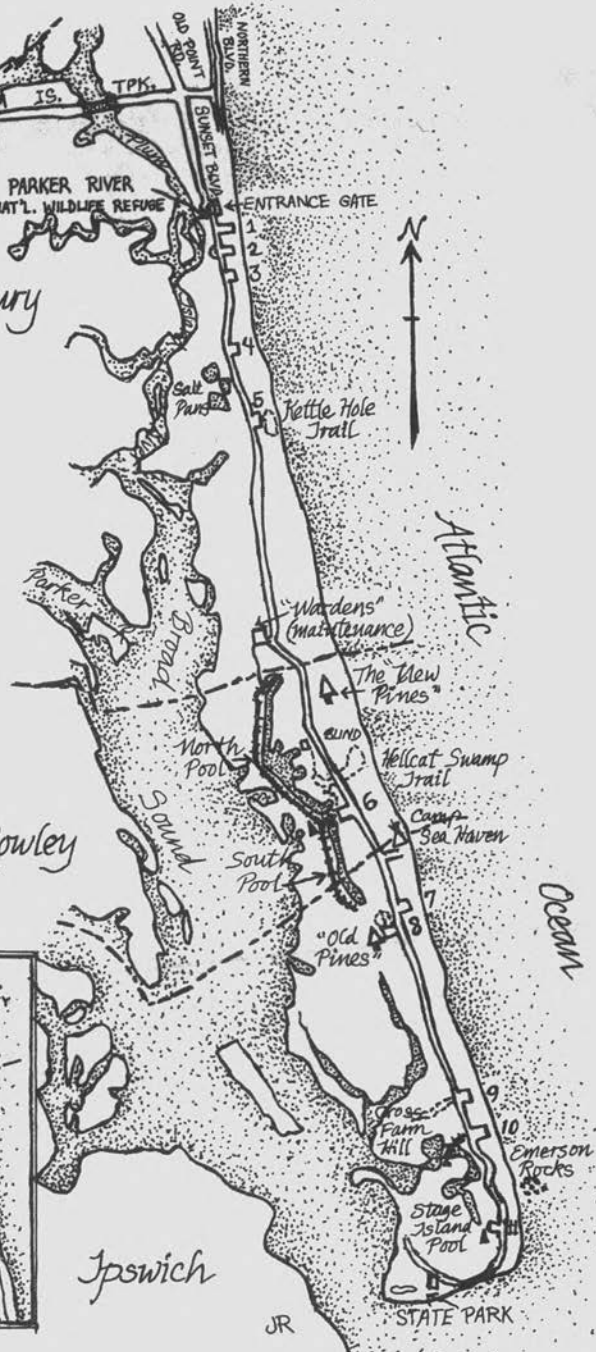


# PLUM ISLAND

## KEY:

- TRAIL
- ▲ TOWER
- PARKING LOT
- ⇄ DIKE



## THE FOUR SEASONS AT PLUM ISLAND

### (PART I - WINTER-SPRING)

by Herman H. D'Entremont, Brookline

and Soheil Zende, Somerville

Located 35 miles north of Boston, at the confluence of the Merrimack, Parker, and Ipswich rivers, Plum Island is reached by driving southeastward on Water Street, Newburyport. Geologically, the island is a barrier beach backed by swampy hollows. A salt marsh dominates the western half of the island, and fresh water from the rivers combines with tidal flow to produce a brackish environment full of nutrients. Plants, rodents, crustaceans, and insects thrive and, in turn, attract the migrant and resident birds that make Plum Island so inviting to bird and nature lovers.

The southern two-thirds of the island is part of the Parker River National Wildlife Refuge, managed by the U.S. Department of the Interior. Information, maps, refuge regulations, and bird lists are available from:

1. Parker River N. W. R. Headquarters, Northern Boulevard, Plum Island, Newburyport, Massachusetts 01950 (telephone 617-465-5753). This location is at the north end of the island, at the Coast Guard Lighthouse.

2. The booth at the refuge entrance, which is staffed most of the year during daylight hours.

3. The bulletin board located a quarter mile south of the refuge entrance.

In the near future a new headquarters will be erected at the "Warden's," located about 2 1/2 miles south of the entrance. The refuge is open to the public, without charge, every day on the following schedule: May 1 to October 15, 6 a.m. to 9 p.m.; October 16 to April 30, dawn to dusk.

Part 2 of "The Four Seasons at Plum Island (Summer-Fall)" will appear in a future issue of Bird Observer.

#### WINTER

The bird-watchers' year begins on Plum Island with searches for alcids at the north end. After crossing the bridge onto the island, continue on Northern Boulevard, which curves to the left, until it ends at a large parking lot by the fire station and the old Coast Guard boat house. By looking across the Merrimack River toward Salisbury Beach, you can often find Common and Red-throated Loon, Horned Grebe, and Common and Red-breasted Merganser. Gulls are often numerous here, for the swift current provides for good feeding. Iceland, Great Black-backed, Herring, Ring-billed, and Bonaparte's Gulls are usually present, together with an occasional Glaucous, Black-headed, or Little Gull as well as Black-legged Kittiwake. Extreme rarities include Ivory, Mew, Sabine's, and the famed Ross' Gull. Harbor seals are also commonly seen here swimming, on the rocks in mid-channel, or on ice floes.

While walking along the beach toward the breakwater, look for alcids in the harbor mouth and on the south side of the breakwater. Razorbill; Thick-billed Murre, and Black Guillemot are also occasionally found. Iceland and Glaucous Gulls sit atop the breakwater, while Purple Sand-piper's explore the lower rocks for food. With east or northeast winds, Gannet, Black-legged Kittiwake, and alcids can often be glimpsed at sea. The dunes behind may contain Savannah Sparrow, (including the Ipswich race), Horned Lark, and Snow Bunting.

After returning to your car, retrace your route southward on Northern Avenue. As you approach the marsh, turn left onto Sunset Boulevard, which leads to the Parker River National Wildlife Refuge. Keep an eye on the marshes to your right for Snowy and Short-eared Owls, and Marsh Hawks.

Plum Island's bleakest season is also its most inaccessible. Winter storms occasionally combine with high tides to flood sections of the island and the causeway leading to it. Sunset Boulevard and the refuge road are particularly vulnerable. After the first few snows of the season, no attempt is made to plow the refuge road or to maintain it. This road, over six miles long, can be very rough and possibly impassable, especially if the snow has accumulated. On occasion it will be officially closed, but you may proceed at your own risk. At other times, the road will be plowed a short distance to the main parking lot, but the rest of it will be barred to automobile traffic. Then you have to hike several miles southward to seek the island's winter specialties--shrikes, owls, hawks, and winter finches. Proper clothing, footgear, water, and ample time are prerequisites for such a venture.

Three miles from the main parking lot you will see an erect granite marker in a field to the right that denotes the boundary between the towns of Newbury and Rowley. Park carefully to avoid hindering traffic and walk along the unmarked trail that enters the "New Pines" just east of the marker. (If possible, one should stop at the booth at the entrance and ask for a permit to park at the Warden's, the first cluster of buildings on your right. One can then stop there and walk back along the road to the marker.)

In the New Pines we have found Great Horned, Long-eared, and winter-resident Saw-whet Owl; Black-capped and Boreal Chickadee; Red- and White-breasted Nuthatch; Golden-crowned and Ruby-crowned Kinglet; Pine Grosbeak; Common Redpoll; Pine Siskin; American Goldfinch; Red- and White-winged Crossbill; Dark-eyed Junco; Savannah, Tree, White-throated, and Song Sparrow; and Snow Bunting. Remember to keep a sharp eye skyward for Goshawk and Merlin.

After returning to your car, drive southward to Parking Lot #8, the Pines Nature Trail, commonly known as the "Old Pines." Many of the birds cited for the New Pines may also be found here, especially if little activity had been noted to the north. One can also walk back northward a short distance to a road leading rightward to Camp Sea Haven or the "polio camp." From the shelter of its buildings, scan the sea for loons, grebes, and sea ducks. If the sea in running high and large breakers are hitting the beach, pay careful attention to loons feeding close to the shore; it is sometimes possible to see them swimming (flying?) down the face of a wave!

When the weather has been severe, the refuge road may be open only as far as the Warden's, or perhaps the Old Pines. Beyond, the road can be treacherous even when open. If conditions permit, drive to Parking Lot #11 and walk to the beach where to the north you will see a natural breakwater known as Emerson's Rocks. There you can often find loons, Horned and Red-necked Grebe, Bufflehead, and, rarely, King Eider. Usually present are flocks of Greater Scaup, Common Goldeneye, Common Eider, all three scoters, and Red-breasted Merganser. In good years, alcids may also be found from this vantage point.

#### SPRING

At Plum Island spring arrives in stages; American Woodcock and blackbirds appear in late February, followed by Tree Swallow and Eastern Phoebe in mid-March. But for many local birders it is the appearance of Snow Geese that truly heralds spring--it is an unforgettable sight to see them showering out of an April cloud to land on the marsh just south of the Plum Island Turnpike. Birders often stop at various points along the first mile of the refuge road to admire these birds and to look for "Blues" among them.

After passing the main parking lot, stop at the two small mounds on the right to look for Mockingbird as well as Savannah, Vesper, White-crowned, Lincoln's, and Song Sparrow. Then drive to the wooden guard-rail at the bulletin board, park to the right of it, and walk to the river's edge to search for Sharp-tailed and Seaside Sparrows. During low tide scan the river bottom for rails. One never knows quite what to expect here. For example, throughout the spring of 1976 a Clapper Rail and another large reddish rail, judged to be a Clapper-King cross, were frequently seen at this spot.

#### The Salt Pans

After passing Parking Lot #4 you will see a shallow body of water to your right. These "Salt Pans" become flooded at high tide and attract a variety of shorebirds, including: Short-billed Dowitcher; Dunlin; Red Knot; Semipalmated and Black-bellied Plover; Ruff or Reeve; Least, Semipalmated, White-rumped, and Pectoral Sandpiper; and Wilson's Phalarope. Check the back side of the salt pans for Great Blue, Green, Little Blue, and Black-crowned Night Heron. Ring-billed and Herring Gull as well as Common Tern can often be found resting here, while Black Duck, Pintail, Blue-winged and Green-winged Teal, Gadwall, and Northern Shoveler feed in the shallow water. Between the road and the edge of the salt pans Sharp-tailed and Savannah Sparrow may also be found.

#### The Kettle Hole

Just beyond the salt pans is Parking Lot #5 on the left. First check the ponds across the road and then follow the boardwalk a short distance to a narrow woodchip trail on your left, which leads into a classic kettle hole, a steep-walled hollow where a retreating glacier left a melting chunk of ice.

Now a swampy tangle, the kettle hole forms a migrant trap where one can expect to find all common spring passerines as well as Black-billed and

and Yellow-billed Cuckoo; Ruby-throated Hummingbird; Least and Yellow-bellied Flycatcher; Blue-gray Gnatcatcher; Winter Wren; Philadelphia, Red-eyed, Solitary, and Yellow-throated Vireo; and Yellow-breasted Chat. The pathway is circular and will return you to the parking lot via the wood-chip trail.

#### The Warden's

As already mentioned, a permit is technically required to stop here. If you do not have one, a short visit is usually safe, provided that you do not walk out of sight of your car. Purple Martin, Barn, Tree, and Cliff Swallow nest in the adjacent field or around the buildings. Looking north, toward the Plum Island River Bridge, you can often see Glossy Ibis, egrets and teal. The small pond just south of the buildings might contain Spotted and Solitary Sandpiper; Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs; and Green and Black-crowned Night Heron. Killdeer, as well as Song and Chipping Sparrow frequent the fields; Canada Geese regularly nest.

#### The Town Marker Field

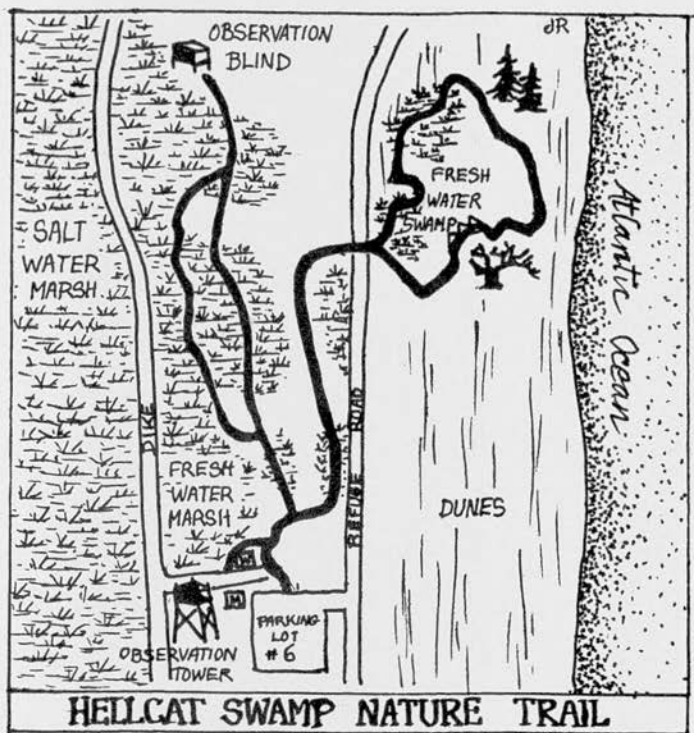
Often partially flooded in early spring, this field allows excellent views of many waterfowl, Killdeer, and occasionally Marsh Hawk.

#### Hellcat Swamp

Here is one of the most popular birding spots on the island, being bordered by two large freshwater impoundments that attract a wide variety of waterfowl and shorebirds. The swamp itself, located on both sides of the refuge road, is laced with a network of boardwalks and trails that provide excellent vantages for closeup viewing of migrant warblers, vireos, and other species. One of these trails takes you across the road and up one of the largest dunes on the refuge, permitting a spectacular view of the island and the ocean. Hellcat Swamp is also important in having the only year-round restrooms on the island and, in warm months, fresh drinking water.

Upon leaving the parking lot, walk up the dike toward the tower conspicuous to the west. On the right is North Pool where Least and American Bittern, Blue-winged and Green-winged Teal, American Coot, Common Gallinule, and Sora and Virginia Rail either nest or visit frequently. The South Pool, on the left, has large mudflats where shorebirds, waders, ducks, and geese browse and rest. Common Tern nests on platforms set up by refuge personnel. From the top of the tower it is possible to scan the tidal inlets to the west where American Bittern, Black-crowned Night Heron, and occasionally Yellow-crowned Night Heron may be seen stalking fish trapped by the outgoing tide. Canada Geese are found on the dike and in the pools.

Returning eastward along the dike, you'll find the boardwalk trail, which splits into three parts. Shortly after leaving the parking lot, the left fork of the boardwalk will take you to the marsh spur and to the observation blind. While walking toward the latter, check the numerous beach plum and bayberry bushes for warblers and other small migrants.



Where the marsh and observation-blind trails split, listen for Least, Willow, and Alder Flycatcher. Long-billed Marsh Wren as well as Swamp and Song Sparrow will be calling from the cattails that grow at the boardwalk edges. Along the marsh trail King, Sora and Virginia Rails have been called into view. Before reaching the observation blind you will find an open area with a sign stating "Quiet Please." Here you should listen for the calls of all *Empidonax* flycatchers. At the blind itself it is possible to see Pied-billed Grebe, Canada Goose, Black Duck, Mallard, Gadwall, teal, Pintail, Northern Shoveler, American Coot, Common Gallinule, and Mourning Dove as well as Savannah, Swamp, White-crowned, and Song Sparrows.

After returning to the trail junction near the parking lot, turn left onto the boardwalk which will eventually take you into the swamp across the road to the east. Here kinglets, thrushes, vireos, and warblers may be seen. At a low point on the boardwalk there is a stagnant pool of water shaded by a canopy of trees. It is worth spending some time here, quietly listening for the songs of migrants. Virtually any Eastern, and occasional Western, landbird is a possibility here. The same situation prevails across the road where there is a variety of habitats: wet swamp, some pine woods, and the previously mentioned dunes.

During April and early May virtually any dune on the east side of the refuge road can provide an excellent view of the spring hawk migration. Sharp-shinned Hawk, Merlin, and American Kestrel can often be seen

below eye level, and an occasional Peregrine Falcon may pass by. Few buteos occur, however.

The boardwalk path on the western side of the road is circular. After reaching the road, you can either retrace your steps along the eastern boardwalk or stroll southward down the refuge road to the parking lot. The shrubbery along the road itself can be very productive here and practically anywhere else on the island.

#### The Old Pines

Driving south from Hellcat Swamp, pause at Camp Sea Haven to search nearby bushes in the field to your right for Vesper Sparrow. (This species has nested at this location.) Stop at Parking Lot #8 to investigate the old pines for migrants. Before leaving, scope the marsh to your left; the pools visible to the west and south attract a variety of ducks, waders, and shorebirds, as well as an occasional Louisiana Heron.

Continuing southward, you'll see Cross Farm Hill on your right. A Purple Martin box is located here, and Upland Sandpiper and Bobolink can often be seen nearby. Don't forget to scan the ponds on either side of the hill.

#### Stage Island

The southern tip of Plum Island widens considerably and contains two moraine hills, a large marshy pond, and a sandy expanse at the very tip (Plum Island State Park). Leave your car at Parking Lot #10 and walk westward along the dike that leads to Stage Island itself, the larger and northern hill. Shorebirds will be seen at low tide in the creeks north of this path and also on the mudflats of Stage Island Pool, if the water is low enough.

At the outlet of the pool, look for Least Bittern and listen for the rattle of Belted Kingfisher. Bobolink nests on the slopes of the hill, where from various vantage points one can look into the pool to view its breeding inhabitants: Pied-billed Grebe, Least Bittern, Mallard, Black Duck, Gadwall, Green-winged and Blue-winged Teal, Northern Shoveler, Wood Duck, Ruddy Duck, American Coot, Common Gallinule, and Common Tern. Great Black-backed, Herring, Laughing, and Bonaparte's Gull use this pool for bathing and resting. Double-crested Cormorants can often be seen in comical poses as they sit atop the many Wood Duck boxes to dry their wings. Nesting Red-winged Blackbird, Long-billed Marsh Wren, and Yellow Warbler seem to call from every corner of the pool.

Another view of the pool and the surrounding swamp can be had from the observation tower at Parking Lot #11. Nesting passerines in this area include Willow Flycatcher, Gray Catbird, Yellow Warbler, and Common Yellowthroat. Just below and to the north of the tower Least Bittern, Sora, and Virginia Rail are sometimes spotted as they prance about in a small pool. The intermingled calls of Pied-billed Grebe, American Coot, and Common Gallinule make one pause to ascertain from whom and from where they are coming. Even more difficult is attempting to identify a fluffy black ball that is walking or swimming alone. This is a perfect place to get superior views of all the previously mentioned ducks plus American Wigeon and, possibly, Greater and Lesser Scaup and Pintail. From time to

time a couple of Mute Swans will float majestically across the pool, dwarfing all other waterfowl. Some rarities seen here include American Flamingo, American Avocet, and Black-necked Stilt.

#### Plum Island State Park

This truncated park begins a short distance south of the observation-tower parking lot. Bear right after leaving the refuge and park at the second lot. Then walk eastward to the shore where Sanderling, Semipalmated Plover, and Ruddy Turnstone dodge advancing waves. Walking along the beach to the right brings you close to a small colony of Common, Roseate, and Least Tern. Piping Plover has also nested here. Caspian and Black Tern are possible here in April and May, respectively. Don't forget to scan the feeding terns for a jaeger--probably a Parasitic--in seemingly endless pursuit of a free meal.

#### ACCOMMODATIONS NEAR NEWBURYPORT

One of the better inexpensive motels in this area, the Susse Chalet, is located on Route 110 west of Route I-95 in Amesbury. To reach it from Newburyport, take Route 1 north to Salisbury center, then turn west on Route 110 and continue until you pass under I-95; the motel will be on your left. Many other motels, some of them open all year, can be found along Route 1A east of its intersection with Routes 1 and 110 in Salisbury.

There are many fine restaurants in the area. The Sportsmen's Lodge on the Plum Island Turnpike is the most convenient and has good food at very reasonable prices. Another inexpensive seafood restaurant, The Riverview, is located on Route 1 in Salisbury, a half mile north of the Merrimack River.

#### Update on Turkeys

James E. Cardoza of the Division of Fisheries and Game for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts reports the following update on the Wild Turkey situation in Massachusetts.

Birds in the southern Berkshires are doing well, despite last year's hard winter, and are spreading out into adjacent areas of the state. There is also some influx of birds from Connecticut, New York, and Vermont, and there has been one report from Townsend, which may represent either illegally-released pen-reared stock or dispersal from New Hampshire's releases.

Mr. Cardoza beautifully summarized the status of the Wild Turkey in Massachusetts previously in Bird Observer (vol. 5, no. 3, pg. 76).