

WATER BIRDS AND SHOREBIRDS IN BOSTON HARBOR:

TWENTY-SEVEN OVERLOOKS

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Breeding terns and herons, clouds of migrant shorebirds, rafts of wintering sea ducks--all may be found in Boston Harbor in season. What we call the harbor is actually the western bulge of Massachusetts Bay, a complex of islands, necks, beaches, sand bars, submerged erratics, coves, and harbors which stretches approximately 12 miles north to south and, at its widest point, 6 miles east to west.

This is a guide to 27 sites, or overlooks, from which you can observe the water birds and shorebirds of Boston Harbor. The first half of this article provides a general description of the harbor, region by region, from Nahant to Quincy Bay. The southernmost portion of the harbor, Hingham Bay, will be described in a future issue.

Specific directions, via public and private transport, to each overlook are grouped according to region in the second half of this article. Most places with good views of the harbor and its birds are reached relatively easily by car. Getting to the same spots via public transportation requires somewhat more effort but is quite feasible. With the prospect of gasoline prices doubling within the year--or gas rationing being instituted--urban birding, particularly by public transport, should rapidly come of age.

Nahant Bay/Egg Rock

Semi-circular Nahant Bay lies east of Nahant and the causeway to Lynn. Long stretches of fine white sand beaches interrupted by rocky outcrops border the bay. As you travel south and east in Nahant, the outcrops turn into high, massive cliffs overlooking the ocean. Egg Rock, an isolated cliff rising 75 feet from the bay, is one mile northeast of Nahant and visible from all Nahant Bay overlooks.

In winter, looking east into Nahant Bay, one commonly sees Common and Red-throated Loons, Horned Grebes, Buffleheads, and White-winged Scoters. Egg Rock is a major Great Cormorant roost, and east of it one often sees a large raft of Common Eider. A few Common Goldeneyes and Red-breasted Mergansers usually hang out at one of the smaller coves off Ocean Street, and alcids, including Thick-billed Murre, Razorbill, and Black Guillemot, may on rare occasion turn up anywhere along this shore.

Easterly gales in spring, summer, and particularly in the fall, may blow pelagic species such as Gannets or tubenoses close to shore. Sooty and Manx Shearwaters and Wilson's Storm Petrel have been observed during the past three years. As for gulls and shorebirds, check the masses of rotting seaweed bulldozed into mountains by earthmoving machinery on Lynn Beach just north of the MDC parking lot. Bonaparte's Gulls and the smaller shorebirds, including Semipalmated Plover, Semipalmated Sandpiper, and Sanderling, flock here in very large numbers in August and September.

Lynn Harbor/Revere

The vast mudflats and mussel beds of Lynn Harbor, protected from the open ocean by the extended arm of Nahant, have a birdlife rather different from that of Nahant Bay. In summer and fall, shorebirds and gulls of all sizes swarm on these flats at low tide. When high tide arrives, the shorebirds disperse to various roosts, one of which is the northernmost channel marker in Lynn Harbor. In late fall and winter, an incoming tide brings rafts of Common Eider, Greater Scaup and Common Goldeneyes to the mussel beds to feed. Various overlooks from Nahant, Lynn, and Point-of-Pines in Revere are useful for watching the water and shorebirds of Lynn Harbor.

At Revere Beach just south of the northern rotary, shallow tidal pools open up at low tide. In fall, hundreds of Bonaparte's Gulls gather here to feed, spinning and bobbing in water thick with seaweed. Farther south along the beach, the resident flocks of Ring-billed Gulls mingle with pigeons at refuse barrels. At the southern rotary, in summer and fall, Double-crested Cormorants sit on the pilings.

South of Revere Beach, at Simpson's Boatyard, a long rocky spit out to the breakwater hosts shorebirds. The breakwater itself is a shorebird high tide roost. Terns fish here in the summer, while eider, White-winged Scoter, and loons are seen in winter.

Winthrop

Moving south from Revere to Winthrop, the influence of the open ocean to the east becomes increasingly obvious. On the other hand, the western shore of Winthrop, the area of Boston Harbor surrounding Logan Airport and Snake Island, is shallow and protected from easterly storms. Although Greater Scaup, Bufflehead, and Red-Breasted Merganser are equally common on both sides of Winthrop, loons, grebes, eider, Oldsquaw, and scoters are found to the east but not the west. Great Cormorant and Brant are found to the west but not the east.

Winthrop's Fort Heath offers spectacular views in three directions. Common Goldeneye, Common Eider, and Harbor Seal are seen here regularly in winter.

The "Five Sisters" breakwaters are excellent high tide roosts for a large portion of the northern harbor shorebirds, although they are too distant for easy identification of any but the most obvious species.

In summer, Snake Island has Common and Least Tern colonies and at low tide shorebirds and gulls can be seen foraging on its enormous mudflats. In summer and fall, Great Blue Herons and Snowy Egrets are also seen on these mudflats as well as on those of the nearby Logan Airport.

In winter, you can scope across the water looking for a Snowy Owl perched atop the shacks or structures of Logan airport. One was seen a number of times in 1979.

East Boston

Much of the marsh and tidal estuary of this part of Boston lies under Suffolk Downs Racetrack, Logan Airport, and other "developments." Two wetland areas still remain, areas with considerable expanse and of avian interest. The first, Belle Isle Marsh, has been described in the author's "Revere-Winthrop Revisited" article (see bibliography). In a future issue Bird Observer will publish more on this largest salt marsh in Boston.

The second wetlands area is Constitution Beach, separated from Logan Airport by only two-to-three hundred yards of water. South of the beach is the East Boston Yacht Club, and farther south, a large tidal estuary with *Spartina* marsh and a mudflat exposed at low tide. In summer and fall, this mudflat is a major feeding site for migrant shorebirds such as Short-billed Dowitcher, Red Knot, yellowlegs, and Black-bellied Plover. In winter, look for Common Loon, Great Cormorant, scaup, Bufflehead, and Red-breasted Merganser off the beach. A large flock of Black Ducks reside in the vicinity of the mudflat. Scan the airport for American Kestrels and Snowy Owls perched on high objects.

Mystic and Charles Rivers

The Mystic and the Charles Rivers once had meandering tidal estuaries which slowly merged with each other between what is now Charlestown and the North End. Today the Mystic is tidal up to the Amelia Earhart Dam in Somerville, and the Charles is dammed at the Science Museum. Both bodies of water are used to some extent by the water birds that pass through or reside in Boston Harbor.

The Mystic River around Amelia Earhart Dam is quite marshy and in summer appears to host a large population of Black-crowned Night Herons roosting in the big cottonwoods along the river. Double-crested Cormorant, Great Blue Heron, Black Duck, and, occasionally, Northern Shoveler may be seen here.

Many local citizens fish the Mystic from the Alford Street Bridge. In winter they are joined by Common Goldeneyes and Red-breasted Mergansers fishing in the river.

The Charles River Basin, viewed either from the Longfellow Bridge or the Science Museum, may turn up a few common sea ducks in winter. Mallards, Black Ducks, and gulls concentrate near the Science Museum.

South Boston and Columbia Point

Fort Independence on Castle Island, at the eastern tip of South Boston, offers commanding views of the inner harbor and Spectacle and Thompsons Islands. The automobile causeway around the northern perimeter of Pleasure Bay and the footpath around its southern rim produce an almost circular, shallow lagoon which in winter can shelter the scaup, Buffleheads, goldeneyes, and Red-breasted Mergansers which one might also see in the harbor to the east.

Looking east from Castle Island, you can see Long Island and Deer Island define the limits of the inner harbor. Great rafts of Common Eider might

be seen towards and beyond those islands. In summer it should be possible to see the herons that nest or roost on Spectacle and Thompsons Islands.

To the south, the varied winter birdlife of Dorchester Bay includes Horned Grebe, Red-throated Loon, Black Duck, large rafts of scaup, some White-winged Scoters, shorebirds, and gulls on the mudflats at low tide. The bay can be scanned from the L-Street Beach on Day Boulevard in South Boston and from the Kennedy Library at Columbia Point.

Savin Hill Cove, to the south of Columbia Point, often contains concentrations of Black Ducks and scaup. At low tide the mudflat here should be perused for shorebirds and Ring-billed Gulls.

Quincy Bay

This lobe of the harbor, defined by Squantum, Moon Island, and Long Island to the north, Wollaston Beach to the west, Houghs Neck to the south, and various islands and shoals to the east, has long been the haunt of ornithologists and birders. The marshes associated with the Neponset River and Blacks Creek, and the shallow, muddy edges of Quincy Bay attract plenty of waders and shorebirds in migration. In winter, large flocks of Brant, often numbering in the thousands, may be found here unless they are forced farther south by freezing conditions.

Moswetuset Hummock overlooks a shallow cove at the northwest corner of Quincy Bay where sea ducks and grebes feed. At low tide, this is an excellent location to look for Black-headed Gulls.

Squaw Rock is the deepest penetration into the southern harbor currently accessible to birders. Look at the Thompsons Island sandspit during low tide for gulls and, in season, herons and terns. Ducks, particularly Blacks, frequent the eastern shore of Thompsons.

At the southeastern end of Wollaston Beach, Merrymount Park encompasses the inlet at Blacks Creek and a pond open to the sea. This is an excellent place to view ducks, especially those that prefer to feed in shallow water. Red-breasted Mergansers, Black Ducks, and Buffleheads are especially numerous. The bridge over Blacks Creek is a good vantage from which to search for Black-headed Gull. This end of Wollaston Beach usually hosts Brant.

Nut Island, at the tip of Hough's Neck, offers a grand view of the southern harbor. The rip north of Peddocks Island is a favored feeding place for gulls, including Bonaparte's and occasionally, Iceland Gulls. In winter, loons, grebes, and waterfowl are scattered in Quincy Bay to the west and Hingham Bay to the east. Great Cormorants can readily be seen sitting along the Prince Head sandspit of Peddocks Island.

We hope this introduction will help you to become more familiar with Boston Harbor and its varied birdlife. We have not presented a checklist of rarities because the coverage of Boston Harbor has been quite limited in time and scope. Only recently has much of the harbor received any systematic coverage, as Bird Observer records attest. In reality, birders have generally ignored this rich birding resource. For this reason,

we have not discussed other aspects of the harbor's birdlife. Nahant Thicket, Squantum Airport, and Squaw Rock are well-known passerine land-traps, but little information on them is available. The significance of Boston Harbor and its islands for migrant passerines has hardly been explored.

We invite you to participate in Take a Second Look, a project which is examining Boston Harbor's birdlife in some detail during 1980, "The Year of the Coast." Please join us, either by participating in our field trips or by reporting your harbor sightings to Bird Observer.

For more detailed information on access to the birding overlooks, the Arrow Street Map Atlas and the MBTA System Map are almost indispensable. We also recommend that you consult the publications listed below. Unfortunately for those using public transport, many buses run infrequently, if at all, on weekends. If you plan to use public transportation, call MBTA Information 722-3200, ahead of time to avoid long and possibly fruitless waits at bus stops.

Maps and Guides

Arrow Metropolitan Boston Map and Street Guide. Newton Upper Falls: Arrow Publishing Company, c. 1973 (\$1.95)

Arrow Street Map Atlas of Metropolitan Boston and Eastern Massachusetts. Newton Upper Falls: Arrow Publishing Company, c. 1973. (\$4.95)

Car-Free in Boston and all Massachusetts. Cambridge. Association for Public Transportation, Inc. 1979. (\$2.50). This booklet contains the MBTA System Map.

MBTA System Map. Boston: Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority. (Available free at MBTA stops, or from the MBTA, 50 High Street, Boston, MA 02110)

Universal Atlas of Metropolitan Boston and Eastern Massachusetts. Boston: Universal Publishing Company, c. 1973 (\$5.95)

USGS Topographic Maps, 7.5 minute series. Quadrangles for Boston Harbor: Boston North, Lynn, Boston South, Hull, Weymouth, Nantasket Beach. (U.S. Geological Survey, Reston, VA 22092) \$1.50. On sale locally at J. L. Hammett, 48 Canal Street, Boston; Eastern Mountain Sports, 1041 Commonwealth Avenue, Brighton.

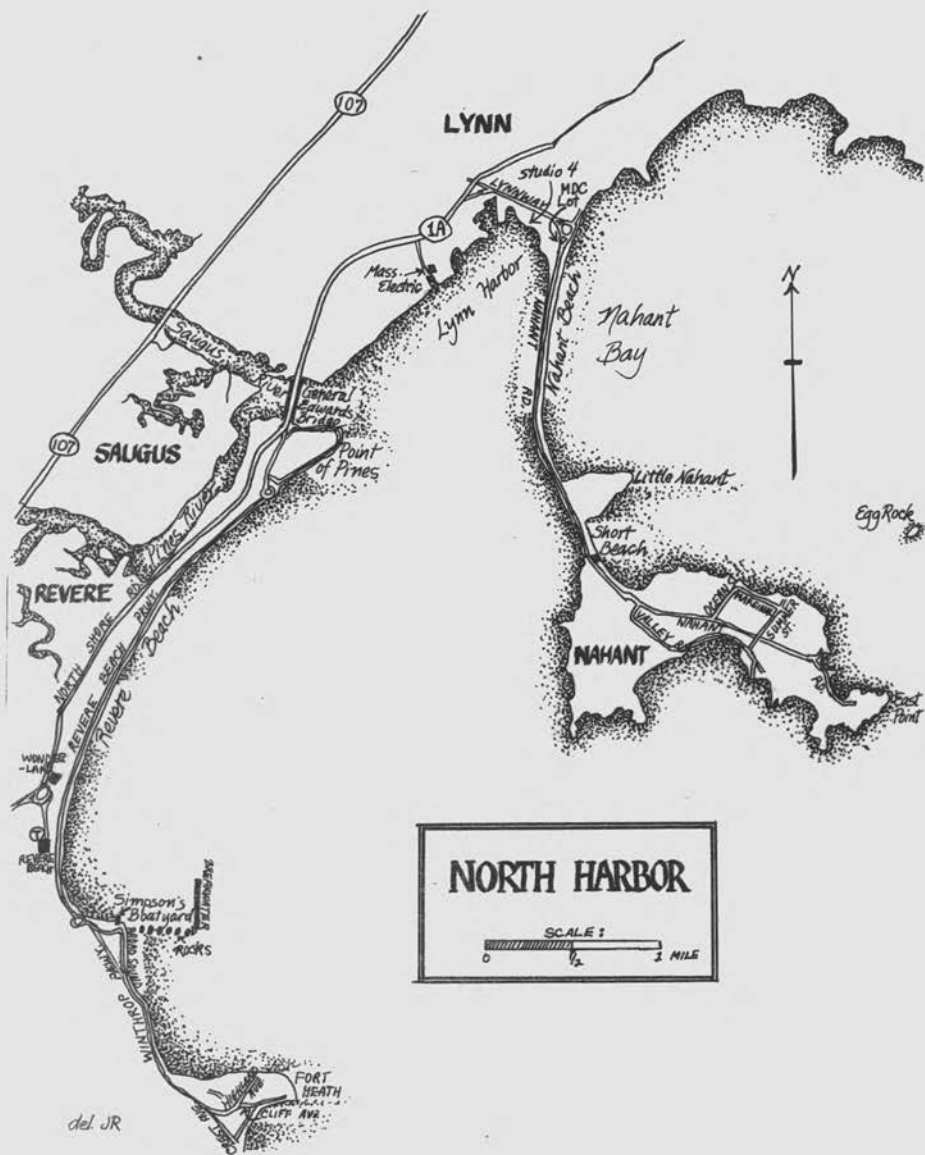
Articles

Brown, David T. "Thompson's Island--A Good Place for Birds." BOEM, Vol. 5. No. 1 (Jan.-Feb. 1977, pp. 4-8).

Morrier, Edward J. "Birds of the Squantum and Wollaston Beach Area," BOEM, Vol. 3, No. 5 (Sept.-Oct., 1975, pp. 156-159).

Stymeist, Robert H. "Revere Winthrop." BOEM, Vol. 2, No. 6 (Nov.-Dec., 1974, pp. 172-174).

Zende, Soheil. "Revere-Winthrop Revisited." BOEM, Vol. 4, No. 6 (Nov.-Dec., 1976, pp. 159-162).



DIRECTIONS TO OVERLOOKS

Nahant Bay

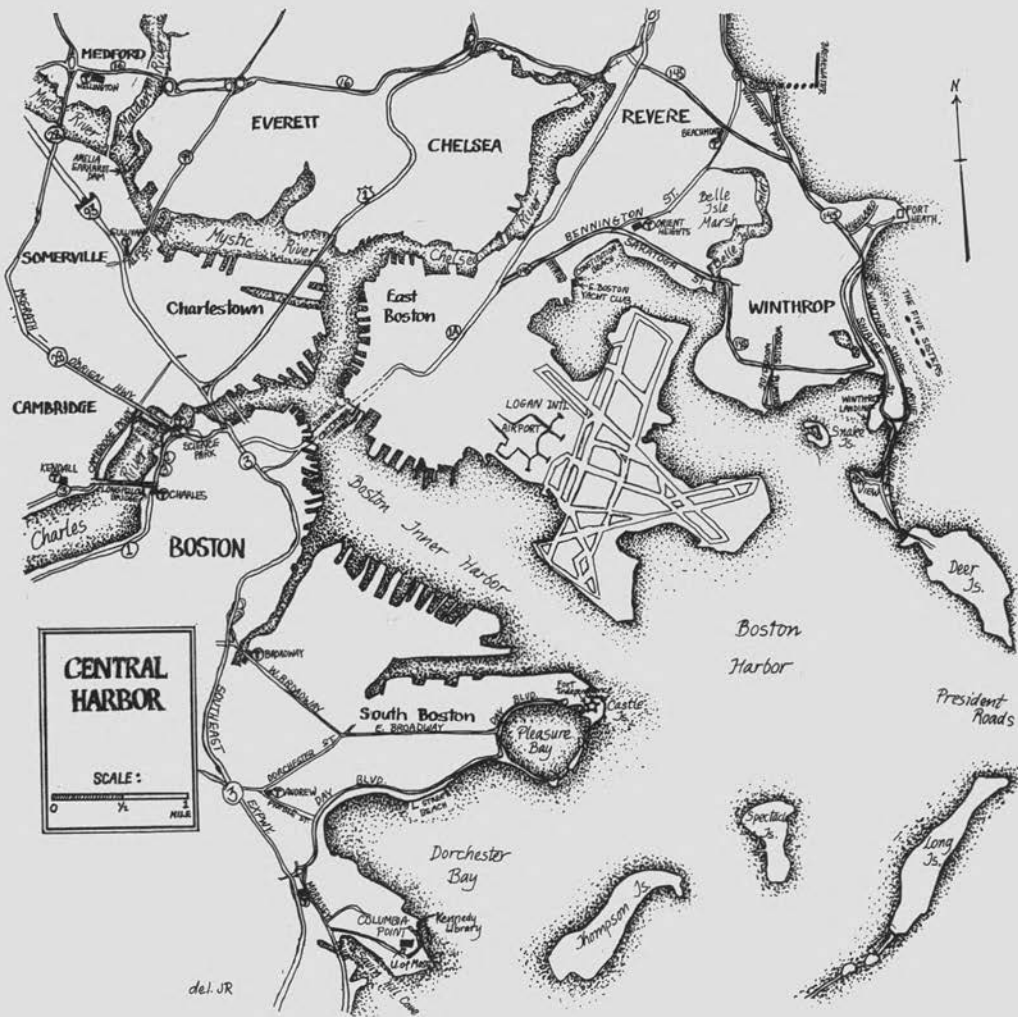
From Boston, follow Route 1A to Lynn. Shortly after the Massachusetts Electric sign, look for signs for Nahant. Follow to the rotary.

All spots in Nahant are accessible by Bus #439 from Lynn's Central Square. This bus runs once an hour (not on Sundays).

1. MDC Parking Lot, Nahant Beach--Leave rotary southbound for Nahant. The MDC beach parking lot stretches the length of the Nahant Causeway. Drive to the southern end of the causeway to enter the lot.
2. Nahant Short Beach--Shortly after the end of the causeway, on the left, is a Coast Guard station with a parking lot you can use when the gate is open. Otherwise, take the first right and park near the drug-store.
3. Ocean Street--From Nahant Road, take a left onto Ocean Street, then a right at the rocky shore.
4. East Point--Go to the end of Nahant Road. From October to April it is safe to park at the "Nahant Sticker Parking Only" sign. Although all kinds of signs and a fence suggest that this portion of Nahant is owned by Northeastern University, only certain sections are actually private property; most of the area is a town park. To keep the Northeastern folks happy, though, it is recommended that you walk up the hill between the parallel yellow lines until you are out of sight of the occupied buildings. You will then be on a high cliff overlooking an immense expanse of sky and ocean.

Lynn Harbor

5. To look at the head of Lynn Harbor, drive or walk across the causeway to another parking lot directly opposite the MDC headquarters. The only other way to see the birds in upper Lynn Harbor from the east is to stay on the parking lot side of the causeway and look west through breaks in the fence. In the off-season it is reasonably safe to drive southbound in this parking lot, though only northbound traffic is officially allowed. Route 1A crosses the Saugus River at the General Edwards Bridge and is called the Lynnway for a couple of miles north into Lynn. Bus #440 will take you from the MBTA's Haymarket Station to Lynn's Central Square along Route 1A.
6. North Side of Saugus River--Immediately north of the General Edwards Bridge, go right through gates into a dirt lot.
7. Massachusetts Electric Plant--Immediately after the Lynn Dog Pound, go right through a gate into the Massachusetts Electric lot. Drive slowly--many trucks back in and out of this area. View another section of Lynn Harbor from the wall at the end of this road.
8. Head of Lynn Harbor--After Route 1A and Nahant Street diverge, look for two large roast beef signs. After the second, turn right into the Studio 4 parking lot.



CENTRAL HARBOR

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Revere

Access to all shore points in Revere is achieved by going to the end of Revere Beach Parkway (Route 16). The MBTA's Blue Line has stops at Revere Beach and Wonderland.

9. Revere Beach--Walk or drive the beach from rotary to rotary.
10. Simpson's Boatyard--From the rotary at the southern end of Revere Beach take the exit southeast toward Winthrop. Bear left at the first fork (Broad Sound Avenue), and park where the road turns right. To the left is the gravel parking lot of Simpson's.

Winthrop

Public transportation access to all locations in Winthrop is via Bus Route 1 from the Blue Line's Orient Heights station.

11. Fort Heath--From Simpson's, continue south on Broad Sound Avenue, bear left on Winthrop Parkway, and bear left again onto Highland Avenue (Texaco station on right). A right on Cliff Avenue will bring you to the parking lot of the large apartment house complex at Fort Heath.
12. Five Sisters--These breakwaters are visible from Winthrop Shore Drive.

Snake Island and Surrounding Harbor Areas

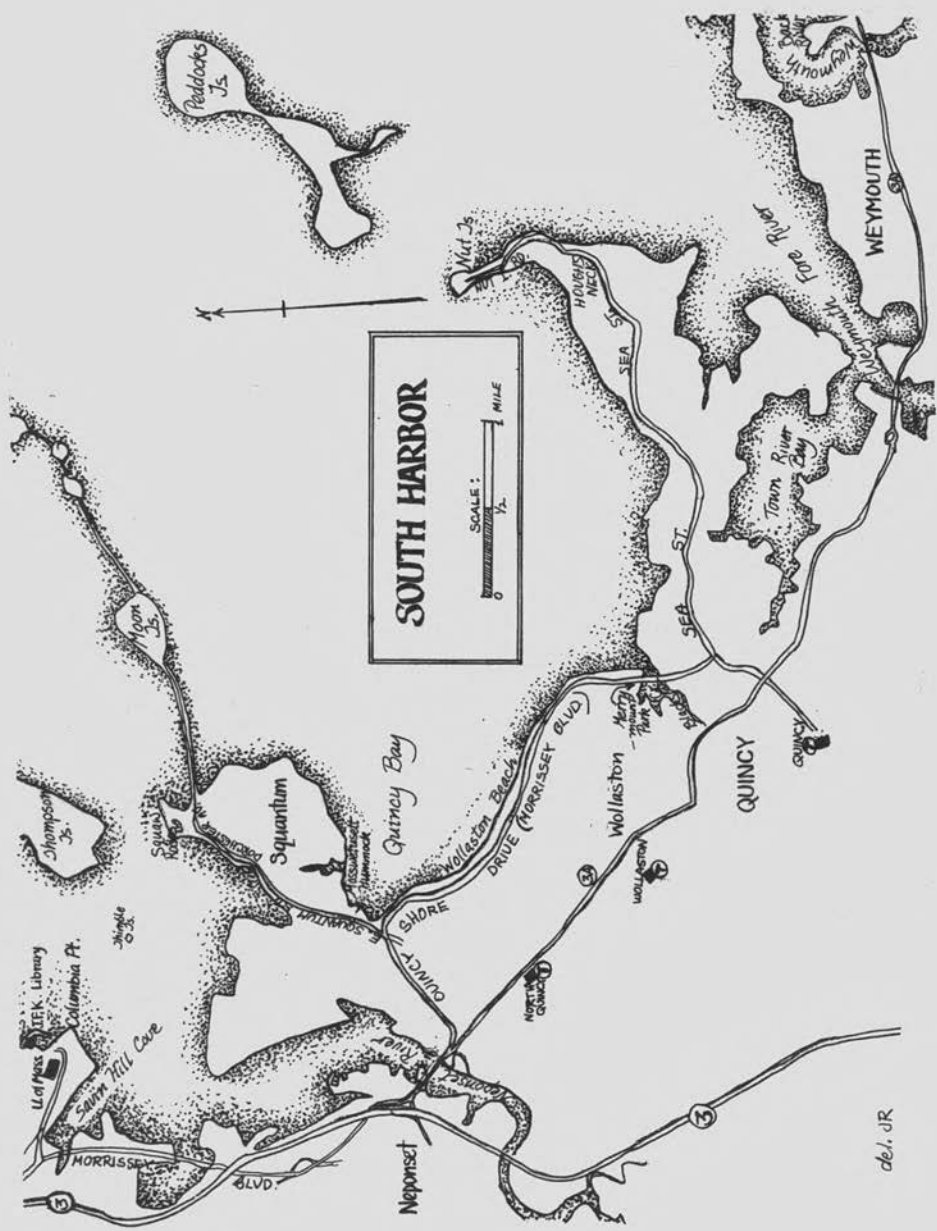
13. From Pleasant Street, Winthrop, (Route 145), turn south on Woodside Avenue and go to the end. Snake Island is southeast of you. The best views of the mudflats are from here.
14. From Route 145, take Shirley Street southward, turn right into the parking lot of Winthrop Landing. Snake Island is due west.
15. Continue south on Shirley Street. Take a right on Bayview Road and go to where the road swings left. Snake Island is due northwest.

East Boston

16. Constitution Beach and Vicinity--From Bennington Street, (Route 145), East Boston, turn east on Saratoga Street, and turn right immediately. Within a hundred yards, Constitution Beach will appear on your left. Continuing on the road past the beach house will bring you to the entrance of the East Boston Yacht Club, where you will have a fine view of the airport and surrounding mudflats. The Blue Line Orient Heights station is on the corner of Bennington and Saratoga Streets. The walk to Constitution Beach is very short.

Charles and Mystic Rivers

17. Amelia Earhart Dam--From the rotary on Route 16, 1/2 mile east of Wellington Circle, Medford, follow the signs to the dam. The Orange Line to Wellington station is within walking distance of this area.



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18. Alford Street Bridge--Follow Route 99 north from Sullivan Square, Somerville. The drawbridge (perpetually under construction) over the Mystic River is 1/4 mile from the Orange Line's Sullivan station.

19. Longfellow Bridge--Walk from the Red Line's Charles Street or Kendall stations. Park on the Cambridge Parkway (Route 3).

20. Science Museum--Take the Green Line to Science Park station. Park behind the Science Museum where the Charles River cruises begin.

South Boston and Columbia Point

21. Castle Island--Take Broadway, South Boston, to its end, when you turn left to get to Fort Independence (Castle Island). From the Red Line's Broadway station take Bus #09 or #11 to City Point and walk west 3/4 mile to Fort Independence.

22. L Street Beach--Turning right instead of left at the end of Broadway brings you to various overlooks of Dorchester Bay, among which is this famous walled-off beach where the L Street Brownies go skinny-dipping year-round. (Best views of the Brownies are obtained from across the bay at the Kennedy Library.)

23. Columbia Point, the University of Massachusetts, or the Kennedy Library--Continue west on Day Boulevard past the L Street Beach. From the Southeast Expressway take Exit 17 and follow signs for the Kennedy Library. By MBTA take the Red Line to Columbia station. A free shuttle bus, HBL, will take you to all points on the University of Massachusetts campus. This bus does not operate on Sundays.

Quincy Bay

Shore points in this area are all accessible from Morrissey Boulevard in Quincy. Take exit 20 of the Southeast Expressway and follow signs for Wollaston Beach.

24. Moswetuset Hummock--From the Red Line's North Quincy station, take bus #211. The hummock is at the intersection of Squantum Street and Morrissey Boulevard.

25. Squaw Rock--Same public transportation access as for the hummock. This vantage lies behind the VFW Post on Dorchester Street, Squantum.

26. Merrymount Park--From the Red Line to Wollaston station, take Bus #217 to the park, which is off Morrissey Boulevard at the south end of Wollaston Beach.

27. Nut Island--From the Red Line's Quincy Center station, take Bus #216 to Nut Island, which is no longer an island. To drive, take Morrissey Boulevard east to Sea Street, turn left, and continue to Quincy Yacht Club. Continue north over a hill to the gate of the sewage treatment plant, enter the grounds, and continue to the end of the peninsula.