



SCITUATE AREA
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THE SCITUATE COAST - A BIRDER'S VIEW

by Wayne R. Petersen, Whitman

Massachusetts is endowed with a lengthy coastline. If the touring bird finder were to begin at Salisbury Beach, follow the coast south toward Boston Harbor, around Cape Cod Bay, along the Cape's back side, around Buzzard's Bay, and finally end in the vicinity of Acoaxet on the Rhode Island border, he would have sampled a wide and varied array of geologic formations and faunal-floral habitats. Each of the stretches has its own special features, charm, and bird specialties. This is fortunate, since much of the pleasure in birding seems to lie in sampling different areas for different birds. Obviously, some coastal areas are far richer than others. Some are sufficiently developed to render them unattractive to birds. Others may not afford an adequate diversity of local conditions to be highly attractive to a variety of bird species, while still others do not enjoy the optimum geographical location that places such as Monomoy Island seem to possess. With these considerations in mind, it would seem that in Massachusetts there are few really prime areas (such as the Parker River National Wildlife Refuge) that provide wide species diversity on a year-round basis. The stretch of coast running from Cohasset to the North River in Scituate is one of these prime areas.

Coastal Cohasset, located on the south shore of Massachusetts Bay, begins roughly at the base of the Hull peninsula and runs southeast, to Scituate. The Scituate coast continues to the southeast, gently turning southward at Lighthouse Point in Scituate Harbor. The distance from the intersection of Route 228 in Cohasset south down Route 3A (the main connecting road) to the North River crossing in Scituate is roughly 8 miles. Traveling the coastal roads will alter this figure somewhat, but the region is less than 10 miles in extent as the crow flies. All of the areas described are to the east of and enclosed by Route 3A, and are bordered by Route 228 on the north and the North River on the south.

WHITNEY WOODS TO NORTH RIVER

Time, season, and tides should influence the way in which the birder chooses to work this region. For convenience, I will describe a circular route that works south down Route 3A and then follows the coast north.

Starting south on Route 3A from the Route 228 intersection, you pass inviting maple swamps, venerable White Pine groves, and mixed transition woods, some containing substantial specimens of American Holly (Ilex opaca), a tree at the northeastern limit of its range. Should the curious naturalist wish to digress, easy access to the woodlands on the right may be found along an old railroad spur less than a mile from the junction of Route 228, or at a point further south, across from where Schier Street enters from the left. This extensive area, known as Whitney Woods, is criss-crossed with trails and bridle paths, making it ideal for the bird finder. In addition to its rich flora, warblers, vireos (including the White-eyed Vireo), and Hermit Thrushes are all regular nesters, and at least two recent known occurrences of Acadian Flycatchers are from these woodlands. Also resident but rarely seen, is the Pileated Woodpecker, a wide-ranging and elusive species much of the year. And finally, since a flightless

young was picked up several summers ago, the Saw-whet Owl may be an irregular (?) breeding resident.

Continuing south on Route 3A, just north of the intersection of Route 123, you encounter Tack Factory Pond on the right and a larger unnamed reservoir pond on the left. These ponds are attractive to swallows in early spring; in the summer, when the water level often drops, herons, such as Snowy Egret, and several species of shorebirds frequently gather on the muddy margins. At high tide on the outer coast, "peep" are often among these shorebirds. The Western Sandpiper has been recorded here on various occasions.

Continue until Route 3A crosses the North River. Stop here and scan the extensive marshes on the left. This is an excellent place from which to observe Great Blue Heron, Green Heron, Little Blue Heron (occasional), and Snowy Egret at appropriate seasons. During the winter several species of waterfowl might be present. Red-tailed Hawks are not infrequent in winter, when they often scan the river from wooded islands in the salt marsh.

NORTH RIVER REGION

After surveying the marshes, retrace your route to Driftway Road, which enters from the right. Follow Driftway Road east, paralleling the North River, until a large sand and gravel facility is seen on the right. Parking is easy on a small loop road to the left. You are now centrally located for some fine birding on foot. On the left is the Scituate dump, which in winter is highly attractive to gulls and affords fine studies of their myriad plumages. There is always the possibility of a rarity such as the Lesser Black-backed Gull, which has been recorded at the nearby North River mouth.

A monoculture of rushes (Phragmites communis) behind the sand and gravel area serves as a buffer for the salt marsh edge bordering the North River. A walk through this area can yield swarms of Yellow-rumped Warblers in fall and winter, and Northern Shrikes and Short-eared Owls are recorded regularly. Slightly farther east, the Phragmites gives way to thickets of Bayberry, Black Cherry, and other typical coastal vegetation. These thickets often harbor interesting birds in migration, including large bands of wandering House Finches in late summer. When their water is low, the adjacent sewer treatment beds frequently have shorebirds. Pectoral, Baird's, and Buff-breasted Sandpiper have all been recorded here, in addition to a number of commoner species. Among the "guard geese" in the sewer ponds, look for Blue-winged Teal in late August. Immediately behind the sewer ponds is a tidal creek that runs out to the North River. A walk along the edge of the salt marsh, beginning on the west side of the creek, especially where the Bayberry and Phragmites come close to the marsh edge, can produce views of Sharp-tailed and Seaside Sparrows, and occasionally Clapper and Virginia Rails during the colder months. Flood tide is the best time to work this area, since the tide forces these marsh inhabitants into the adjacent vegetation. And while searching for sparrows, keep an eye out for the semi-nocturnal Gray Fox, which is occasionally seen hunting the same marsh edges.

After covering the sand and gravel area, return to your car and continue a

short distance to Old Driftway Road on the right, just beyond the sewer treatment plant. Almost at once, a large garden plot is seen on the left, at the corner of the intersecting Kent Street. This garden and adjacent thickets have, over time, produced many an interesting flycatcher, warbler, or sparrow. Dickcissel, Lincoln's Sparrow, Mourning Warbler, and Yellow-breasted Chat are all possibilities. (Caution! Be discreet in walking the garden edge!)

THIRD CLIFF

From this point, continue out Old Driftway Road to Moorland Road, which loops around the section locally called Third Cliff or Rivermoor. There is public access to the beach at the mouth of the North River off this street, but parking is a problem and violators can be ticketed. The shingle beach at the river's mouth is one of the key shorebird roosting areas on the South Shore. In addition, a modest colony of much-harassed Least Terns nests on the sand portion of the spit, as do Piping Plovers and Savannah Sparrows. In late fall, "Ipswich" Savannah Sparrow, Lapland Longspur, and Snow Bunting are regular, while great flocks of Common Eider and Brant usually feed at the river's mouth.

The shorebird season at Third Cliff extends all year round. Dunlin and Sanderling are the dominant winter species, but migration brings all the regularly occurring shorebird species in varying numbers. Species for which Third Cliff is especially important are Semipalmated Plover, Ruddy Turnstone, Red Knot (one of the best areas on the Atlantic Coast), White-rumped Sandpiper, Least Sandpiper, Semipalmated Sandpiper, and Western Sandpiper. The list also includes such fancies as American Oystercatcher, Rufous-necked Sandpiper, Curlew Sandpiper, and Wilson's Phalarope. Best viewing in this area is at high tide and for an hour thereafter.

Forster's, Common, Roseate, Royal (occasional only), and Black Terns are more or less regular here. On occasion in late summer, these birds are harried by an itinerant Parasitic Jaeger. Pans in the adjacent salt marsh often sustain feeding herons and egrets, and a visit at dusk will routinely produce Black-crowned Night Herons (and in late summer, occasionally a Yellow-crowned Night Heron).

SCITUATE HARBOR TO MUSQUASHICUT POND

Leaving Third Cliff, return to Driftway Road and follow it into Scituate Center. Continue through town on Jericho Road, which skirts Scituate Harbor. In winter, the harbor supports Black Ducks, Greater Scaup, Buffleheads, and not infrequently, a Barrow's Goldeneye. Late fall frequently finds substantial numbers of Bonaparte's Gulls sharing the mud flats with flocks of Dunlin. Jericho Road eventually leads to Lighthouse Point, where a fine ocean vantage point can be obtained. A variety of bay and sea ducks can be seen offshore here, and it was not far from this point where the first Massachusetts record of Steller's Eider was obtained. Returning fishing boats should be watched for "white-winged" gulls in winter.

After leaving Lighthouse Point, head north on Oceanside Drive. In winter stop at appropriate locations to look for sea ducks, particularly King Eiders and Harlequin Ducks, both of which are rare but have been seen from

time to time. Pay special attention to the area at Egypt Beach, since this is one of the better locations for the two rare ducks, and for Red-necked Grebes in March and April.

To leave Egypt Beach, take Egypt Beach Road to Hatherly Road where you should turn right. Continue until Musquashicut Brook flows under the road into Musquashicut Pond on the right. Park in the vacant lot near the brook. This pond, now sadly developed around much of its perimeter, was once a famous shorebird and marsh bird location. Now, disturbance and generally high water levels have tainted it somewhat. Nonetheless, Pied-billed Grebes, herons, pond ducks, a few shorebirds, and Ring-billed and Laughing Gulls are still regular in season. It is one of the most reliable ponds on the South Shore for Gadwall. In winter, Iceland Gulls are occasionally seen on the ice.

MINOT AND THE GLADES

Beyond Musquashicut Pond, you come to a stop light at Gannett Road, where you should follow the road to the ocean. The road traverses a high sea wall that affords a fine view of the offshore, wave-washed islets of Minot. These rocks, with their rockweed-barnacle biota, harbor hundreds of Purple Sandpipers in winter. At high tide, careful scrutiny with a telescope can sometimes produce a Ruddy Turnstone or Red Knot. Both cormorant species are common at appropriate seasons, while the wintering sea ducks almost annually include a King Eider or Harlequin Duck. Red-necked Grebes are also routine in winter.

Beyond the sea wall, on the right, is the Minot Light Inn. Discreet parking in this area allows the observer to walk a short distance to an iron gate across the road. While this gate marks the entrance to a private area known as the Glades, small groups of birders are generally permitted to use the trails and roadway to explore the headland. However, it must always be recalled that the area is private property.

The Glades is a forested rock outcrop that features dry oak woods, dense Green Briar tangles, and much Poison Ivy. Its plants reflect some of its more subtle charms, however, with the Polypody Fern, Ebony Spleenwort, Yellow Trout Lily, Scarlet Pimpernel, and several of our more uncommon goldenrods serving as ample testimony to its special characteristics. On the seaward side, you look towards sturdy Minot Light, over whose ledge Black Guillemots are regularly seen in modest numbers from mid-winter to late April. On the inside of the headland, a small salt marsh that borders Cohasset Harbor often has herons, shorebirds, Brant, and Red-breasted Mergansers at appropriate seasons.

During migration, landbirds can be abundant under proper weather conditions. Most of the southern warblers are recorded from time to time, flycatchers are a feature in late spring and in late summer, and sparrows are often abundant along the weedy roadside. The White-eyed Vireo is an irregular summer resident, and Screech Owls are permanent residents that can often be stimulated to call by imitations of their calls, even during the daytime. During April and September, hawk flights often develop over the Glades. Most regular are Sharp-shinned Hawks and American Kestrels; however, Peregrines and Merlins occur with tantalizing regularity.

It should be obvious that the Glades warrants a visit at any season; just be sure to dress warmly in winter! As with many choice birding spots, repeated visits and lots of patience are the keys to ultimate success, and given these, this area will not leave the dedicated observer disappointed.

LITTLE HARBOR REGION

By returning to Gannett Road, you pick up Border Road to the right, which eventually leads into Cohasset Center and then on to Little Harbor via Jerusalem Road. This stretch passes through well-planted estates, many of which have roadside tangles that can harbor semi-hardy wintering species such as Carolina Wren, Catbird, Hermit Thrush, and, rarely, Yellow-breasted Chat. A look at active feeders will also produce species like towhees, finches, and the more common chickadees, titmice, and nuthatches. Persistence is the key to seeing many of these thicket lovers.

Once in the vicinity of Little Harbor, poke into the surrounding roads to inspect all the coves and backwaters of this bountiful area. Both diving ducks and puddle ducks abound in winter, often with some surprises like European Wigeon, teals, or Pintail. One summer, a White Ibis graced the shallows that, in winter, are the feeding areas of Dunlin and Sanderlings. The ocean beach across the road from Little Harbor often has numbers of graceful Bonaparte's Gulls in early winter, and rarely these have been joined by a Black-headed Gull.

For the last leg of the trip, continue up the ocean front on Jerusalem Road, checking offshore in winter for King Eider among the more regular Common Eider. Also look closely for rafts of Red-necked Grebe in March and April, since this seems to be an important gathering area for them in early spring, before they depart for the Canadian interior. Jerusalem Road eventually brings the visitor to Route 228, which leads back to Route 3A to the left and the starting location of the trip.



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