

Bodie-Pea Island Area, North Carolina

*The unique Outer Banks of North Carolina;
how to bird them and what you'll find*

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Location: Dare County, N. C., from the entrance of Cape Hatteras Nat'l Seashore at Whalebone to the northern half of Pea Island Nat'l Wildlife Refuge. Oregon Inlet, the center of the area, is approximately 90 miles south of Norfolk, Virginia, and 40 miles north of Cape Hatteras, North Carolina.

Description: The Outer Banks are barrier beaches generally less than one mile wide separating Pamlico Sound from the Atlantic Ocean. Between the brackish marshes bordering the sound, and the dunes along the ocean, lie shrub thickets and low grassy dunes. The Bodie-Pea Island area has richer habitats for birds than the rest of the banks, owing to freshwater and brackish impoundments and marshes, large tidal flats and salt marshes at the inlet. This section of the banks is noticeably devoid of forests; however, there are several pine groves on Bodie Island (pronounced "body") near the lighthouse.

Access: The nearest major airport is Norfolk. By car from the north take U.S. 158; from the west U.S. 64, from the south U.S. 70 through Morehead City to the Cedar Island-Ocracoke Ferry. Crossing time is 2.5 hours; there are 2-4 trips daily, at \$5 per car. To cross Hatteras Inlet by the latter route one must take the (free) ferry, which takes about an hour, and runs hourly during daylight. Space on the ferries is no problem in winter, may be overtaxed at other seasons.

Accommodations: Many motels along U.S. 158 from Kitty Hawk to Whalebone are open April-October, a few year 'round. Manteo has several year 'round motels. There are campgrounds at Manteo and on Bodie Island and south to

Ocracoke. Campgrounds are crowded in summer; camping uncomfortable with blowing sand and mosquitoes.

Birdwatching: The Bodie-Pea Island area is unquestionably one of the best birding spots in the East. Large numbers of rarities have occurred here, owing in part to the concentration of accessible birding sites. Despite the scarcity of trees, it is possible to find 150+ species here on a fall weekend.

Birding is good at Bodie-Pea Island all year, but the fall season is undoubtedly the most exciting. In September and October the falcon, shorebird, and land-bird migrations are especially strong. The main waterfowl concentrations arrive in November and remain through February. Late winter and early spring are less interesting, but the area still has good birding potential. May is excellent for viewing shorebirds, but at this time

there are few migrant landbirds to be seen. As birding slacks off in summer; however, there are many nesting waterfowl: Black Duck, Gadwall, and Blue-winged Teal, as well as waders and lingering shorebirds. Black-necked Stilts nest commonly in the summer, and non-breeding American Avocets are found all year at the ponds.

The best local birding spots are detailed below proceeding from north to south, although they need not be worked in that order.

Several miles south of Whalebone on N.C. 12, are a few large ponds and excellent freshwater and brackish marshes. The ponds should be checked carefully. Snow Geese are abundant in these marshes in winter. All six species of rail have been seen here then; Virginia, and probably Yellows are common then. Black Rails have been seen in migration and may well nest here.

About 5 miles south of Whalebone follow the road to the visitor center and lighthouse. The large Lighthouse Pond is an excellent site for waterbirds, especially dabbling ducks, shorebirds, and waders. Stilt Sandpipers, White-rumped Sandpipers, and Long-billed Dowitchers are regularly found in fall but less so in spring. A few Wilson's Phalaropes, Baird's Sandpipers, and Hudsonian Godwits occur here in fall. Also in autumn the surrounding pine and shrub thickets often host migrant landbird concentrations. In addition to most of



Marsh and pond complex south of North Pond. Photo/Edmund K. LeGrand.

the eastern transients, certain western passerines, e.g., Western Kingbird, Lark Sparrow, and Clay-colored Sparrow turn up here each fall.

Across the road to the Visitor Center is the road to Coquina Beach, which is convenient for ocean-watching. Patience often yields Parasitic and Pomarine jaegers, September to December, Black-legged Kittiwakes in winter, and Sooty Shearwaters in late May. Pelagics seem to be more common both when the gulls are active and during and after a period of easterly winds. Gannets are easily seen from the beaches during the winter.

Most of the saltwater birds are found at Oregon Inlet. The inlet is best birded at low tide. Park at the marina on Bodie, north of the inlet and walk south across the vast flats. The large flocks of gulls, terns, and shorebirds that occur here all year should be carefully checked for rare species. In fall Brown Pelicans and Marbled Godwits occur regularly, and Long-billed Curlew is a rare specialty. Piping Plovers occur all year and Sandwich Terns are absent only in winter. The shrubs near the marina should be searched in fall for grounded transient landbirds.

After crossing the inlet bridge and entering Pea Island Refuge, turn left past the Pea Island Coast Guard Station and park at the campgrounds at the end of the road. The shrubs along the inlet again can be excellent for fall migrants, especially after passage of a cold front. Savannah (Ipswich) Sparrows are easily found on the low dunes toward the ocean.

Several miles south of Oregon Inlet, the Salt Flats, also called "New Impoundment", is visible on the right. Large numbers of gulls and shorebirds are often present here.

North Pond, just south of the Salt Flats, usually has the greatest variety of waterbirds. Whistling Swans, Canada Geese, dabbling and diving ducks, waders, and shorebirds are seasonally common here. Most of the pond can be viewed from the highway and also observation platforms located at its north and south ends, but a walk along a dike that circles the pond is often more rewarding. The north platform also overlooks part of the Salt Flats, and the south platform also overlooks a large marsh, field, and pond complex where thousands of Snow Geese and many Ring-necked Pheasants often feed. A platform for ocean viewing is located on the dunes across the road from the North Pond south platform.

South Pond, two miles down the road, has many waterfowl but is smaller and less accessible than North Pond.

Other noteworthy birding areas on the Outer Banks are:

Duck Woods north of U.S. 158, near the town of Duck, is a mature hardwood forest good for migrant landbirds.

Kitty Hawk Woods, located along County Road 1206 is a hardwood swamp where Swainson's Warblers nest. County Road 1206 is a dirt road south of U.S. 158 and just north of Kitty Hawk.

Wright Brothers National Memorial at Kill Devil Hills has large short-grass fields occasionally productive in fall for grassland shorebirds.

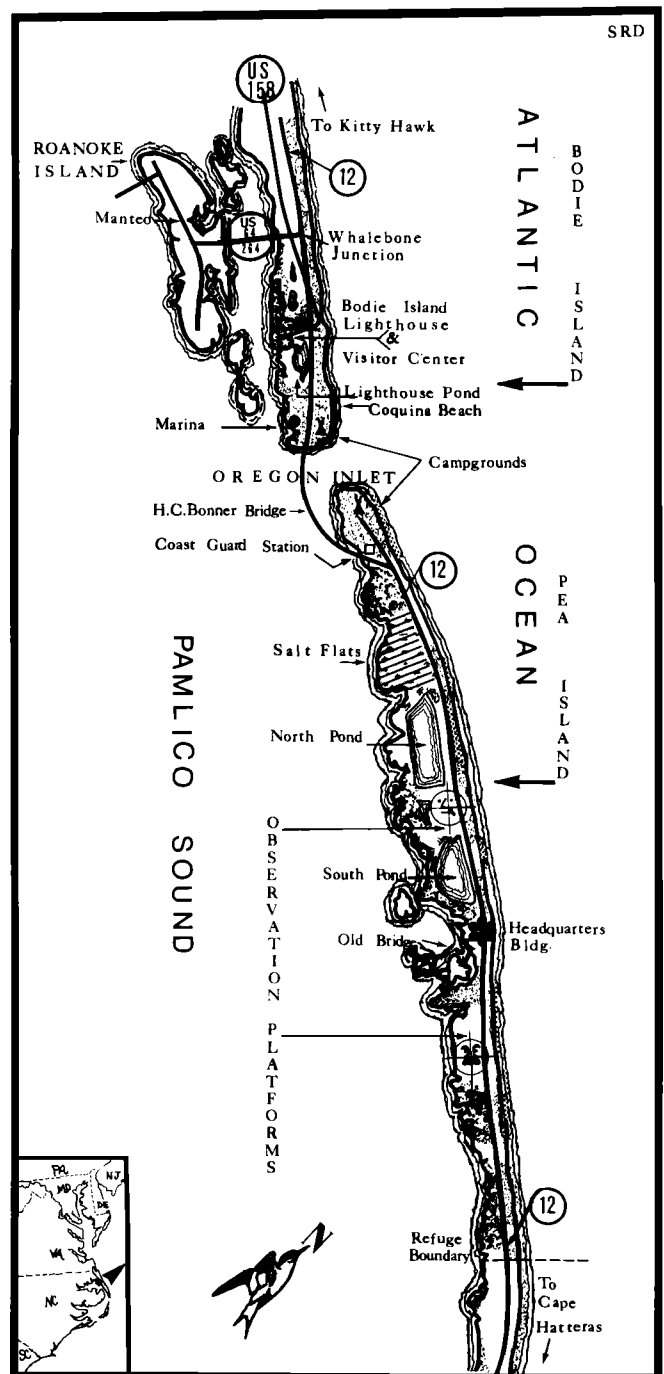
The Cape Hatteras and Ocracoke areas are less interesting than the Bodie-Pea Island region as they contain neither large impoundments nor easily accessible (although often excellent) inlets. Brant are more easily found in the Hatteras-Ocracoke area than at Bodie-

Pea, and pelagics in spring and summer are probably more visible south of Cape Hatteras, but otherwise has little to offer that Bodie-Pea lacks.

Although the Bodie-Pea Island region can be fairly well worked in a few hours, a minimum of two days is recommended to completely cover the area. We also recommend studying all birds individually for rarities and stopping to talk with other birders to exchange noteworthy sightings. Even during unfavorable conditions such as times of high mosquito density, or during high winds, or

rain, birding can still be rewarding if done from inside a car. A visit to the Outer Banks should be successful any time.

Rating: Fall (September and October) ****, Winter (November-January) ***, May and August ***, other months **1/2.



Bodie-Pea Island Area, North Carolina. Map/S. R. Drennan.