

THE BIRDS OF MONOMOY

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Monomoy Island is one of the finest birding spots in Massachusetts, if not the entire Atlantic coast. It enjoys a wealth of shorebird migrants throughout the summer, and when conditions are "right" in the fall, virtually any and all landbirds can be found there.

Yet, there are a number of problems involved with seeing birds on Monomoy, not the least of which is getting to Monomoy itself. As stated in the previous issue of BIRD OBSERVER, Art Gould Ferrys at Andrew Hardings Lane is one means of access to Monomoy - \$5.00 fee. Also possible are the Beach Buggy Wildlife Tours operated by the Wellfleet Bay Sanctuary - \$25.00 fee. In the past it was possible to rent boats at local marinas, but this is more difficult today. Further limiting the chances of a trip is the fact that Monomoy is located about one mile off Chatham, traditionally one of our foggiest localities. In addition, the shoal waters on the Nantucket Sound (west) side of Monomoy and the open ocean to the east are considered to be one of the most treacherous boating areas on Cape Cod.

Assuming that you haven't given up in total despair and that you are firmly planted on Monomoy, you have two options. You can bird either the north or the south end. The time of year should greatly influence the choice. From May through the third week of August you should select the north end. But beginning the 25th of August you should choose the south end - if possible.

North End

The best time for observing birds on Monomoy is at or as near to high tide as possible. At low tide the shorebirds are scattered over the vast flats and many feed at adjacent areas such as North Beach. The shorebird variety from mid-May through early June is not great, but the large numbers of certain species in breeding plumage is the attraction. Birds present during this period are Semipalmated, Piping (breeds) and Black-bellied Plovers, Ruddy Turnstones, Knot, White-rumped (few), Least and Semipalmated Sandpipers, Short-billed Dowitchers and Sanderlings. Oystercatchers have nested in recent years with mixed success.

The tern colony on Monomoy is currently located in the dunes at the extreme north end. Common Terns predominate, but a few Roseate Terns and an occasional Arctic can also be found. The latter have apparently left Monomoy for the more established Tern Island in Chatham where they can be easily seen from the Chatham fish pier. The Roseate Terns are frequently seen nesting with the Commons on the beach. Black Skimmers, which formerly nested, are often seen lounging on the beaches during the summer months as are Royal Terns, particularly in July. August and September are good months to look for Black and Forster's Terns.

In close proximity to the tern colony is the only active Laughing Gull colony in Massachusetts, these birds being joined by ubiquitous Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls. As is true of any area where gulls and terns gather in large numbers, it is often profitable to check the resting and feeding birds for rarities, especially after storms.

From July to September the main attraction is the migrating shorebirds. The Hudsonian Godwit is a highlight, arriving on or about July 4th and remaining the rest of the summer. An occasional Marbled Godwit or two put in an appearance with the Hudsonians, usually during August and September. In addition to the returning May migrants, other shorebirds to be looked for are: Whimbrel, Golden Plover (after mid-August) with Black-bellied, Willet, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs and Pectoral Sandpipers (in the short grass). Closer scrutiny is apt to reveal any number of unusual species such as Ruff, Wilson's Phalarope and others.

If you are on Monomoy during the landbird migration and it isn't possible for you to get to the south end, there is an alternative. Wildcat Swamp lies just north of Inward Point on the sound side of the island. From the flats to Wildcat is a reasonable walk and well worth the effort if you have time. Although Wildcat doesn't hold the numbers of migrants that the south end has, it is reasonably good. Yellow-breasted Chats, Yellow-bellied Flycatchers, and Philadelphia Vireos are regularly seen as well as the other flycatchers, vireos and warblers. There is always a chance for Dickcissel and Lark Sparrow.

At Inward Point the small marsh has nesting Sharp-tailed Sparrows and an occasional pair of nesting Seaside Sparrows.

South End

The south end contains the greatest variety of birds. The dense thickets, particularly the area of Dike Pond and the Lighthouse Marsh, hold hordes of migrants on a good day and fair numbers even on a quiet day. It is senseless to list what birds to expect because any species seems possible.

The variety of shorebirds is better than the north end. They can be found in the areas of Camper Cove, Dike Pond, and the edges of Big and Little Station Ponds. Camper Cove is good at both high and low tide. Check the rich mud flats and the algae along the high-tide line. Generally speaking, the east side of Little Station Pond is the best place for shorebirds. The small ponds in the Dike Pond area and the west side of Big Station are also good, if the water level is low. The species that are easy to see here are Stilt Sandpiper (usually numerous in August) and Western and Baird's Sandpiper in late August and September.

Another area for shorebirds is the Hudsonia moors about 1/2 mile north of the Lighthouse. Here in late August and September Golden Plovers and Whimbrel are found as well as an occasional Buff-breasted Sandpiper.

The Lighthouse Marsh and Little Station Pond Marsh are the breeding localities for Mallard, Black Ducks, Green-winged and Blue-winged Teal. Often summer residents and possibly breeders are Gadwall, Shoveller and Ruddy Ducks. These same marshes, including Big Station Pond, are favored stops for migrating fresh water and bay ducks in September and October.

The typical marsh birds are little known, although Least Bittern and King Rail have been present in the summer and Common Gallinule has bred.

Pelagic species include Wilson's Petrel, Shearwaters, and Parasitic Jaeger. The best chance for these birds is on the ocean side although the Sooty Shearwater is fairly regular in late May and June off Inward Point.

Sharp-shinned Hawks and Merlins are frequently seen in mid-September and the majestic Peregrine Falcon is a regular feature from late September to the end of October. In recent years the Gyrfalcon has been found in late fall.



FERRY TO MONOMOY & NORTH BEACH

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