



BIRDING DUXBURY BEACH

by Mark Kasprzyk

Duxbury Beach is a sandy pebble peninsula approximately six miles long that forms the northern end of Plymouth Bay including Duxbury Bay. An unusual feature of the beach is the sand strands or tombolos formed by long shore currents between Gurnet Point and Saquish Head. It is located in the town of Duxbury about thirty miles south of Boston and can be reached from Route 3. There are two approaches to the beach.

How to get there. From Route 3, take exit 11 to Duxbury, heading east on Route 14. Less than a mile down the road just past the police station take Route 139. Continue on Route 139 until the green signs for Duxbury Beach appear -- at the junction with Route 3A. Just follow the green signs, and you will eventually arrive at the public parking lot at the north end where there is a bathhouse and lunchroom. There is a fee for summer parking: \$2 on weekdays, and \$4 on weekends and holidays.

The other approach is to take exit 11 east from Route 3 onto Route 14 and continue on 14 across Route 3A and past the Duxbury High School on the left. The road curves to the right along the Bluefish River. At the intersection with the flagpole in its center go left, and continue straight ahead. Follow the road until you reach the Powder Point Bridge (a granite marker at the site calls it the Gurnet Bridge), one of the longest wooden bridges in the country. This bridge was destroyed by fire in 1985 but has been completely rebuilt and opened to the public in September 1987. The small lot before the bridge is a public boat landing with only a few parking spaces. The parking lot across the bridge is reserved for vehicles with Duxbury resident permit stickers.

The Duxbury Beach Reservation Inc. In 1919, this beach, privately owned by the Wright family for over thirty years, was offered for sale. The prospect that extensive real estate development might occur prompted a number of Duxbury residents to raise money to buy the property in order to protect the beach for the benefit of the town of Duxbury. Title was taken in the name of the Duxbury Beach Association, a common law trust. Property limits stretched from the upper parking area to just north of the Gurnet, and at this time, eighteen shacks and three large shooting stands existed on the beach. Nearly all of these were removed. Even the three Wright cottages were taken out by floating them across the bay and relocating them in south Duxbury. Today, aside from the residences on the Gurnet, only one house remains on the property itself.

In 1926 and 1931, after many years of negotiation, litigation, and the acquisition of marshlands bordering the beach, the Massachusetts Land Court

finally confirmed the Association's title to the land. This expensive process was financed by additional subscriptions from the shareholders of the Association.

In 1928, a bill was introduced into the Massachusetts legislature providing for state acquisition of several beaches, including Duxbury Beach, but Duxbury residents organized to defeat the plan, and the annual town meeting voted against it.

As beach use increased over the years, the Association expanded public parking, extended the road from the north parking area to the bay, and built a public bathhouse and lunchroom, still known today as the Pavilion. The improvements were financed by the shareholders and by selling small parcels of land outside the north end of the beach. The policing problems for the Town also increased, and these costs were met by requiring a minimal sticker. Parking in the Duxbury Beach parking lot was open to residents of Duxbury by stickers only.

During the 1970s, the three remaining families in charge of Duxbury Beach proposed to give the property to The Trustees of Reservations. However, the Trustees felt there was too much recreational use of the land for their standards. The Association then incorporated as the Duxbury Beach Reservation and gave their rights over to a new board of directors (unpaid), none of whom would be owners. The new directors consisted of eight representatives from local organizations.

The Duxbury Beach Reservation has undertaken measures to protect this natural resource and to prevent beach erosion and habitat destruction. Beach grass and shrubs are even more extensive now than in earlier days. Roadsides are being protected with post and cable fencing along the right of way to the Gurnet and Saquish to reduce damage caused by vehicles pulling off the road. Conservation officers patrol the beach during periods of heavy use to ensure that people possess stickers and that they stay out of the Least Tern colonies and dunes.

Rules and regulations for the protection of Duxbury Beach. Before setting off in anticipation of finding that rare shorebird or vagrant landbird, beach rules should be reviewed and understood by every visiting birder. Like any of the more popular Cape beaches, Duxbury Beach becomes flooded with beachgoers throughout the summer months, particularly along the northern sector and southern Saquish bay area. Heavy use requires constant beach patrol to protect areas of fragile habitat. To birders willing to make the 4.5 mile trek to Saquish, this means they can observe birds in the bay and thickets *from the road only* unless permission has been granted to bird in a specific area.

Only four-wheel-drive vehicles bearing either a Duxbury or Plymouth permit sticker are permitted down the beach. Plymouth residents are given access because the southern part of Duxbury Beach, from just north of the

Gurnet directly west past Saquish Head, is within the town of Plymouth. However, regulations state that Plymouth residents are allowed access to the Saquish area but *are not permitted to stop and use the beaches along the way.*

Birding Duxbury Beach. The main bird attraction at Duxbury Beach is the fall migration of shorebirds. Thousands of Semipalmated Sandpipers, along with a great host of other shorebird species, stop over to refuel on invertebrates. Although Duxbury may not rival Plum Island or Monomoy for sheer numbers or diversity, shorebirds that do frequent the area can usually be viewed at close range. Landbirds occasionally "fall out" in any of the vegetated areas dotting the beach. One August morning I witnessed ten species of warblers feeding in the wrack at Saquish along with shorebirds. It was a strange sight to see Yellow-rumped Warblers and Northern Waterthrushes feeding among the Semipalmated Sandpipers!

Along the northern end of Duxbury Beach, the best birding can be found on the bay side; the ocean side up to the level of the High Pines area is usually devoid of birds. On the bay side during high tide, shorebirds roost in scattered flocks ranging in size from a few birds to over two thousand. The best roosting spots on this part of the beach are located within the first half-mile, just south of Powder Point Bridge. Semipalmated Sandpipers make up the majority of the flocks along with Semipalmated Plovers, Sanderlings, Ruddy Turnstones, and other more common species. During the summer, Piping Plovers nest north of High Pines along the bay in sandy cobblestone areas with beach grass. Flocks of Least Terns also nest in this area. However, their breeding grounds tend to vary each year, and these areas may not always be posted. In September, Sanderlings and Black-bellied Plovers are the more common shorebirds along with the occasional Lesser Golden-Plover or Whimbrel. During fall, a surprising variety of warblers and sparrows can occur right in the beach grass with Lark, Clay-colored, and White-crowned sparrows reported here irregularly.

Continuing south will bring you to High Pines. Trees and thickets surrounding the one "private" residence can act as a migrant trap. The salt marsh here begins to jut out into the bay and is a fairly isolated roosting spot for shorebirds. The larger shorebirds in particular find favor here with numbers of Red Knots, Greater Yellowlegs, and Black-bellied Plovers found during August or September. The ocean side south to the Gurnet attracts large flocks of gulls, with Lesser Black-backed Gull always a distinct possibility from late summer on.

At high tide herons and egrets abound in the extensive salt marshes to the west of the Gurnet. Breeding birds from nearby Clarks Island come to feed as the tide pushes fish up into the grasses. Little Blue Herons are regular here. Check the harbor between High Pines and the Gurnet for summering eiders, mergansers, scoters, or loons.

Saquish Neck, also known as Crescent Beach, offers the greatest variety of birds along Duxbury Beach. Nearly all of the regularly occurring shorebirds may be seen here during the course of the fall migration. Over three thousand Semipalmated Sandpipers feed on the sand flats and wrack beds, which are best visited one to two hours after high tide. Western, White-rumped, and Least sandpipers can be found mixed in with the flocks of Semipalmated Sandpipers. Hundreds of Red Knot feed on mussel spat along the rocks that border the tidal pool once the tide recedes. In September, Lesser Golden-Plover is a regular species here, and Hudsonian Godwits occur sporadically. Cox's Sandpiper, Little Stint, and Red Phalarope head the list of shorebird rarities in recent years. Merlin and Peregrine Falcon may often be seen harassing the shorebird flocks here and anywhere else along Duxbury Beach. Lesser Black-backed Gull may be picked out of the roosting flocks of Herring Gulls that sometimes gather along the beach during low tide, especially after storms. September is also a good time to find large flocks of terns feeding along Saquish; keep an eye out for Forster's and Caspian terns.

The Gurnet Head and Saquish Point areas have proved to be excellent migrant traps for landbirds. Private residences surrounded by shrubs and thickets are packed into these outcroppings and provide a refuge for tired migrants. Fortunately, most of the vegetation can be checked for birds from the small roads that snake through the area. *There is no excuse for birders to trespass on private property.* Be sure to check for sparrows in the weedy margins bordering the roads. Rarities such as Northern Wheatear and Yellow-headed Blackbird have been seen here.

Another birding option to consider for Duxbury Beach is the Massachusetts Audubon Society's (MAS) Natural History Program in the summer. For further information write to MAS South Shore Regional Center, 2000 Main Street, Marshfield, MA 02050. Bird walks and beachcombing expeditions along the beach can make an outdoor excursion both fun and informative.

Reporting birds color-banded by Manomet Bird Observatory (MBO). While searching through the shorebird flocks along Duxbury Beach, you may come upon a color-banded individual. Through the years, MBO has been color-marking shorebirds in an attempt to determine length of stay, site fidelity, and longevity for fall migrants using the Plymouth-Duxbury system. Red Knots, Sanderlings, and Semipalmated Sandpipers are the birds most likely to be found with color bands. If you do come across one of these marked birds, you can make a real contribution by reporting it accurately. Please note the color-band combination, sequence and position (whether above or below the "knee" (joint) on both legs. For Semipalmated Sandpipers, nearly all individuals will be banded with a metal band above the left "knee" and will have a five-band color combination: two on the lower left leg and three on the lower right leg. Five

colors have been used: red, green, yellow, white, and orange. Two bands of the same color may be adjacent, so care must be taken to discern the five-band combination accurately. With Sanderlings and Red Knots, the number of color bands and colors may vary. Also, color flags should be present on most of the banded individuals of these latter two species. Please send the information to MBO, Box 936, Manomet, MA 02345.

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MARK J. KASPRZYK, who is studying the turnover rates of Semipalmated Sandpipers in the Plymouth Beach area for his master's degree from the University of Massachusetts/Boston, grew up on the northshore, graduated from Salem State College, and interned at Manomet Bird Observatory before working for two years as a field biologist in charge of fauna/flora inventories and revegetation studies along the lower Colorado River, a project affiliated with Arizona State University. At this time, he also was subregional editor of this area for *American Birds*. He worked for two years on a U. S. Bureau of Reclamation study along the Virgin River in Nevada and for three years coordinated the shorebird banding program in the Plymouth area for MBO. He is currently on the Manomet staff working with Brian Harrington on the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network, helping to write a shorebird manual. Mark enjoys nature photography and has birded extensively in the Northeast, Arizona, California, Nevada, Texas, Florida, and the Yucatan and Chiapas in Mexico. After January 1, 1988, his address will be 13 Rockhill Street, Foxboro, MA 02035.