

BIRDING CHATHAM, CAPE COD

by Blair Nikula

The "elbow" of Cape Cod, Chatham, offers the charm of a rural seaside village combined with some superb birding possibilities. The initial impression upon visiting Chatham is of a watery landscape, for the town is bordered on three sides by the sea and is pocked by numerous bays, inlets, and freshwater ponds. The vast expanses of salt water and extensive shoreline attract large numbers of migrant shorebirds and wintering waterfowl. During the fall migration, southbound passerines and raptors become bottle-necked here, and when the winds are northwesterly, some impressive concentrations of birds can result. In the winter the numerous thickets and residential plantings provide berries and shelter for a variety of lingering species that are rare on the mainland of Massachusetts in this season.

Of course, it must be kept in mind that this area is a traditional and very attractive summer residence and tourist area. The Cape traffic on weekends from Memorial Day to Labor Day may make it impossible to visit or to find parking at any of the town landings or public beaches, and a car sticker is required after July 1 to park at the public beaches: for nonresidents, \$5 per day, \$20 per month, and \$45 for the season.

To explore the following areas in sequence, find your way to Route 28 and follow it along the southern side of the Cape (the Nantucket Sound side), driving east from the Harwich-Chatham town line. Chatham Cemetery is located just within the Chatham boundary; and about a quarter of a mile from this point, turn right onto Forest Beach Road, which will lead you to the shore.

Forest Beach (1) is a small barrier beach and salt marsh on Nantucket Sound. It is worth checking in the winter for sea ducks and, during the warmer months, for herons, a few shorebirds --particularly Whimbrels in late summer, and nesting Sharp-tailed Sparrows. Barrow's Goldeneyes, King Eiders, and Harlequin Ducks have all been seen here, though very infrequently. Raptors sometimes use the radio towers as perches, and for the past two years, 1987 and 1988, Ospreys have built a nest on one of the poles.

Cockle Cove (2). Continue east on Route 28 for about three-quarters of a mile, past Route 137, which enters from the left, to the next road on the right, Cockle Cove Road. This cove is another small barrier beach and salt-marsh system on Nantucket Sound. Like Forest Beach, it has wintering sea ducks and at times a few migrant shorebirds and herons.

Ridgevale or Buck's Creek (3). Slightly less than half a mile farther along Route 28 will bring you to Ridgevale Road. Follow this road to the shore, to a sight that will gladden any birdwatcher's heart. Buck's Creek is a charming little

shallow estuary that is primarily of interest in the spring when it attracts herons and shorebirds, particularly yellowlegs and Willets. The estuary is usually less productive during the summer and fall. The best time to check is at low tide (approximately three hours after Boston low tide), when the flats are exposed. On the higher tides, look for herons and roosting shorebirds in the marsh beside the road. For the best vantage point, park along the side of the road near the beginning of Ridgevale Road South, a narrow track that leads off to the left. Walk to the end of the road and out onto the small rise that extends into the marsh.

Hardings Beach (4). About a mile farther along on Route 28, turn right onto Barn Hill Road. After 0.4 mile along this road, bear right onto Hardings Beach Road and follow it to the beach parking lots. This lovely barrier beach extends for a mile and a quarter on Nantucket Sound and is backed by a narrow salt marsh that is rather productive for birding and was in the early nineteenth century an important source of salt marsh hay. During the winter, a walk down the beach will often produce Snow Buntings, Horned Larks, Northern Harriers, occasionally a Lapland Longspur or an "Ipswich" Sparrow, and, more rarely, a Barrow's Goldeneye, Common Black-headed Gull, Short-eared Owl, or Snowy Owl. During the warmer months, watch for shorebirds in the marsh and at the end of the beach as well as for herons, terns, and nesting Sharp-tailed Sparrows or, rarely, Seaside Sparrows. Piping Plovers and Willets nest here, and American Oystercatchers can often be found on the small flats at the entrance to Oyster Creek. Access is by foot from the public parking lot.

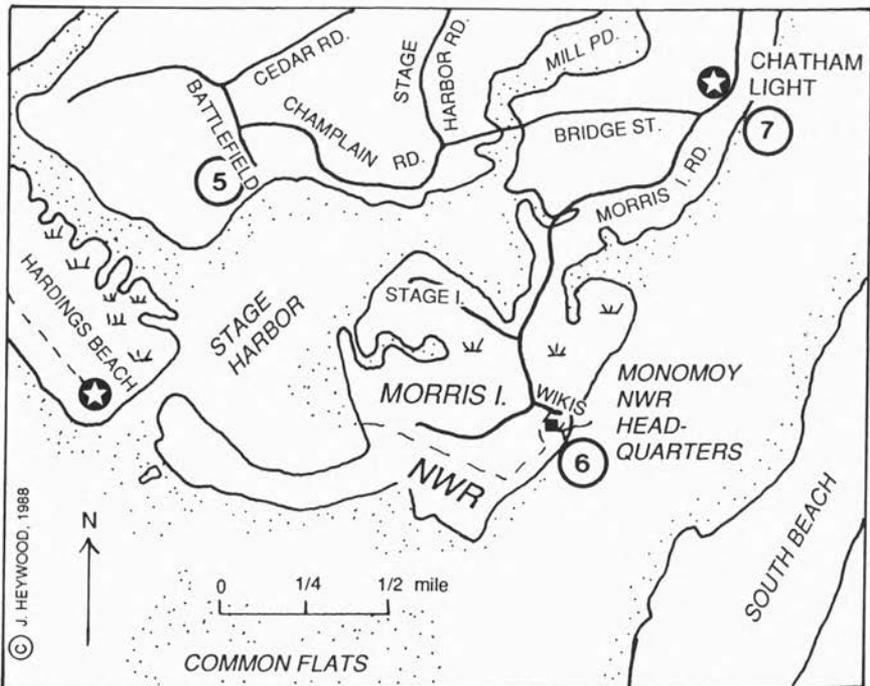
On the way back on Hardings Beach Road, you may wish to turn sharp right (0.7 mile) and follow Barn Hill Road to the town landing on Oyster River. In the 1930s this was a well-known area for oyster marketing, and there are still several old oyster shanties standing on the Oyster River Landing. From this position you can look across the river to what is called The Neck or Stage Harbor Neck. If you look toward Nantucket Sound, Stage Harbor Lighthouse can be seen in the distance, marking the end of Hardings Beach. The term stage refers to the horse-drawn Chatham Stage Coach, which in days past was a link between these areas that are separated by inlets from the sea.

Stage Harbor (5). For those willing to hike a bit, good vantage points for looking over the harbor are the end of Hardings Beach (4) or the end of the beach on Morris Island (see 6 below). Stage Harbor, particularly the outer portion, generally has a good assortment of wintering bay ducks, often including a Barrow's Goldeneye, and in late fall, terns and small gulls, among them occasionally Common Black-headed Gulls or Little Gulls.

To reach another vantage point for viewing Stage Harbor and the next stop on our Chatham birding tour, it is necessary to return to Route 28 from Hardings Beach or Oyster River Landing and proceed east about 1.4 miles. At the

stoplight, bear right onto Queen Anne Road for a short distance. Turn right onto Pond Street. Continue along the edge of Oyster Pond, and you will very quickly reach Stage Harbor Road. Turn right again and after 0.3 mile take the first right onto Cedar Street, which ends after 0.7 mile in Battlefield Road. Here, turn left. After 0.1 mile (when you pass Champlain Road on the left), Battlefield Road becomes a narrow one-lane paved track leading down to a town landing. This is a good vantage point for viewing Stage Harbor, and the light is best in the afternoon. Here you can look across the harbor to Stage Island and Morris Island; both are part of the same island mass. To the right, toward Nantucket Sound, the entrance to Stage Harbor can be seen.

When you travel back on Battlefield Road, in order to see a bit more of the area, turn right onto Champlain Road. A couple of spots along Champlain Road offer less desirable views of Stage Harbor, and it is difficult to pause long unless the road is deserted. Champlain Road ends after 0.8 mile at Stage Harbor Road. Turn right. A distance of 0.7 mile along this will bring you to Bridge Street on the right. Turn here. Within a mile, there is an intersection. Make a sharp right turn here and you will be on Morris Island Road, a turning and curving road which leads to the causeway over to Morris Island and Stage Island and to the Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge (a total distance of 1.2 miles from the Bridge Street turn).



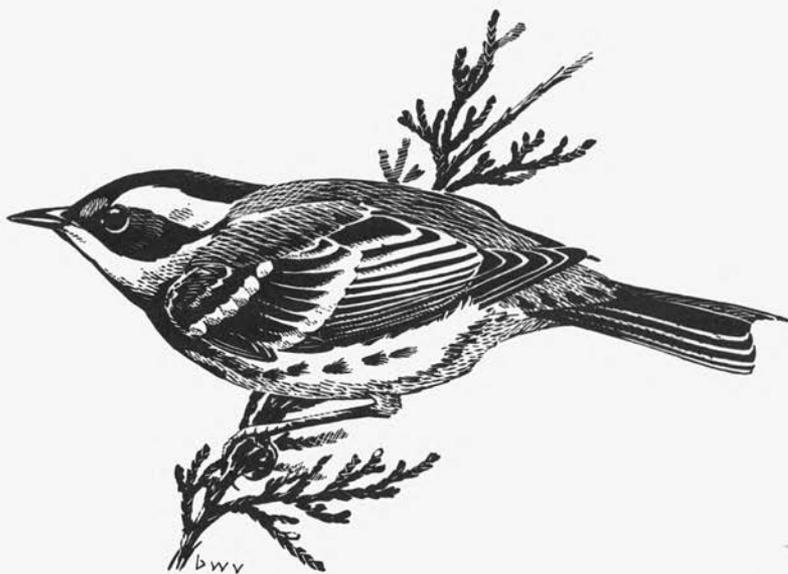
Morris Island (Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge) (6). Morris Island is a small oasis in the southernmost corner of Chatham and offers some of the finest year-round birding on Cape Cod. A large number and variety of birds are usually present in the area at any season. Although most of Morris Island and all of the adjacent Stage Island are privately owned and generally off-limits to visitors, the federal government owns approximately fifty-six acres on the east and south sides of Morris Island, part of the Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge, and public access is permitted in that portion.

When proceeding out Morris Island Road on the causeway, check both sides of the road for egrets, herons, shorebirds, Common and Least terns, and small gulls in season. Falcons, accipiters, and Northern Harriers are frequently seen here during migration and winter. On occasion, a wintering Short-eared Owl courses the marsh at dusk. In the fall, watch for sparrows in the grass and kingbirds on the wires. Small numbers of wintering bay ducks can be seen in Stage Harbor on the west side of the causeway.

At the end of the causeway, Stage Island Road leads off to the right. Formerly one of the premier migratory landbird "traps" in New England, this small island has suffered heavy residential development, and the resultant loss of habitat and increasingly restricted access have eliminated the birding prospects here -- a particularly sad example of what has happened in many portions of Cape Cod.

As you enter Morris Island from the causeway, a sign announces the "End of Town-owned Property." Continue past Stage Island Road on Morris Island Road. Do not be intimidated by several signs in the area announcing "private way," and "residents only." However, this is private property; so do pay attention to the sign that informs visitors that there is no parking on the roads on the island. Access is permitted as far as the first road on the left, Wikis Way, which ends shortly at the Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge headquarters, where limited public parking is available. The parking lot is very small and fills up early in the day during the summer. If the lot is full, return to the causeway, and park on the east side of the road. Either walk back the main road up to the headquarters or walk the sand trail that leads east from the end of the causeway to the beach. There are no public exhibits or rest-room facilities at the headquarters, but the seasonal refuge manager is generally present from April through August, and pamphlets, including a bird-list, are available.

The headquarters lawn offers a fine panorama of the Chatham mainland to the north and of South Beach Island and the Atlantic Ocean to the east. Sharp-eyed observers can scope the distant flats on South Beach where it is often possible to pick out the larger, more conspicuous shorebirds, terns, gulls, and other waterfowl, and occasional seabirds, especially Northern Gannets, over the ocean beyond. During migration, watch for hawks and swallows overhead and



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Black-throated Gray Warbler
September 1987
Morris Island, Chatham

Illustration by Barry W. Van Dusen

over the marsh to the north. Rough-winged Swallows and Belted Kingfishers often nest in the cliff face below.

From behind the headquarters take the trail leading down the stairs and follow the beach to the south end of the island. Monomoy Island beckons from across the deceptively narrow channel to the south (so near, yet so far!), and South Beach Island lies to the east. At low tide, the mud flats in this part of Morris Island often attract a good variety of shorebirds. This in turn attracts migrating Merlins, Sharp-shinned Hawks, Northern Harriers, and Peregrines. The mussel beds are particularly favored by American Oystercatchers, Willets, and Red Knots from spring through early fall, and by Common Eiders and Brant during the winter. Hudsonian and Marbled Godwits are sometimes seen here or feeding in the distance on the north end of Monomoy. From mid-May to late September, Common and Least terns often fish the channels. During the late summer, they are usually joined by a few Roseate Terns. Double-crested Cormorants are routinely sighted from early spring through the fall and are replaced by Great Cormorants during the winter.

Continuing west along the beach, watch for nesting Piping Plovers and Horned Larks in the summer and Snow Buntings and an occasional Lapland Longspur in the winter. The beach eventually ends at the mouth of Stage Harbor, where there are shorebirds and terns in the summer and fall and various small gulls during the late fall and early winter. This is also a good spot from which to check for wintering ducks in Stage Harbor.

On your return from Morris Island keep to the right when you reach Bridge Street (on the left). Travel north on Shore Road to the Chatham Coast Guard Station and park there, facing Pleasant Bay.

Chatham Light (7) is a beautiful vantage point overlooking the lower portion of Pleasant Bay and the newly formed passage that broke through the barrier beach (once known as Great Beach and variously as North Beach or Nauset Beach) in 1987. This inlet of the Atlantic Ocean now separates two long, slender spits of what are currently called North Beach and South Beach (also known as South Beach Island). This interruption of the barrier beach has had a profound effect on the shoreline of lower Pleasant Bay. The inlet is steadily widening (about a mile in width as of June 1988), and watching this process has become a major attraction for visitors and Chatham residents alike. Here one can view the ocean at work altering the coastline and can appreciate the fragile and temporary nature of a barrier beach.

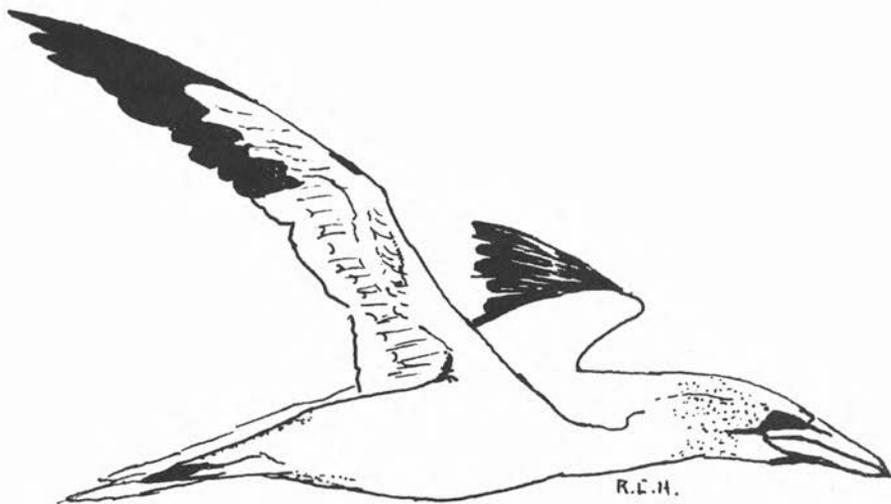
Check the bay for gulls at any season, terns during the warmer months, and waterfowl in the winter. Large flocks of Common Eiders are present here some years. During the early spring and again in the fall, gannets can often be spotted (with the help of a telescope) fishing off the outer beach. On rare occasions, a sharp-eyed observer can pick out a few shearwaters plying the distant horizon.

Chatham Fish Pier (8). From Chatham Light, travel north on Shore Road for just over a mile until you reach the pier. This is worth a quick check in the winter for waterfowl and gulls, including an occasional white-winged gull. The small island directly across from the pier is Tern Island, the former home of a large tern colony until an invasion of rats drove them out.

North Chatham (9). A quarter of a mile farther north on Shore Road, a set of lights marks the intersection with Old Harbor Road, and Shore Road becomes Route 28. There is no sign to indicate that this is Old Harbor Road. But turn right at these lights and visit a quiet neighborhood of lovely waterfront homes. The area offers several vantage points on Pleasant Bay that you can visit in succession: the Cow Yard, the end of Cotchpinicut Road, and the town landing at the end of Scatteree Road. As you travel up Old Harbor Road, watch for Cow Yard Lane (0.2 mile) on the right. Beyond this, 0.4 mile farther, Old Harbor Road ends. Again there is no sign, but this is Scatteree Road. Turn right. In 0.2 mile Cotchpinicut Road enters Scatteree Road from the left. Another 0.2 mile along, Scatteree Road turns left, and at this point there is a sign to prevent you

wandering down a private lane. Follow each road to its end. Each is worth checking during the winter for Great Cormorants, Brant, Common Eiders, goldeneyes (including Barrow's) and other waterfowl. The flats off the end of Cow Yard Lane attract a few shorebirds during migration. Also, small thickets of syringa, honeysuckle, and wild rose are scattered throughout this neighborhood. "Pishing" at any likely-looking spot will often produce a few migrant passerines in the fall or lingering "half-hardies" in the winter.

Frost Fish Creek (10). Make your way back to Route 28 and continue north past the North Chatham Post Office. About a mile from the lights at the Old Harbor Road intersection, a small tidal creek crosses under the road. This is often worth a quick look during the winter. The flock of domestic Mallards and half-breeds on the east side of the road sometimes attracts a wayward Northern Pintail, American Wigeon, Green-winged Teal, or Wood Duck during winter freeze-up.



Northern Gannet

Illustration by Robert C. Humphrey

Chathamport (11), the next destination, has extensive waterfront on Pleasant Bay. Onward another half mile on Route 28 from Frost Fish Creek, turn right on Crows Pond Road (or if you miss it, on Fox Hill Road, which Crows Pond Road soon joins). Seapine Road will appear on the left 0.4 mile from the beginning of Crows Pond Road. A quarter of a mile along Seapine Road, there is a dirt pullover area on the left (marked private), where you can park to scan Crows Pond.

Crows Pond (12) is a good spot to look for Barrow's Goldeneye and other bay ducks during the winter. From Seapine Road return to Crows Pond Road and continue on. Just beyond the point where this road joins Fox Hill Road, there is a private golf club on the left and directly across the way is a very obscure track, easily missed, leading to a town landing, another site that overlooks Crows Pond. Continue on Fox Hill Road 0.6 mile farther until you see a sign for Strong Island Road. Turn left and follow Strong Island Road to a town landing at its end. This is an excellent spot for looking over Pleasant Bay. A good variety of bay ducks can be found here in the winter, and this is one of the most reliable places on the Cape to find Barrow's Goldeneye. Check over the islands in the bay (the largest of these is Strong Island) for hunting Red-tailed Hawks, Northern Harriers, and rarely, a Rough-legged Hawk or Bald Eagle.

Lovers Lake and Stillwater Pond (13) attract a good variety of pond ducks during the winter. Of the two localities, Lovers Lake is generally the more productive and easier to check. Canvasbacks, Ring-necked Ducks, scaup, Pied-billed Grebes, and American Coots can usually be found. Lovers Lake is best checked from Old Town Lane, whereas Stillwater Pond can be seen only from a dangerous curve on Old Comers Road. To reach these ponds from the Crows Pond area, follow Fox Hill Road south across Route 28, where it becomes Training Field Road. Stay on this for 1.2 miles and turn left into Old Town Lane (marked private), which leads through a residential area down to the lake. When you come back out this lane, turn right and in half a mile, look for Old Comers Road on the right. A right turn here will take you past Stillwater Pond and back to Route 28.

BLAIR NIKULA, who has contributed many fine articles to this publication, is a regional editor for *American Birds*, leads birding tours at home and abroad, and has been responsible for sighting or confirming many of the rare vagrants observed on Monomoy and Cape Cod. Blair wishes to acknowledge the assistance of Dorothy Arvidson and Rebecca Barber in preparing the travel instructions and checking the route. The map was prepared by Janet Lee Heywood.