

NANTUCKET, PART II

by Marcia J. Litchfield

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the concluding portion of a two-part article on Nantucket. "Nantucket, Part I" was published in the October 1988 issue of Bird Observer (16: 248-55).

Nantucket State Forest, Polpis Pines, and Old South Road (5). From the rotary follow Milestone Road (the only unmarked spoke of the rotary), and turn off at the second left (marked Polpis/Wauwinet), which is Polpis Road. After the Islander package store (almost immediately on the right), turn in the second dirt driveway on the right. This leads to paddle tennis courts. Park on the left anywhere past the courts. If you continue on foot down the driveway toward Milestone Road, you will find a large boulder marking a trail off to the left. Go into the pines here, and walk slowly up the hill back toward your car. Both Northern Saw-whet Owls and Common Barn-Owls have been seen and heard reliably in this corner of the state forest, generally in the fall and winter. After first checking this route during daylight hours to acquaint yourself with the area and to look for owl pellets and whitewash to locate the birds, try to visit on a calm night.

Another section of state forest is also famous for saw-whets, barn-owls, and Long-eared Owls. From the rotary take Old South Road (marked Airport/Surfside) to Lovers Lane on the right, a distance of 0.7 mile. Travel along Lovers Lane to the first dirt drive on the right, where there is a barrier. Park here and walk in, heading westward. It is best to first check this route also during daylight. You will reach an open area off to the left. Walk left and find a path through the pines, heading roughly south. This whole area is crisscrossed by similar paths. The main one will wind around to the left a couple of times. The bends in it and various clearings up through the branches are where owls are usually noted in this area. This main path eventually leads to Lovers Lane, where you can now walk northward back to the car.

Folgers Marsh, Quaise, and the Lifesaving Museum (6). From the rotary take Milestone Road to Polpis Road on the left. Follow Polpis Road to the Lifesaving Museum, located on the left 2.6 miles from the rotary. Park at the museum, and enjoy excellent views of a lovely marsh. This is where a Western Reef Heron visited in 1983, from April 26 to September 13. The smaller marsh to the south of Polpis Road is also worth checking for Marsh Wrens, Virginia Rails, and Soras, and Sedge Wrens have been twice recorded here.

Polpis Harbor (7). From the Lifesaving Museum travel east on Polpis Road for two miles, and look for a dirt road going off to the left, immediately

before the Wauwinet Road turnoff, also on the left. Turn in this small dirt road, which crosses a stream where American Woodcocks frequently winter and ends at picturesque Polpis Harbor, worth checking at any time of year.

Pocomo Head, Pocomo Meadow, and Upper Harbor (8). Enter Wauwinet Road from Polpis Road, and watch for Pocomo (Pah-ka-ma) Road to appear on the left after one mile. Go all the way to the end of Pocomo Road. Here will be spectacular views of all of Nantucket Harbor. Park in the lot here, and look from the bluff for wintering sea ducks and shorebirds. From May through November it is an easy, lovely walk along the beach southward (to your left) below the bluff to Pocomo Meadow. It looks farther than it actually is.

This large salt marsh is rich with waders and ducks in the fall. The flats at the mouth of its creek are alive with birds at low tide, which occurs about two hours behind the Nantucket Harbor tide. You may wish to cross the creek and continue along the edge to the mouth of Polpis Harbor.

Squam and Quidnet (9). There are two ways to get to Quidnet village, one of the oldest settlements on the Island. Drive back along Pocomo Road, take a left onto Wauwinet Road, and travel 0.9 mile to Squam Road, a dirt road on your right. Squam Road is secluded, overgrown, winding, and often full of landbirds--a nice road to walk the length of (1.6 miles) on a still morning during migration. Squam Road ends at Quidnet. The village road in Quidnet forms a square with parking at the edge of Sesachacha (pronounced "Sack-a-cha") Pond, straight ahead.

If you approach from Polpis Road, Quidnet Road turns off to the left half a mile past Wauwinet Road. Travel to the end of Quidnet Road (about one mile) and turn right. Follow the road left, and find a parking area by Sesachacha Pond.

From September to November Quidnet can be especially active with landbirds. The little manicured yards and flower gardens of the village often hold White-crowned Sparrows, Lincoln's Sparrows, an occasional Dickcissel, Blue Grosbeaks, Western Kingbirds, and more. The pond is always worth a check for ducks and gulls. The Quidnet "cut," where the pond occasionally breaches to the sea, is a nesting ground for Least Terns and Piping Plovers in some years. Historically, Arctic Terns have also attempted to nest. When the pond level is low, an excellent variety of shorebirds may be present here, and a Curlew Sandpiper was seen here once in August. A walk along the pond edge to the cut and then back along the ocean to the village is a good route, providing views of both fresh and salt water.

Sesachacha Pond (10). In addition to the Quidnet vantage point, there are two other places along Polpis Road to check Sesachacha, Nantucket's largest pond. Travel southeast on Polpis Road for exactly one mile from the Quidnet Road turnoff, and look for a small parking area on the left. Park here, and follow the path to the pond. Off to the left will be a cove where Virginia Rails, herons,

egrets, and ducks can be found. This corner of the pond serves as a roost and feeding area for waders during migration.

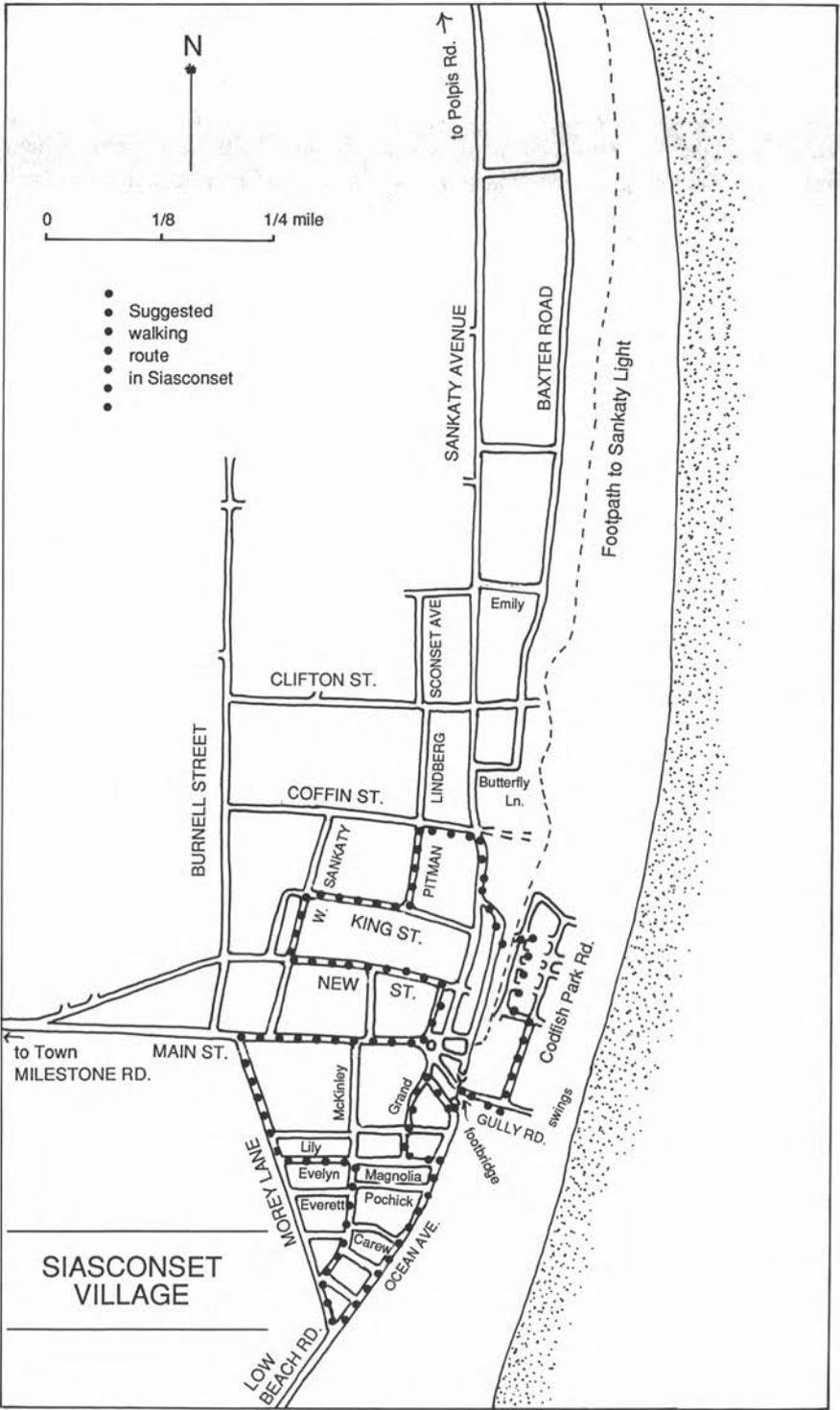
The other spot is 0.3 mile farther along Polpis Road. This dirt turnout has a little more elevation to it and offers an excellent vantage point for scoping. Lesser Black-backed Gull and Glaucous and Iceland gulls have been sighted from here. The lush and wild area surrounding the pond and behind you across the moors to the south is a property of the Massachusetts Audubon Society known as the Nantucket Heathlands Sanctuary (eight hundred and fifty acres acquired in 1988).

The Beach Club (11). Travel an additional 0.6 mile farther along Polpis Road, take Hoick's Hollow Road (pronounced "Hoyks") off to the left, and follow it to the end. Walk up to the bluff edge in front of the buildings to take in a beautiful view of the open ocean. Sometimes the Sankaty Bluff Harlequin Ducks drift northward to this point during the winter, and both Iceland and Glaucous gulls may be noted in the daily movements of hundreds of gulls along the eastern shore. All of Hoick's Hollow Road is attractive, too, for landbirds because of an abundance of food as well as a lush cover of catbrier and grape thickets.

Sankaty Light, Sankaty Bluff, and Siasconset North Bluff (12). From the Beach Club on Hoick's Hollow Road, return to Polpis Road. From this point travel to your left toward Siasconset (past the golf course) for 0.85 mile to the first paved road on the left. Turn in here. This takes you over to a road that parallels the bluff (Baxter Road, although there is no sign). Turn left here, and follow Baxter Road to its end at the Coast Guard's Sankaty Head Light Station. Here you can walk to the edge of a rapidly eroding bluff, the highest bluff on the Island. At its edge you are enveloped by a spectacular vista sweeping out to sea and across the moors behind you. From November 9-30, 1986, a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher was present at the Sankaty Head Golf Course, and an American Swallow-tailed Kite was seen in July 1988. During fall migration Peregrine Falcons and Merlins seem to play in the updrafts along this bluff and will zip between the houses or up around the lighthouse. Later in the year, look for Harlequin Ducks or King Eiders, which occur here annually.

Siasconset Village, Siasconset Beach, and Low Beach (13). The timeless little hamlet of Siasconset (pronounced and often written simply "Sconset") offers a birder all the whimsy and magic of a living fairy tale. From the truly quaint little gardens, shell-lined avenues, and rose-covered cottages to the pretty panorama of Low Beach, you will nearly always be rewarded with either a nice bird in an unusual place or an unusual bird in a nice place!

Whether you come to Siasconset from Polpis Road as above or out the Milestone Road from the rotary, the best place to park is at the swings in Codfish Park. To get there, take a right at the Siasconset circle (there is a flag



pole here) and then an immediate left, passing under the footbridge within sight. The swings will be directly in front of you at the edge of the sea. From here, depending on what is your birding pleasure, you may either walk the open beach off to the south (to your right) as far as Tom Nevers Bluff, looking for waterbirds or wander about Codfish Park and Siasconset Village for landbirds. Pochick Rip, which runs off the beach just north of the Siasconset sewer beds, is often the site of much feeding activity. One good route is to bird the beach and then cut across the dunes to Low Beach Road, which leads you back into the village.

Both spring and fall migration can be exciting in Siasconset with impressive numbers and variety. Try following the suggested route on foot early in the morning, preferably on a windless day. Also, the Siasconset Footpath, which begins at the footbridge and goes all the way to Sankaty Light along the bluff, can be alive with activity in its dense rose thickets draped in honeysuckle, grapevine, and Virginia creeper, with pines and ornamentals along the way.

The entire beach along the open ocean from Codfish Park south to Tom Nevers Bluff is loosely known to birders as Low Beach, where you will find miles of open beach and ocean vistas. Here upward of a dozen gull species can be seen between late November and early February, including regular Lesser Black-backed Gulls and some of the highest numbers of white-winged gulls to be found anywhere in New England. Alcid flights are not uncommon, and fancy ducks like King Eider, Harlequin Duck, and Barrow's Goldeneye occur annually. Hundreds of Common and Red-throated loons also occur during migration, and clouds of Northern Gannets are present over the rips all winter.

Tom Nevers Bluff and Madequecham (Mad-a-ke-sham) Valley (14). From the flagpole in Siasconset, follow Milestone Road to Tom Nevers Road, a distance of 2.5 miles. Take Tom Nevers Road all the way (just over three miles) to the tall red-and-white water tower at the navy base, where the road turns to dirt. In a rugged vehicle you can continue westward toward Nantucket Airport along a reasonably civilized dirt road called New South Road. Along this road are many morainal valleys that run north and south through typical Nantucket scrub-oak habitat and lead to the ocean. This route brings you back onto Milestone Road approximately 0.6 mile east of Nobadeer Road (marked only with an airport sign). This circuit can thus be driven in the reverse direction. However, New South Road is a rough and narrow road several miles long, pockmarked with a number of low, washed-out areas that may be impassable when filled with water, forcing you to retrace your route back to the red-and-white water tower. If you are looking for the entrance to New South Road from Milestone Road, it is 1.6 miles west of the Tom Nevers Road turnoff and 2.1 miles east of the rotary in Nantucket Town and is inconspicuously marked.

Aside from the marine birds, this is a reliable area for Rough-legged Hawks in winter and is also attractive habitat for Peregrine Falcons and Snowy Owls.

Eel Point Road, Eel Point, and Warren's Landing (15). From Nantucket Town take either Cliff Road or Madaket Road westward to the black water tower, which is near the junction of Cliff, Madaket, and Eel Point roads, just west of Maxcy Pond. Follow Eel Point Road, looking for Short-eared Owls and Northern Harriers along the way, to a small parking area at the end. It is possible to drive out around Eel Point on the many sand roads, but only with a four-wheel-drive vehicle. The main road, which becomes Warren's Landing Road and enters Madaket Road at the other end, is 3.8 miles long. It is paved for only just over a mile beyond the black water tower. Then like many Nantucket roads, it turns to dirt (or to sand). For most of its length (2.7 miles), it is a narrow rough road, but still navigable in an ordinary vehicle (without four-wheel drive).

Eel Point is definitely one of Nantucket's birding hot spots at any time of year, and the views are unequalled. The large salt marsh attracts waders, shorebirds, and raptors as it hooks out around Madaket Harbor, where thousands of sea ducks and waterbirds gather in winter to feed in the shallows. The interdune swales and thickets trap migrants blown out to the Island in the fall and serve as roosts for Short-eared Owls and Black-crowned Night-Herons in fall and winter. In late summer and early fall, the open expanse of sandbars, Tuckernuck Channel, and Nantucket Sound can be alive with great flocks of Roseate, Common, and Least terns, regularly joined by Black, Forster's, and Royal terns. Jaegers may be seen marauding them as they feed. American Oystercatchers seem to own the place during the summer, and the entire peninsula is critical breeding, feeding, and wintering habitat for Short-eared Owls and Northern Harriers.

Warren's Landing is another vantage point for birding Madaket Harbor and is reached by heading toward Madaket. Walking from the Eel Point parking area along the roads to Warren's Landing will provide good birding during migration. From the Eel Point parking area, continue toward Madaket. About 0.7 mile before the road enters Madaket Road (or 3.1 miles from the black water tower), there is a cement post inscribed "public way" indicating a road where you can get a closer view of Madaket Harbor.

North Head of Long Pond (16). This regular birders' stop is easily found by following Madaket Road to the landfill, about 1.6 miles west of the black water tower. Park and scope the pond to find annually occurring Eurasian Wigeons, good numbers of Redheads, Canvasbacks, Ring-necked Ducks, and scaups along with hundreds of Mute Swans and gulls, including Lesser Black-backed Gulls.

Smith Point and Madaket (17). Follow Madaket Road to its end and take the last available right. Cross a small wooden bridge, known as Millie's Bridge,

and you will be on Smith's Point. Follow the road, which turns to the left, take the first right and then a left, and go to the end, or park at the public way marked by a concrete post on the right. If you have a four-wheel-drive vehicle, you may continue out this sandy point jutting into Tuckernuck Channel and, as of this writing, around to Esther "Island," which is now attached. Walking out along the northern edge of Smith's Point, with its sandflats and views of Madaket Harbor, is equally, if not more, productive. The strong currents at the western tip of this point are often full of feeding terns, gulls, Northern Gannets, and sea ducks. Pelagic birds may be seen from the ocean side of the point.

Great Point, Coskata (Cos-kay-ta), and Coatue (Co-too) Refuges, and Wauwinet (18). This fragile barrier beach system can provide a full day's birding excitement in any season. It offers nearly fifteen hundred acres of ecologically unique wild habitat valuable to both wildlife and plant species on Nantucket. The three wildlife refuges are managed by the Trustees of Reservations, the Nantucket Conservation Foundation, and the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. It is best to explore this vast open landscape with the help of a four-wheel-drive vehicle (beach sticker required), but the hardy walker will also enjoy a jaunt out to Coskata (about one mile) or all the way to Great Point (about five miles). Traversing the length of Coatue (about six miles) can be a feat in itself, requiring an open-ended schedule and complete backtracking to Wauwinet. It is very easy to get stuck, lost, or exhausted. An excursion by vehicle is always an adventure, revealing Coatue's wild and windswept landscape and heathy dunes. However, exploring it by boat is somewhat more practical.

To get to the refuges by vehicle or on foot, take Wauwinet Road from Polpis Road to its end. Stop at the refuge gatehouse to check on obtaining a beach sticker. The gatehouse attendants will provide you with a map, regulations, and recent bird sightings. Walkers may park their cars or bikes here in a small lot.

The village of Wauwinet (Wah-win-it) can provide rewarding birding during migration with its catbrier thickets and tupelo-sassafras groves. It is possible to walk a casual loop (about a half mile). From the gatehouse, walk to the right of the tennis court on a small cart-path to Crow's Nest Way. Go right to Squam Road, right again onto Wauwinet Road, and back to the refuge gatehouse. In breeding season listen for nesting American Redstarts and Northern Bobwhites.

Great Point, Nantucket's northernmost extremity, juts out into Nantucket Sound five miles from the village of Wauwinet. On a clear day you can see South Monomoy Island, some twelve miles to the northeast. The main body of the point holds most of the valuable feeding and nesting habitat to be found on Nantucket for Piping Plovers and Least Terns and virtually transforms itself into

one big nursery from May to August. The heathlands, cedar forests, and surrounding waters also provide important feeding and wintering habitat for numerous species.

The birdlife may change weekly, daily, or hourly with the weather, tides, or season. The salt marsh, flats, and turfy open beach around Great Point Pond regularly provide the viewer with rewarding numbers of terns, gulls, shorebirds, waders, and raptors. Highlights have included Sandhill Crane, Black-necked Stilt, Bar-tailed Godwit, and Lesser Black-backed Gull. In the fall Great Point is an outstretched arm welcoming migrating Peregrines, Merlins, Sharp-shinned Hawks, Common Loons, flocks of Lesser Golden-Plovers, and other shorebirds, as well as to landbirds dropping out of the sky into the cedar thickets. Snowy Owl, Rough-legged Hawk, Gyrfalcon, and Bald Eagle are possibilities, as are pelagics off the very tip of this area. Thousands of wintering sea ducks thrive in these rich offshore waters.

Coskata, with its uniquely isolated mature oak forest and vast salt-marsh system, is a birder's delight. Look for a trail cutting south-north through the woods. This starts at an old Osprey nesting platform at the wood's edge and will take you to Coskata Pond. Find also the mouth of this salt pond emptying into Nantucket Harbor. On low tides the exposed bars and creek shallows can be alive with mixed-species feeding flocks of herons, egrets, and shorebirds. American Oystercatchers simply abound. Just south of Coskata Woods, find Haulover Pond and its outlet. In summer this fragile area is critical Piping Plover habitat and is also used by migrating shorebirds, ducks, and waders.

If not exploring the scalloped shores of Coataue via boat, inquire of the gatehouse attendant as to the best route to take from Wauwinet, for it tends to change with tides and sand conditions. In summer Coataue is home to Nantucket's Great Black-backed and Herring gull colony and is difficult to miss. Great Egrets were first found nesting in 1987 in the cedars, and American Oystercatchers are abundant. Dense stands of wild prickly pear cactus also occur along the western third of Coataue. Look for their showy yellow blossoms in early July.

The eighteen birding locations described here and in "Nantucket, Part I" will provide you with many seasons and years of excellent birding. You will never go away disappointed, once charmed by the natural beauty of the land, the sea, and the skies, and will be tempted by the birds to return again and again to this faraway isle.

MARCIA J. LITCHFIELD, who moved to Nantucket in 1979, has been birding since childhood. She has been the Nantucket Tern Warden for the Trustees of Reservations, writes a weekly column about birds for *The Inquirer and Mirror*, and has led trips for the Maria Mitchell Science Center. Observers are welcome to contact her anytime for tips on birding Nantucket by writing Box 1015, Nantucket, MA 02554.

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