

**MIDDLETOWN and  
NEWPORT, RI**  
Based on USGS maps Tiverton,  
Sakonnet Point, Newport, and  
Prudence Island.

## BIRD FINDING AT SACHUEST POINT, RHODE ISLAND, AND ENVIRONS

by Alan E. Strauss

When all of the freshwater ponds are frozen and the sheltered bays are covered with ice, a birder can always find some excitement at Sachuest Point National Wildlife Refuge in Middletown, Rhode Island. The refuge is situated on Aquidneck Island, which is surrounded by Narragansett Bay to the west, Rhode Island Sound to the south, and the Sakonnet River to the east, and contains the towns of Portsmouth, Middletown, and Newport. At the end of the last ice age, Sachuest was itself a separate island (Quinn 1976, page 57). The steep slopes of the island fall to shingle beaches composed of Pennsylvania Age shales, sandstones, and argillites. It is believed that the local prehistoric inhabitants used some of these rocks to make their stone tools (Strauss 1989, page 25). The rocky coast and the promontory of Sachuest Point, which noses out into the ocean, provide a wonderful habitat for many interesting avian winter visitors.

Birding at Sachuest Point really picks up beginning in October with the arrival of small groups of Harlequin Ducks, a major birding highlight of the area. Thirty were reported on the December 1989 Newport County, RI/Westport, MA Christmas Bird Count.

As the winter progresses the sanctuary plays host to a variety of birds including Snowy Owls, Common Eiders, King Eiders, Short-eared Owls, Rough-legged Hawks, Perègrine Falcons, Snow Buntings, Lapland Longspurs, meadowlarks, Common Goldeneyes, Barrow's Goldeneyes, Purple Sandpipers, American Pipits, Horned Larks, Common and Red-throated loons, Horned and Red-necked grebes, and Sanderlings. During stormy weather, the lucky birder may also find gannets, Razorbills, and Dovekies although the latter two are only occasionally seen.

To reach Sachuest Point National Wildlife Refuge from Massachusetts, take Routes 93 (128) or 495 or 195 to Route 24 south. Follow Route 24 south into Rhode Island to the exit marked Portsmouth/Bristol. At the stop sign at the end of the exit ramp, turn left to Route 138. Bear south on Route 138, also called East Main Road, for about 6.7 miles to Mitchell's Lane on the left, immediately after a sign "Entering Middletown." Turn left onto Mitchell's Lane.

**Barn Owls and the Norman Bird Sanctuary (1).** Follow Mitchell's Lane for about 1.3 miles, and look for an owl box on the side of a barn on the left side of the street opposite the intersection with Wyatt Road. The owl box can be viewed if you stop at utility pole number 37. The Barn Owl that occupies this box must be observed from the edge of the road. *Do not go into the farmyard.*

The Barn Owl was present on June 20, 1990. Continue on Mitchell's Lane, and take the right fork at the small sign for Newport Memorial Park. Mitchell Lane's becomes Third Beach Road from this point on. At the next stop sign, continue straight ahead.

After about a mile, you will pass the Norman Bird Sanctuary on the right side of Third Beach Road. Although the birding here in recent years has been poor, the wooden water tower at the sanctuary has been home to a family of Barn Owls for several years. The birds are best viewed at dusk or early evening. The Grey Craig Trail in this sanctuary leads to Nelson Pond (also known as Grey Craig Pond), which often has teal and both American and Eurasian wigeons. This area also has wintering landbirds such as catbirds and Carolina Wrens.

**Sachuest Point National Wildlife Refuge (2).** When finished at Norman Sanctuary, return to Third Beach Road. At the next stop sign continue straight ahead to what is known locally as Navy Beach. The road forks opposite a long trailer-like building marked "Navy MWR." Go to the right. Shortly you will come to a yield sign; a fenced-in parking lot and camp spot is at this corner. Proceed left to the entrance to Sachuest Point National Wildlife Refuge.

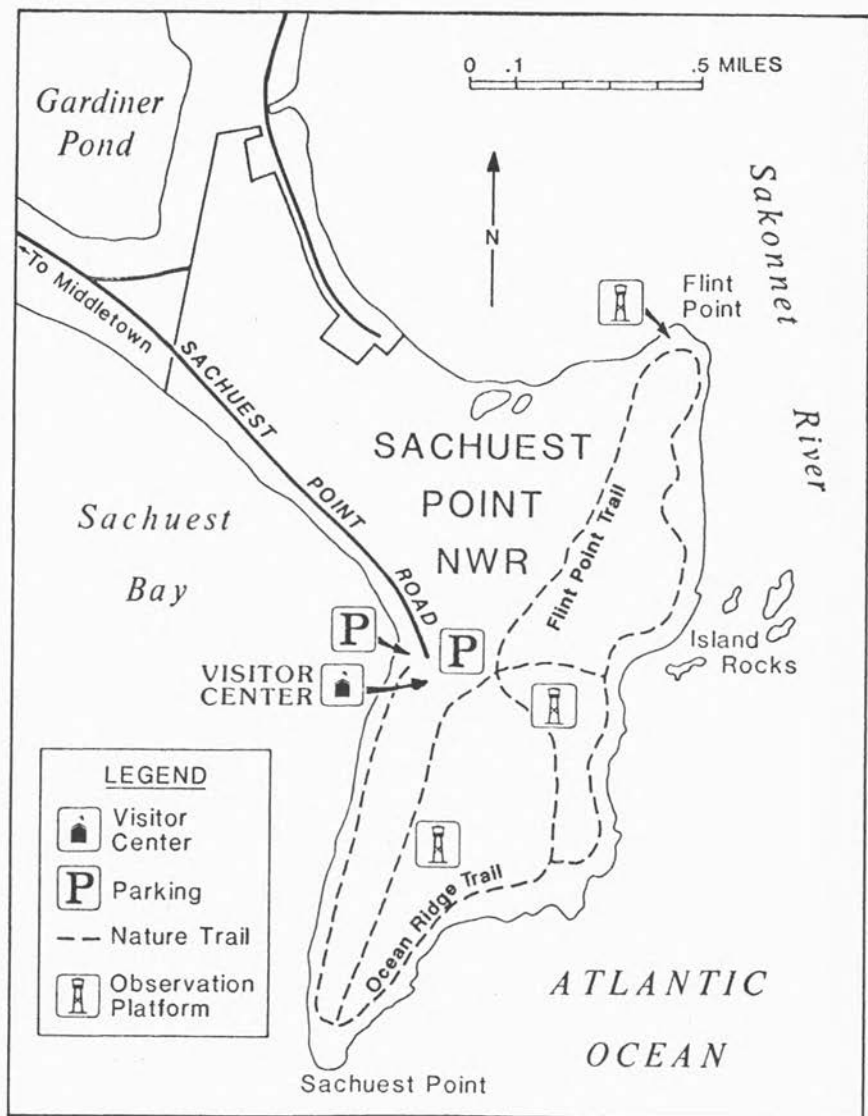
At the parking lot is a small visitors' center, which is open Wednesday through Sunday from 8:00 A.M. to 4:00 P.M. and provides drinking water, restrooms, and a display of local marine life. The park naturalist, George Sprague, is usually available to provide information about bird sightings on the refuge as well as at other nearby locations in Rhode Island. Maps, bird lists, and information about all of the state's national refuges can be obtained here.

Birding at the refuge is best begun early in the morning. This will provide the best views of Short-eared Owls and the closest looks at loons, grebes, eiders, and Harlequins. Late in the day, people walk their dogs here, and fishermen often come in close to shore to check lobster pots and fishing traps. These activities sometimes spook the aquatic birds and force them farther offshore.

Sachuest Point Refuge is a 242-acre sanctuary with a three-mile system of easily walked trails that skirt a majestic coastline and cross through the interior of the park. The major trails are shown on the map, reproduced here with permission. This map is also available at the visitors' center. The Ocean Ridge Trail follows the coastal edges of the sanctuary. The views into Sachuest Bay often result in sightings of Common Loons, American Black Ducks, Greater and Lesser scaups, Red-breasted Mergansers, Common and Barrow's goldeneyes, and Horned and Red-necked grebes. In the winter of 1988, as many as 119 Red-necked Grebes were counted at one time.

Follow the eastern coastline to a small peninsula of rocks that projects out into the ocean. Male and female King Eiders as well as Common Eiders have been seen feeding just off the end of the line of rocks. As you continue along the

coastal trail, scan for Common and Red-throated loons, Greater and Lesser scaup, three species of scoters, and, of course, Harlequin Ducks. The Harlequins usually feed around the rocks, often in the rough water currents. One of the best places to view them is from Island Rocks, where you can slowly crawl out along the rock slabs and get very close to these fascinating ducks. It is not uncommon for fifty or more Harlequins to be present at one time, and King Eider has been observed here as well.



Map by Steve Haydock. Reprinted with permission.

Proceed along the shoreline trail, scanning the water, the rocks, and the fields for birds. A large population of Yellow-rumped Warblers is present year-round in the brush. Northern Harriers cruise low over the fields often putting up a kestrel or large flocks of Eastern Meadowlarks and Snow Buntings. Towhees, mockingbirds, and Northern Flickers are present in the tangled bittersweet.

At Flint Point, there is an observation platform from which you can scan the Sakonnet River and adjacent hillsides. The trail then heads away from the shore back toward the parking lot. In the interior of the property one can find a variety of common landbirds. The low bushes and man-made T-posts provide perches for Snowy and Short-eared owls, although these raptors often perch on the ground. For several years two Short-eared Owls have stayed the winter at the refuge. Last winter, two Short-ears circled directly over my head at dusk as I watched from the viewing platform near the parking lot. Snowy Owls, which usually arrive by the end of December, may be found in a variety of locations in the park—perched on the roof of the visitors' center, on the man-made perches, on the low dike that borders the refuge, on small juniper or cedar trees, and even on the rocks adjacent to the ocean. Other raptors regularly seen on the refuge are Merlins, Ospreys, Cooper's Hawks, and, during migration, Peregrine Falcons. An immature Bald Eagle was also reported this year by George Sprague, the refuge naturalist.

On any given day a red fox mousing in the open fields is a sight that may catch the eye of an observant visitor. On my trip to Sachuest to prepare this article, a young fox not only tolerated my presence but cooperated further by letting me photograph him at close range.

If you visit the refuge on a stormy day with east or southeast winds, you may find a variety of interesting seabirds. Oldsquaws may be seen, as well as Razorbills, Thick-billed Murres, Dovekies, Northern Gannets, Bonaparte's Gulls, and in the fall on rare occasions jaegers. Just before you enter the park on any day it is a good idea to check the shoreline for shorebirds on the sandy beach or around the seaweed-coated rocks. Purple Sandpipers can usually be found in the winter along the offshore rocks.

I suggest that a visiting birder whose interests extend beyond avifauna might also wish to explore the tidal pools and eddies along the rocky coast. Interesting shells and a variety of flora and marine fauna can be seen. In the spring and summer, the waters of Rhode Island Sound often bring in unusual marine life. The exposed rocks at low tide provide an ideal place from which to cast for tautog, or blackfish. (Green crab pieces make the best bait, but almost any natural bait will work.) This past summer in the area between Sachuest Point proper and Island Rocks, I caught a gray triggerfish (*Ballistes capriscus*) measuring over sixteen inches—a state record.

**Gardiner Pond (3) and Hanging Rock.** After finishing at Sachuest Point,

drive back out of the park heading west along Sachuest Point Road. Take the second right, and you will find a large elevated pond, Gardiner Pond, that is surrounded by a dike. On the left-hand side of the road, one can see "Hanging Rock," a conglomerate cliff formed during the last glacial episode. Across from "Hanging Rock" on the right-hand side of the road, there is a pulloff near a steep set of wooden steps that leads up to the top of the dike. Here one can scan the pond for a variety of diving ducks such as scaup, Ruddy Ducks, Redheads, mergansers, black ducks, and Canada Geese. The grassy wetlands around the dike are noted for wintering Soras and Virginia Rails. The salt marsh opposite Second, or Sachuest, Beach should also be checked for rails. A Sedge Wren was found at this location last fall.

**Purgatory Chasm (4).** Return to the main road and continue west. After passing the last stretch of beach, the road rises and forks. The left fork is Tuckerman Avenue. Take the first left off Tuckerman into a small parking lot for Purgatory Chasm. The park is open from 6:00 A.M. to 11:00 P.M. with thirty minute parking. This area provides a good vantage point from which to scan the ocean for Common Loons, scoters, Red-necked Grebes, scaup, and both Common and Barrow's goldeneyes. The chasm itself is an interesting geological formation. It consists of a split in the conglomerate rock that is about 10 feet wide, 120 feet long, and nearly 50 feet deep. The chasm was formed by constant marine erosion and weathering.

**Easton Pond (5).** Now return to the main road and continue west across Easton Point. At the stop sign at the end of Tuckerman, go left, and then take a right onto Wave Avenue. Easton Pond is on the left. Vantage points can be found from the several parking sites along Wave Avenue. Continue left at the end of this short street, and go north to an electric substation at the edge of the pond near the dike between Easton and Green End ponds. This spot provides a good viewing point. Easton Pond may offer diving ducks, coots, teal, and merganser. The lucky birder may also be able to add Northern Pintail, Redhead, Canvasback, and Lesser Scaup to the list. When the water level is low enough, this area also attracts late fall shorebirds, including occasional Hudsonian Godwits. Two unusual sightings at this area were a Smew seen January 3 through March 2, 1976, and an American White Pelican recorded in the winter of 1978 (Conway 1979, pages 31-32).

**Green End, or North Easton, Pond (6).** Continue straight on Route 214 to the light at Green End Avenue and turn left. At the point where Green End Avenue crosses the outlet from the north end of Green End Pond, pull cautiously off to the right side of the road, which is narrow and heavily traveled. The small wetland on the right side of the road, if not frozen, often has wintering snipe and Black-crowned Night-Heron. The northern end of Green End Pond, across the road, is one of the most reliable spots for Lesser Scaup.



**Cliff Walk (7), Newport's mansions, and the Breakers (8).** Next cross the bridge and go left at the fork. Follow this road (still Green End Avenue), turn left on Bliss Mine Road and then right on Bliss Road into Newport. After five blocks, go left on Eustis. You will pass through several stop signs until you reach Memorial Boulevard. The entrance to the Cliff Walk will be directly across the street in front of you. Go right on Memorial and then, after about 0.5 mile, turn left at the first main intersection onto Bellevue Avenue. This is the area of the famous Newport's mansions, a good side trip should the weather totally preclude birding. Follow the road to the entrance to the Breakers Mansion on Ruggles Avenue. If you have not seen Barrow's Goldeneye, you might try the Breakers. An elevated wooden platform above the rocky coast provides good viewing opportunities. Return to Bellevue Avenue, which goes past the end of the Cliff Walk and makes a sharp bend where it becomes Ocean Drive at the fork with Coggeshall Avenue. Go left on Ocean Drive by the tennis courts.

**Lily Pond (9)** will be on the right across from Gooseberry Beach. The pond is surrounded by a thick screen of *Phragmites*, but there is an opening where a small brook crosses under the road. This pond is perhaps the most reliable spot in the state for Gadwall, sometimes supporting as many as two hundred birds in November, and is also a good location to find Northern Shovelers.

After viewing Lily Pond, proceed west on Ocean Drive. In about 0.5 mile you will see a large rocky cove on the left which makes an excellent photographic locale, especially during sunset or stormy weather. A rocky outcrop on the right side has been a traditional nesting site for Common Tern. On June 20, 1990, there were nine terns here, and one egg could be seen. The water on the right side curves around into a marshy area and pond. The ducks from Lily Pond such as Hooded Mergansers often travel back and forth between the two ponds. Continuing on Ocean Drive, you will see greenish metavolcanic rocks. These rocks are similar to the types used by prehistoric inhabitants to manufacture stone tools. Following Ocean Drive west once again, you will come to Brenton Point State Park (10). People often fish from the rocks for tautog and bluefish at this location. Gulls and cormorants can be found on the offshore rocks. The golf course in this area can be a good spot to find Short-eared and Snowy owls in winter, and Castle Hill Light to the west can produce various raptors (Sharpshins, Cooper's, kestrels, and Merlins) during the fall migration.

This tour of some of Rhode Island's birding spots can be made in one day. However, numerous accommodations are available in Newport and Portsmouth for those who wish to stay overnight and visit other birding localities in the state or the parks, mansions, and museums of Newport. You should check with the Newport Chamber of Commerce for seasonal schedules. It is best to be aware that Newport, like Cape Cod, is a prime tourist area and very crowded in the

summertime. At other times of year, however, Rhode Island provides a variety of interesting birdlife that can often be studied at very close range. When the winter doldrums set in and you are ready to settle for watching birds at the feeder, plan to visit a little island that, for this birder, shines like a jewel in the sea—Sachuest Point.

#### References

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