



BIRDING MARTHA'S VINEYARD

by E. Vernon Laux, Jr.

Just a forty-five minute ferry ride from Woods Hole, Massachusetts, and with frequent and inexpensive ferry service year-round, the island of Martha's Vineyard maintains a rural character except during the summer tourist season. The Vineyard is approximately twenty-five miles long and fifteen miles wide, and while there are excellent bike paths in many areas and a good bus system in the summer, most birders will want to either bring a vehicle with them or rent one on arrival.

From June 15 to Labor Day, nonresidents can park their cars and use beaches at South Beach (Katama, south of Edgartown), State Beach (between Oak Bluffs and Edgartown), and at Gay Head Lighthouse (very limited parking). Other beaches are open for casual birding visitors the rest of the year.

The months of September and October are exceptional for generally fabulous weather and good numbers of birds. While most of the island is private property, the best birding spots are primarily town-owned or county-owned and birders never have a shortage of habitats to check or thickets to work.

Before leaving Woods Hole, you should check the rocks for harbor seals. Ferry crossings can be good for birds. Past highlights of the crossing included a Peregrine Falcon stooping a pigeon and narrowly missing the heads of passengers, hand-feeding of an Iceland Gull from the stern (potato chips available at the snack bar), and occasionally great views of Northern Gannets, Black-legged Kittiwakes, Razorbills, and other pelagic species after strong onshore winds.

A note on the boat ride: in fifteen years of crossing in good and bad weather, I have never seen anyone get seasick. I therefore would not worry about taking any preventive medication. Even if the wind is howling, there are only one or two rough spots and the ferry never rocks for more than a few minutes. If the weather is particularly bad and dangerous, some trips will be canceled and you cannot get here from there.

Loons, grebes, cormorants, many waterfowl, and the commuter crows, seen flying north in the morning and returning south in the afternoon, are staples of the boat ride from September through May. Great Cormorants are present in considerable numbers from October through April and can be seen sitting in the water and fishing at any time during the trip. As you enter Vineyard Haven Harbor, check along the west shoreline for wintering rafts of Common Goldeneyes and occasional Barrow's Goldeneyes. As many as four Barrow's Goldeneyes have wintered on the Vineyard. During migration virtually any bird is possible. If, upon approaching Martha's Vineyard, you see migrating

accipiters, falcons, or Ospreys moving south, or land birds heading northwest, you may have hit it just right and your destination upon disembarking should be the extreme western end of the island: the cliffs at Gay Head.

Gay Head

The western tip of the Vineyard rises some 170 feet above sea level in spectacular fashion with multicolored cliffs that can be alive with birds in spring and more often in fall. This is where the Red-billed Tropicbird appeared in September 1986 and returned the following year to delight literally thousands of birders from around the country. From mid-August through November, but particularly from mid-September through mid-October, the fall migration birding at Gay Head is perhaps better than at any other locale in the state. Flocks of migrating birds may be stacked up in layers both above and below the cliffs departing to the northwest toward Cuttyhunk Island. At times, large numbers of birds may be visible climbing higher and higher until vanishing from view.

Having spent the past fifteen years trying to figure out when and where birds will appear or move in numbers, I have learned that the more I know the less I know and that it is always worthwhile to check the cliffs at first light to see and hear what is flying off the island, what movement has occurred, and if it will be worthwhile to check other nearby areas after 8:30 or 9:00 A.M.

The most reliable spot to see visible migration of birds is near the Gay Head Lighthouse and along Lighthouse Road on the northern edge of Gay Head. Other good spots include West Chop in Tisbury, East Chop in Oak Bluffs, and Cape Poge (sometimes spelled Pogue). At Gay Head, an early start is essential because thousands of birds may depart from the cliffs at dawn or shortly thereafter. As the sun rises and falcons and accipiters begin to appear, most passerines descend and fly back into cover. By 9:00 A.M., birds stop attempting to leave and settle into trees and thickets for the day.

Upon arrival at the western tip of Gay Head, park in the lot at the base of the teardrop circle and proceed to check the immediate area for migrants. Western Kingbird, many vireos and warblers, Yellow-breasted Chat, and many fringillids, including White-crowned, Lincoln's, Clay-colored, Lark, and Vesper sparrows, Dickcissel, and Blue Grosbeak are fairly regular in the weeds and hedgerows around the parking area. Walking is highly recommended. Staying in a good vantage point with views into a thicket with good light and an open horizon to check on birds flying by is the most productive way to get results. Birds often move in a circle starting from the south and working around north toward the lighthouse and beyond, then repeating the route. One Red-headed Woodpecker was seen following this loop six times on an early October morning.

After it quiets down near the cliffs or as the day wears on and tourists

appear, it is often profitable to walk down Lighthouse Road pishing and working both sides of the road for migrants. A good ear is invaluable, as many birds will be heard flying over but not seen. Often the wind will be southwesterly and birds will be abundant in Gay Head. Find an area sheltered from the wind and check likely-looking spots from the road and you should have success.

The Gay Head Dump on State Road is an excellent land bird trap. Park near the entrance of the dump (do not block) and bird the area on foot. The Vineyard's only Ash-throated Flycatcher was seen here in early November 1989 and Cerulean Warblers have been noted in September with some regularity.

The cliffs along Moshup Trail are a good spot for raptors, loons, grebes, and waterfowl in the winter months. The trail is also the best spot for Northern Shrikes. Increasingly, rare winter finches are also a feature of the cliffs in the fall and winter months. The falcon migration can be spectacular. For Merlins, it peaks in late September, while for Peregrines, it peaks a week or two later in early to mid-October. Both species are hard to miss. On one afternoon in early October 1990, thirty-two Peregrines, fifty Merlins, and many other hawks were seen from the lighthouse in the span of two and one-half hours. This was a wonderful sight, but just about any day in October has a couple of Peregrines around the cliffs.

Gay Head is fifteen miles from Vineyard Haven and can be reached in one-half hour by car or two hours by bicycle.

Lobsterville and Menemsha Bight (West Basin)

Lobsterville and Menemsha Bight are on Vineyard Sound on the northeast side of Gay Head. Occasionally in the fall large numbers of terns congregate on the sound and jaegers are sometimes seen. Shorebirds, terns, summering loons, herons, egrets, and excellent fishing are all features of this area. A Eurasian Curlew appeared in this area and remained for the entire winter in 1975.

Squibnocket Beach Parking Lot

Squibnocket Beach at the Vineyard's southern tip is a famous island birding spot with many rarities seen here in the past. Located at the southwest corner of Chilmark, turn south 400 yards west of the bridge onto the only paved road between the bridge and Moshup Trail. Squibnocket Beach seems to be a magnet for flycatchers. Gray Kingbird, Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher, and Scissor-tailed Flycatcher have appeared here. The Western Kingbird is regular with as many as six birds seen in one tree once in October. It is the only marsh habitat on the island and therefore the only likely and reliable spot for Marsh Wren, Virginia Rail, and American Bittern. It is the best spot for wintering Purple Sandpipers and Harlequin Ducks. The latter are found close to shore around the rocks to the left or right of the parking lot. I recommend taking a short walk along the beach

to the west to look for birds not visible from the parking lot. In the winter the numbers of loons, grebes, eiders, and scoters will impress anyone: this is one spot you should not miss! The light is best either early or late in the day and a spotting scope is very useful for scanning the water.

Indian Hill Road, Christiantown

Indian Hill Road in the Christiantown section of West Tisbury has mature deciduous woods and is good for woodland bird species. Red-bellied Woodpecker is common and a pair or two of Red-headed Woodpeckers are usually found near the intersection of Indian Hill and Christiantown roads. About half a mile up Christiantown Road (dirt) is the Mayhew Chapel, which was purchased by the Martha's Vineyard Land Bank. A parking area lies just beyond the chapel. The parking area can be excellent for warblers and thrushes in migration, while Scarlet Tanager, Red-eyed Vireo, Wood Thrush, Eastern Bluebird, Ovenbird, and Carolina Wren are all common nesting species.

Long Point Wildlife Refuge

Long Point Wildlife Refuge is a 500-plus acre sanctuary owned and operated by The Trustees of Reservations. It is situated along the south shore and has the typical scrub oak vegetation prevalent along the entire south shore outwash plain of the Vineyard. It is the premiere spot for Short-eared Owl and Rough-legged Hawk from October until April. Additionally, there is a large freshwater pond and the saltwater Tisbury Great Pond, both of which are very good for waterfowl. Northern Harriers and Red-tailed Hawks are common and Bobwhites are hard to miss in spring and early summer. Barn Owls breed in a nesting box placed on the south side of the old barn next to the refuge parking area. To get there, look for Deep Bottom Road (dirt) approximately one mile west of the Martha's Vineyard Airport on the Edgartown-West Tisbury Road. Follow the dirt road south to the parking area.

Martha's Vineyard State Forest

Located in the geographical center of the island is a protected 4,500 acre forest that is a mix of scrub oak, white pine, Norway spruce, and mostly dead red pines crisscrossed with fire lanes. A lovely paved bike path runs along the forest's perimeter. The area is very good at night for Whip-poor-wills and several owl species. The headquarters building is a reliable spot for Saw-whet, Eastern Screech, and Long-eared owls. Eastern Bluebirds nest in the bird boxes near the headquarters and in spring the maple trees can be filled with orioles, Indigo Buntings, and Rose-breasted Grosbeaks. Owling is best before dawn as the wind is usually calm and the noise from both air traffic and automobiles is much reduced. Rufous-sided Towhee, Brown Thrasher, Gray Catbird, and

Prairie and Pine warblers are common breeding birds. To get to the forest headquarters, take Barnes Road (sometimes called Airport Road), which runs between the Edgartown-West Tisbury Road and the Edgartown-Vineyard Haven Road. Turn east onto the only paved road off Barnes Road.

Felix Neck Wildlife Sanctuary

The Felix Neck Wildlife Sanctuary is a large and beautifully managed property to which sanctuary director Gus BenDavid has been hard at work attracting wildlife for many years. Gus is the man behind putting up over ninety-seven Osprey poles, resulting in the most abundant Osprey population in the northeast, about seventy-five pairs. Gus also created Barn Owl nesting sites, thereby increasing its population as well. The owls have succeeded and are common over most of the island. The barn and gift shop building has nesting Barn Owls in the loft, while Ospreys nest along the entrance road to the sanctuary. Felix Neck Wildlife Sanctuary can be reached via a paved road leaving the main Edgartown-Vineyard Haven Road in north Edgartown. The road to the sanctuary is marked with a sign.

This true story begs for inclusion. On May 12, 1991, two boys were visiting the sanctuary. Some trash cans are kept along the west side of the barn, just under where the Barn Owls enter their nest 30 feet above. The boys came into the gift shop and asked the volunteer working at the front desk why the owl in the trash can did not have any food. The volunteer had no idea what they were talking about and went out to see. In the trash can was a baby Barn Owl, which had somehow managed to leave or fall from the nest entrance before it was ready. The bird was promptly reintroduced to the nest.

The duck pond in the sanctuary is often very active and many rarities have appeared there over the years. The fields can be productive for finches and a Black-headed Grosbeak stayed here for several months in 1989 and the winter of 1990. Sanctuary staff conduct frequent bird walks year-round. Times may be checked by calling the sanctuary at 508-627-4850.

Sarson's Island

Sarson's Island is a small sandbar located on one of the most beautiful roads in the country: Beach Road between Oak Bluffs and Edgartown, with Nantucket Sound on one side and the tidal flats and shallow water of Sengekontacket Pond on the other. By stopping on either side of the bridge, the birder has excellent views of many shorebirds, gulls, terns, waterfowl, and, in the breeding season, the nesting Double-crested Cormorants, Snowy Egrets, Great Black-backed and Herring gulls, Common Terns, and American Oystercatchers. Scanning the far shoreline of the marsh can be good for the odd heron or duck. During migration many rarities have been found here and it is

very good for Caspian Tern in late September and early October.

Katama

The Katama area of south Edgartown offers a large open habitat with many raptors, gulls, shorebirds, and passerines in the savanna-type habitat found here. In the winter Red-tailed Hawks, Northern Harriers, Rough-legged Hawks, Peregrine Falcons, Merlins, and Short-eared and Barn owls appear regularly. During storms, large concentrations of gulls often gather to weather the blow or to feed on earthworms after soaking rains. Many gull species have been seen here, with Lesser Black-backed Gull appearing three or four times annually throughout the year. A working dairy farm (with two large silos), called Katama Farm, can be reached via dirt roads between Herring Creek and Katama roads. The owner allows birding on his property if you park away from farm equipment and avoid blocking any roads. Please do your part to ensure his attitude of goodwill for local and visiting birders now and in the future. The farm is a terrific spot to bird and the small pond near the silos is always worth checking. Black-necked Stilt, Ruff, Stilt Sandpiper, Baird's Sandpiper, and Buff-breasted Sandpiper have all been found here. Lesser Golden Plover and Upland Sandpiper are regular most of the fall on an annual basis.

The weedy areas in Katama have many birds and the usual western strays are likely to appear after fall frontal systems. Western Kingbird, Loggerhead Shrike, Dickcissel, Lark Sparrow, Clay-colored Sparrow, Blue Grosbeak, Yellow-headed Blackbird, and Brewer's Blackbird have all been seen in the past, and the fields can be loaded with migrant passerines. When the area proves dull or it is mid-tide, you should proceed to South Beach at the south end of Katama Road, park your car, and walk east on the only sandy path to the Katama Flats on the north side of Norton Point. This is the best spot on the Vineyard for gulls, terns, and shorebirds. It is a short fifteen minute walk from the parking area. If time or weather is a problem, follow Edgartown Bay Road (a loop road east of Katama Road) to a Town of Edgartown boat launching ramp. Scan across the bay to the flats. In winter this area is an excellent vantage point for large numbers of waterfowl.

The fields around the Katama Airport and further west at Herring Creek Farm off Slough Cove Road are also very productive spots and should be checked from the various adjacent roadways. Birds in the area utilize all the fields. Meadowlarks, Savannah Sparrows, and a few Grasshopper Sparrows nest in the fields and the island's only records for Western Meadowlark and Burrowing Owl are from here. Cattle Egret, Glossy Ibis, and other herons may be found on occasion, especially if the fields are wet.

Chappaquiddick and Wasque

The Cape Poge and Wasque refuges, owned, operated, and maintained by The Trustees of Reservations, are good birding spots. They surround the northeast and southeast corners of Chappaquiddick Island. The area is easily birded in a four-wheel-drive vehicle, but the expense of procuring the necessary beach permits makes this an unrealistic option for visiting birders. To reach Chappaquiddick, periodically an island but currently attached to Edgartown by a barrier beach along the south shore, proceed to downtown Edgartown and follow the tiny signs to the Chappaquiddick Ferry. The motorized barges are all named "On-Time" because the 200-yard crossing takes all of three minutes. Thus there is no schedule and the ferries are always on time. The ferry does have limited hours of service that change with the season. Check when you get on to find out when the last one will operate (or call 508-627-9794). Otherwise you may have to swim for it like you know who. The cost is a couple of dollars each way for a car and two passengers.

Some of the good spots on Chappaquiddick can be reached with a car or bicycle. There are nesting egrets, Ospreys, Northern Harriers, American Oystercatchers, Piping Plovers, and Sharp-tailed Sparrows in the salt marsh. Corner Pond (also called Swan Pond) is visible from the parking area at the end of Wasque Road and is always worth checking because an unusual duck, gull, tern, shorebird, or sparrow may show up. Many an island "Big Day" has been made by a "big" bird found at this pond. Scoping the ocean in any season from the parking lot or the beach beyond Corner Pond may produce loons, grebes, sea ducks, Northern Gannets, shearwaters, gulls, terns, Razorbills, and the odd jaeger or phalarope in season. After a hurricane, it may resemble birding Cape Hatteras as it did after Hurricane Gloria in 1985 when many southern terns and even a Brown Pelican put in an appearance.

A property recently acquired by The Trustees of Reservations is a mature pitch pine woodland called Mytoi. It is reached by proceeding straight ahead onto Dike Road (a dirt road) where the paved Chappaquiddick Road bends to the south on the way to Corner Pond and Wasque. Go straight on this dirt road and after a few hundred yards Mytoi will be on the left. This area can have large numbers of migrants, both spring and fall, and is well worth checking.

Those wishing to join organized birding tours on a four-wheel drive safari vehicle can join me on a Cape Pogue Natural History Tour. We do three-hour morning and late afternoon trips from Katama Shores Inn to Katama Flats, Corner and Poucha ponds, and up to Cape Pogue Lighthouse. These operate from May to October. Reservations may be placed by calling 508-627-3599.

Summary of Vineyard Specialities

In winter the entire southern and eastern shorelines have large numbers of loons, grebes, and sea ducks, with more loons, eiders, and scoters than anywhere else in Massachusetts. Best viewpoints are off Squibnocket Beach in Chilmark and off Wasque on Chappaquiddick. Due to the rural environment the density of Red-tailed Hawks, Northern Harriers, Barn Owls, and Eastern Screech Owls is high. During the summer, Red-bellied Woodpeckers are common along the entire north shore from Vineyard Haven to Menemsha and are even in scrub oak along the south shore. Eastern Bluebirds and Carolina Wrens are common permanent residents. From late April until late September Rufous-sided Towhee and Gray Catbird are widespread in habitats not usually associated with these species on the mainland. Small numbers of both species winter annually. The falcon migration from the Gay Head Cliffs is spectacular, and with westerly winds in early October large numbers of falcons can usually be seen.

How to Get Here and Where to Stay

The Vineyard has an excellent airport with daily flights from New York, Boston, New Bedford, Hyannis, and Nantucket, but the cost is very dear and most people arrive from Woods Hole on the gleaming white ships of the Steamship Authority. For information and auto reservations call the Authority at 508-540-2022. Passenger ferries (no cars) operate from Falmouth, Hyannis, and New Bedford in the summer. While waiting for the ferry or while on board, pick up a copy of the local newspaper, *The Vineyard Gazette*, that comes out every Friday (plus Tuesdays during the summer) and has a column entitled Bird News that will tell you what birds were recently seen. It also has a tide chart so you can plan to be at the Katama Flats two hours before to two hours after high tide.

There is a brand new bed and breakfast in Gay Head that is right at the cliffs where the scenery, sunsets, breakfasts, and innkeepers are all fantastic. It is called the Outermost Inn and is run by Jeanne and Hugh Taylor. Their telephone number is 508-645-9548 and they are open year-round. There are campgrounds in Vineyard Haven and Oak Bluffs and many hotels, guest houses, and other houses to rent. Contact the Martha's Vineyard Chamber of Commerce, Vineyard Haven, MA 02568, for information. Hope to see you on the cliffs!

E. VERNON LAUX, JR. (pronounced "lox") began birding twenty-five years ago in Wellesley, Massachusetts, with his neighbors, Richard Forster and Wayne Petersen. Vern worked at Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary on Cape Cod for five summers leading beach buggy tours to Nauset and Monomoy. He led trips for the Massachusetts Audubon Society to Texas, West Mexico, Australia, New Zealand, and the Maritimes with Jim Lane, Peter Alden, and Peter Vickery. A resident on Martha's Vineyard for fourteen years, he operates Cape Pogue Natural History Tours from May to October, and is a free lance bird tour leader.

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