



BIRDING THE NEW HAMPSHIRE SEACOAST

by Steve Mirick

To many people, the eighteen miles of shoreline north of Salisbury, Massachusetts, represent a summer of recreation. With eight state beaches, many town beaches, and plenty of picnic areas, the New Hampshire coast can be filled with people during the summer. The coastline also has a lot to offer for birders. It is relatively short, has a good diversity of coastal habitat, and offers the opportunity for discovery. The entire coast can be covered in a day trip without too much difficulty, depending on how much time is spent in each area. The best times to visit are from August through May. The early summer months tend to be less productive, and several parks and beaches charge admission. The following is a description of some of the more popular areas to check along the seacoast.

Hampton Harbor

One of my favorite areas to bird along the New Hampshire seacoast is Hampton Harbor, located less than two miles from the Massachusetts border and also known as Seabrook Harbor. On a nice summer day in August, the beaches of Hampton, less than a mile away, are hot and packed with people. The mudflats of Hampton Harbor are cool and filled with shorebirds. In New Hampshire, this estuary is second only to Great Bay in size, and is to New Hampshire avifauna what Newburyport Harbor is to northeastern Massachusetts. Twice a day, the outgoing tides leave a feast for the thousands of shorebirds filling up for a long migration. By mid-July Willets are numerous, and Whimbrels can be common on the high mussel beds on the west side of the channel. By August the flats are covered with Semipalmated Plovers and Semipalmated Sandpipers. Look also for Hudsonian Godwits, White-rumped Sandpipers, and Roseate and Forster's terns with the many Common Terns. In September Black-bellied Plovers are abundant, and American Golden Plovers and Red Knots can sometimes be found. By October and November the wintering Sanderlings and Dunlins have arrived in good numbers. Some of the more unusual reports in the last ten years include Harlequin Duck, American Oystercatcher, Wilson's Plover, Marbled Godwit, Little and Common Black-headed gulls, Sandwich, Arctic, Caspian, and Black terns, Black Skimmer, Parasitic Jaeger, Leach's Storm-Petrel, and Razorbill (in May).

The mudflats are most productive in the fall, although May can be good also, and many species of ducks and gulls can show up in the winter. I usually bird the harbor by foot, wearing old sneakers or boots, following the receding tide. However, I do not recommend that others walk the mudflats, which are filled with deep mussel beds that are hazardous and should be avoided. Many

people have fallen in the mud, and more than one boot or sneaker has been lost out there! In addition, a channel of water from the incoming tide fills in before the central mudflats are covered, which would force you to wade out of the harbor.

To reach Hampton Harbor, go 1.2 miles north of the New Hampshire/Massachusetts border on Route 1A to a parking lot on the left side of the road just south of the Hampton Harbor bridge. The flats can be easily scoped from the parking lot or from the Yankee Fisherman's Cooperative just north of the parking lot. Birders are welcome at the Cooperative, but parking is more limited. For a better view toward the northern sections of the harbor up the Hampton River, stop on the north side of the bridge at the parking lot by the Hampton Harbor State Marina.

Hampton Beach State Park

Directly opposite the Hampton Harbor State Marina on the north side of the bridge is the entrance to Hampton Beach State Park. Hampton Beach State Park is the Revere Beach of New Hampshire. In the summer the park is a zoo. Recreational vehicles and beachgoers fill the park and drive away most of the birds. During the fall and winter, however, the park can be excellent for roosting shorebirds, gulls at high tide, or Horned Larks, Snow Buntings, and Lapland Longspurs. Most winters a Snowy Owl can be found somewhere in the vicinity of the park, often roosting on the bath house or the utility building. The mouth of the river can be good for many sea duck species. Purple Sandpipers may be found on the stone breakwaters. Past the breakwaters, look for Northern Gannets or Black-legged Kittiwakes in season. A Royal Tern was seen here following Hurricane Bob. "Ipswich" Savannah Sparrows can be found in the spartina grasses of the dunes in late fall. Historically the park has been a good place to find Buff-breasted Sandpipers, but public use has probably prevented them from using the short-grass areas of the park. A fee is required from mid-June to Labor Day, and weekends to Columbus Day. Fortunately, the best birding here is in the off-season.

Seabrook, Hampton, and Hampton Falls Salt Marshes

When the tide rolls back in at Hampton Harbor, be sure to check the adjacent salt marshes in Seabrook, Hampton, and Hampton Falls. The shorebirds will roost in several pools that are easily scoped from the car. The first area to check is the Route 286 pools south of the harbor. From the parking lot on the south side of the Hampton Harbor bridge, go south on Route 1A to the lights at the intersection of Route 286 (about 1.2 miles). Turn right, and shortly after crossing the Blackwater River (about 0.5 mile), you will see the pools. Pull off to the side of the road, and check the pools from your car. The traffic here can be bad, so be careful. Although rather small, these pools can attract several

different species of shorebirds, and can be good for finding Least and Forster's terns.

Continue west on Route 286 for about 2.3 miles to the intersection of Route 1. Turn north onto Route 1, and go for about 1.5 miles to a Dunkin Donuts. Turn right onto Railroad Avenue, and drive for about 1.4 miles until the road dead-ends at Beckman's Landing overlooking the salt marsh. The wooded "island" in the salt marsh is not productive for shorebirds but can be good for land birds during migration and owls during the winter. Great Horned Owl is the common owl found here, although Long-eared, Short-eared, and Northern Saw-whet owls have been found in the past. Look over the marshes for Northern Harrier and Red-tailed and Rough-legged hawks.

Head back to Route 1, and continue north for about 2.1 miles until you reach Depot Road on the right at a traffic light. Follow Depot Road east until it ends at the Hampton Falls salt marshes (about 0.8 mile). The pools here are good for roosting shorebirds at high tide. Semipalmated Sandpipers and plovers can be abundant, and Wilson's Phalarope, Stilt Sandpiper, and Western Sandpiper can occasionally be found. Snowy Egrets and Glossy Ibis forage in the pools, and Green Herons probably nest in the surrounding trees and shrubs. The two records of Little Egret for the state came from these salt marshes.

Return to Route 1, and turn north (right). Follow Route 1 north for about 1.7 miles, and bear right on Route 51. Follow Route 51 for about 0.5 mile, and turn right at the first set of lights onto Landing Road. Follow this short road until it curves around and dead-ends near a large pool. This salt pan is good for shorebirds at high tide and is one of the best for dowitchers. Long-billed Dowitchers have been found here among the Shortbills. Continue east on Route 51 to get back onto Route 1A (about 1.5 miles).

A gravel parking area on Route 51 between a church and the water tower just before the intersection of Routes 51 and 1A can be a good vantage point for scanning the Hampton salt marshes with a spotting scope. However, to access this parking area, you must be going west on Route 51 from Route 1A (about 0.2 mile). Common Terns, Willets, and Sharp-tailed Sparrows nest in the marshes. A small colony of Seaside Sparrows also nests here, but the nesting area is virtually inaccessible. Most of the herons, including Black-crowned Night-Heron, can be found here. The small row of trees between the church and the parking lot can be surprisingly good for catching spring and fall migrant land birds, and many species of passerines have been seen here.

Route 1A North to Rye Harbor

Route 1A follows the entire New Hampshire coastline up through Rye and offers many different coastal vantage points. During hot weekend afternoons in July and August, the two miles north of the Hampton Harbor bridge are not advised, and alternate routes should be sought. Traveling north along Route 1A

through Hampton Beach in summer can be very slow.

Driving north from Hampton Beach on Route 1A, you will pass Great Boar's Head and reach the 1.2 mile-long North Beach (about 0.8 mile from Route 51). "The Wall" at North Beach is famous for its surfers at any time of the year, but it can also be good for birds. In winter check the southern part of the beach toward Great Boar's Head for Red-throated Loon, Horned Grebe, and possibly Harlequin Duck. Check the northern part of the beach, near the intersection with Route 27 (formerly Route 101C), for shorebirds at high tide during fall and sea ducks during winter. Abundant parking is available along the entire length of the beach. A brief trip west on Route 27 for about one-quarter mile will reveal a short, narrow dirt road leading south through phragmites toward Meadow Pond. Walk down the road to the edge of the pond, and scan for dabbling ducks in spring and fall.

Continuing north on Route 1A, stop at the North Hampton State Beach (about 1.3 miles from Route 27). In the winter this area is good for scoters, goldeneyes, and Red-necked Grebe, and the rocks at the north end of the beach are good for Glaucous and Iceland gulls. In the fall the washed-up vegetation at the north end of the beach attracts shorebirds, and Western, Buff-breasted, and Baird's sandpipers have been found here. Just to the north is an overlook onto the magnificent cliffs of Little Boar's Head. Although you cannot park here, a wide shoulder allows for a quick check offshore.

The next stop is Eel Pond and Jenness Beach (about 2.1 miles from Little Boar's Head). After Labor Day you may park along the stone breakwater and climb up on top. Otherwise, you must park at the Jenness Beach parking lot and walk back. Looking east toward the ocean, you will see Jenness Beach, which can be good for shorebirds and gulls. Buff-breasted and Baird's sandpipers and Franklin's and Common Black-headed gulls have been seen here. Turning around from the ocean, you have an excellent view of Eel Pond. This freshwater pond is the best place along the coast for dabbling ducks. Both species of teals, Northern Pintail, American Wigeon, Pied-billed Grebe, and American Coot should be found here in season. If the water level is low, shorebirds can be common on the exposed mud. Check for Black-crowned Night-Heron, Glossy Ibis, and Great and Snowy egrets feeding along the edges. Marsh Wrens nest among the cattails, and Least Bittern probably nested here in the past, although there are no records in at least five years.

Rye Harbor North to Odiorne Point

The Rye Harbor area, approximately 1.5 miles from Jenness Beach, should not be missed. The relatively small harbor can sometimes be an excellent place to get close views of Common Eider, Oldsquaw, and Common Loon. Thick-billed Murre has also been seen here among the boats. At low tide, the mudflats can also be good for gulls in the winter and shorebirds in the fall. Some

of the more unusual sightings include Marbled Godwit and Lesser Black-backed, Franklin's, and Common Black-headed gulls.

It is easiest to check the mudflats and the western part of the harbor directly from the side of the road along Route 1A. You can also drive down Harbor Road (about 1.5 miles from Jenness Beach) just south of the harbor, or into Rye Harbor State Park (0.6 mile from Harbor Road) to get better views. The point adjacent to the harbor is Ragged Neck (or Rye Harbor State Park). A fee is required here during the summer (mid-May to Labor Day). The short grassy areas here are excellent for Horned Larks, Snow Buntings, and occasionally Lapland Longspurs in season. In winter Snowy Owls and sometimes Short-eared Owls can be seen hunting over the marshes west of the point. Looking out to sea, you may see Black-legged Kittiwakes and alcids. Surf Scoters are commonly seen north of the point along with Common and Red-throated loons, Common Goldeneyes, and an occasional Barrow's Goldeneye. The stone jetty can be good for Purple Sandpipers, and the south edge of Foss Beach just north of the point can be excellent for shorebirds in the washed-up vegetation.

Continue north another 0.9 mile from Ragged Neck to the next major pull-off at Rye North Beach. In the fall during high tide, shorebirds can be abundant. If you climb up onto the rock wall, you can watch shorebirds feeding below you at very close range along the wrack-line or among the rocks. This is one of the better places to find Ruddy Turnstone, and Baird's Sandpiper has been seen here. In winter look offshore for Common Eider, Common Goldeneye, and Surf and White-winged scoters.

About 1.4 miles north of Rye North Beach is the parking lot for Wallis Sands State Beach. Continue just north of here, and pull off the road at the bluff overlooking the ocean. The rocks just offshore are called Seal Rocks. In winter large numbers of harbor seals will pull out onto the rocks at low tide. This is also one of the best places for Purple Sandpiper. All of the common sea ducks can be seen from here, and Barrow's Goldeneye and Harlequin Duck have also been found in the past. Another prominent pull-off about half a mile north of here is Pulpit Rocks. This area has birds similar to Seal Rocks, although Red-necked Grebes seem to be better here. For the winters from 1987 to 1991, a Western Grebe showed up at this location.

Odiorne Point State Park

Odiorne Point State Park on Route 1A and about three miles from Rye North Beach offers the most diverse birding and the best land birding along the seacoast. The park comprises 137 acres of a variety of habitats. The central point of the park is the newly constructed Seacoast Science Center, which offers educational programs and is open year-round. Take the time to check out the marine tanks and historical displays in the center. Ample parking and restrooms are available. The park charges admission daily from mid-June to Labor Day,

and weekends year-round.

The park has miles of trails and can take a full day to bird. Land birding here is best during spring or fall migration. Some of the unusual birds that have been found here include Northern Wheatear, White-eyed Vireo, Connecticut and Kentucky warblers, and Eastern Screech Owl. Orchard Oriole and Willow Flycatcher have nested here. Be sure to check the freshwater marsh at the north end of the park. Virginia Rails can be found here, and Common Moorhens and Least Bittern have been recorded.

The tall bunker at the north end of the park near Frost Point is an excellent vantage point for hawk migration. In September and October watch for migrating accipiters, falcons, Ospreys, and harriers as they move south along the coast. On September 24, 1993, 487 hawks of twelve species were counted migrating past the point. On a good day, you can often get good views of the hawks as they fly by at eye level. Strong northwest winds after a cold front are the best conditions for a good flight.

For those who would like to save money and only bird the south end of the park, there is a pull-off just south of the park on Route 1A. Park here, and walk north along the rock beach into the park. Check the thick bushes along the beach and around the south end of the park near the restrooms. Yellow-breasted Chat has been seen here, and in November 1993 a Townsend's Warbler was reported here. In the winter look off the coast for Northern Gannets, all sea ducks, and occasional Black Guillemots or other alcids. The small cove just north of the science center can be good for Bonaparte's Gulls feeding in the surf. Returning to the pull-off, check the tidal pools across the street where shorebirds are common during spring and fall at low tide and dabbling ducks at high tide. Sharp-tailed Sparrows can be found in the grasses around the pools.

Portsmouth Harbor and New Castle

As you pass north of Odiorne, Route 1A turns inland and heads toward Portsmouth. At about 2.4 miles after Odiorne Point State Park, turn north (right) and east onto Route 1B, which passes the Wentworth-by-the-Sea mansion and goes onto New Castle Island. Turn right onto Wild Rose Lane (about 1.9 miles after the intersection of Routes 1A and 1B), and drive to the end to Fort Stark. The fort is only open Memorial Day to Labor Day, but it offers excellent coastal views.

Return to Route 1B, and continue north to Great Island Common on the right (approximately 0.1 mile). This picnic area offers good birding with an excellent view over the mouth of the Piscataqua River. Most of the winter ducks can be found here. Be sure to check the islands offshore for Snowy Owls. A fee is charged during the summer.

Continue north and west on Route 1B off New Castle Island and into Portsmouth. Turn right onto Marcy Street (about 2.7 miles from Great Island

Common) toward the waterfront area and "Strawberry Bank," and after 0.1 mile, take a right onto an unnamed street near Prescott Park to Pierce Island and the Portsmouth Fish Pier. Park in one of the two parking lots near the pier, and either walk out onto the pier or walk out on Four Tree Island, which is covered with picnic tables opposite the pier. In winter check the mudflats at low tide near the island for Iceland, Glaucous, and Bonaparte's gulls. Harbor seals can often be seen around the pier, and Snowy Owls sometimes roost on the top of the shelters on the island. If no gulls are seen here, continue east along the road on Pierce Island, pull over in the several areas available, and scan the Piscataqua River, which has historically been one of the better areas for gulls in New Hampshire. Ivory Gull has been recorded here twice in the last ten years. The gulls often follow the fishing boats back up the river to the pier.

Pelagic Birding

While the Audubon Society of New Hampshire occasionally offers pelagic bird trips, the best way to see pelagic species is to participate in whalewatch trips offered by local fishing boats. These trips typically travel east of the Isles of Shoals toward fishing areas known as "Old Scantum" and "Jeffrey's Ledge." Birds to be found here are irregular, but Wilson's Storm-Petrel, Greater Shearwater, and Northern Gannet can often be found during the summer and fall. Less common are Cory's and Manx shearwaters, Northern Fulmar, Red and Red-necked phalaropes, and Parasitic and Pomarine jaegers. During the fall of 1993, an unidentified albatross was seen on a boat trip out of Rye. Whales commonly encountered include humpback, minke, fin, and an occasional northern right whale. Atlantic white-sided dolphins can also be seen. Two whalewatch boats to try are the Oceanic, which leaves from Portsmouth harbor (603-431-5500), and the Atlantic Queen, which departs from Rye harbor (603-964-5220).

In 1993 the Isles of Shoals Christmas Bird Count was reinstated as a pelagic count off the Maine and New Hampshire coast. This count has historically been excellent for alcids including Dovekie and Atlantic Puffin. If weather permits, the boat lands on Star Island for a winter census of land birds as well. More information can be obtained through the Audubon Society of New Hampshire at 603-224-9909.

Star Island and the Isles of Shoals

The Isles of Shoals are an archipelago, which splits the Maine and New Hampshire border and lies approximately five miles off the coast. Star Island is the third largest of the group, lies within New Hampshire boundaries, and is the easiest to access. From mid-June until Labor Day, the Isles of Shoals Steamship Company (603-431-5500) offers scenic tours of the islands, and cruises to Star Island, where a limited number of people may be dropped off for a three-hour

stay. There are many trails around the island that offer excellent places for migrant birds to stop. During the off-season, the Audubon Society of New Hampshire (603-224-9909) leads spring and fall day trips to the island.

During the summer, Glossy Ibis, Snowy Egret, Black-crowned Night-Heron, Great Egret, and occasionally Little Blue or Tricolored heron can be seen flying to or from the large breeding colony on nearby Appledore Island. In 1984 a White Ibis joined the Glossys for a brief visit. The large colony of about 5000 pairs of Herring and Great Black-backed gulls on the islands will make you wary of stepping off the main trails, and searching in and around the rocky edges of the island should turn up Common Eiders at any time of the year. Spring and fall migration are the best times to bird for land birds, but anything can show up here at any season. Most of the eastern warbler species have been found on the islands, and other rare finds include Least Bittern (in a pear tree!), Burrowing Owl, Long-eared Owl, Chuck-will's-widow, Clay-colored and Lark sparrows, American Oystercatcher, Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, Common Murre, and nonwinter sightings of Atlantic Puffin.

While circling the islands on the boat on the way back in, search the areas around Smuttynose Island for Black Guillemot, which nests among the rocks of that island. When passing by the large breeding colonies of Double-crested Cormorants on Square Rock and Duck Island, look for Great Cormorants at any season. In 1993 a Cory's Shearwater was found with a group of Greater Shearwaters on the way back from Star Island.

The places listed only touch on some of the more popular birding areas. The coast has many other areas of interest for birders. The Audubon Society of New Hampshire updates bird sightings every Friday on a recorded rare bird alert. The phone number is 603-224-9900 (weekends and after 5:00 PM weekdays).

Seasonal Tips for Birding the Seacoast

Spring (April and May). Scope the mudflats at Hampton Harbor in mid-to-late May only. Stop everywhere along the coast on Route 1A. Check the gravel parking lot on Route 51 for migrating land birds, and walk the trails at Odiorne Point in late May. Check the salt marshes and Meadow and Eel ponds for waterfowl.

Summer (June and July). Do not go near Hampton Beach unless it is before 8:00 AM or raining! Visit the nesting birds on the Isles of Shoals. Go on a whalewatch. Skip the Portsmouth area and Odiorne Point. Get to Eel Pond at sunrise, listen for Marsh Wrens, hope for Least Bittern, and look east over the ocean for Wilson's Storm-Petrels.

Fall (August through November). Scope the mudflats at Hampton Harbor. Scope them again on another day. Skip the Portsmouth area. Go on another whalewatch or a trip to Star Island. Sit on the rocks at Rye North Beach, eat your lunch, and watch the shorebirds feeding below you. Spend a good day

hawkwatching at Odiorne Point in late September or early October. Look in Hampton Beach State Park during late October and November for Lapland Longspurs with the Horned Larks and Snow Buntings.

Winter (December through March). Scope Hampton Harbor for gulls. Stop everywhere along the coast on Route 1A. Skip Depot and Landing roads. Walk around the island at Beckman's Landing. Check Portsmouth Harbor for gulls. Find the Snowy Owl at Hampton Beach State Park. Stare into the northeast winds of a winter storm from Pulpit Rocks, and pray for a Dovekie.

STEVE MIRICK is president of the Seacoast chapter of the Audubon Society of New Hampshire, the fall seasonal editor for New Hampshire Bird Records, and the North Atlantic regional editor for the Hawk Migration Association of North America. He lives in Durham, New Hampshire, where he boasts a yard list of 177 species. Steve has been birding since he was an undergraduate at the University of New Hampshire in 1981, where he took ornithology with Dr. Arthur Borrer. He has birded in Central America and many of the hot spots in the United States, but spends most of his time birding in New Hampshire where he still most enjoys the birds and solitude of the mudflats at Hampton Harbor.

Buying a used VW?
Complete Pre-purchase
Evaluation
Golf - Jetta - Quantum
\$50.

(617) 923-0941
GTShop
Inc.
Formerly Coop Garage

We service Nissan, Honda,
Saab, Toyota, VW, Volvo

106 Pleasant Street
Watertown Square

NORTHEAST HAWK WATCH HAWK MIGRATION CONFERENCE

The NorthEast Hawk Watch (NEHW, formerly known as the New England Hawk Watch) will conduct its fifth conference on hawk migration on March 19, 1994, at the Quality Hotel in Northampton, Massachusetts. A detailed brochure on the conference, which includes a registration form, and additional information are available from Paul M. Roberts, 254 Arlington Street, Medford, MA 02155 (or call 617-483-4263 after 8:00 PM).

Spring Workshops

Avisaur or Dinobirds? The Evolutionary Link between Birds and Dinosaurs

Not many animals seem as different from one another than a Black-capped Chickadee and a *Tyrannosaurus rex*. Is it possible that both of these creatures share a common ancestor which was, in fact, a dinosaur? Many evolutionary biologists believe that birds share so many similarities with dinosaurs that birds *are* modern dinosaurs, a group that escaped extinction when *T. rex* and its large contemporaries were not so fortunate. Is a spring walk through Mount Auburn really the present day equivalent to a stroll through Jurassic Park? This program will, through the use of slides, models, and specimens, explore the evolution of birds and dinosaurs. There will be an optional field trip to the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology to examine modern birds, bird skeletons, and dinosaur fossils. Leader: John Kricher.

Seminars: Fridays, April 15 and 22, 1994 (7:30-9:30 P.M.).

Optional Field Trip: Saturday, April 23, 1994 (afternoon).

Cost: \$35

Spring Warblers — A Birding Workshop

Over thirty species of wood-warblers regularly occur in Massachusetts in spring. Bound for breeding areas in New England and eastern Canada, the migration of these "butterflies of the bird world" can be among the most exciting events of the avian year. Because of their great diversity, warblers offer a wonderful opportunity to examine topics in speciation, migration, foraging ecology, and bird song. Many of these topics also provide useful tools when trying to identify unfamiliar warbler species. A field trip to Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge and selected spots in Essex County will help to enrich impressions gained during the indoor session. Leader: Wayne R. Petersen.

Seminar: Friday, April 29, 1994 (7:30-9:30 P.M.).

Field Trip: Saturday, May 5, 6:00 A.M.(all day).

Cost: \$35.

Wetlands in Early Summer — Birds, Bugs, and Other Beasts

Massachusetts freshwater wetlands are represented by a variety of habitats including cattail swamps, sedge meadows, red maple and white cedar swamps, and quaking bogs. Each of these ecosystems has distinctive floral and faunal components which in early summer are often particularly easy to observe. The characteristics of several dominant wetland communities in southeastern Massachusetts will be described and an emphasis will be placed on helping the group learn to recognize the characteristic birds and other critters of each ecosystem. The field trip will visit several representative South Shore wetlands where a variety of the birds and other organisms described in the lecture should be observed. Leader: Wayne R. Petersen

Seminar: Friday, June 24, 1994 (7:30-9:30 P.M.).

Field Trip: Sunday, June 26, 6:00 AM (all day).

Cost: \$35.

These workshops are cosponsored by *Bird Observer* and the Needham Bird Club. Seminar sessions will be held in Needham, MA, from 7:30-9:30 P.M. Directions to the seminars will be sent to registrants. Details about the field trips will be announced at the seminars preceding them. If you have questions, please call 617-666-8934 (evenings). Preregistration is required.

To register, send your name, address, and phone numbers with your check (payable to *Bird Observer*) to Bird Observer Workshops, c/o H. D'Entremont, 45 Montrose Street, Somerville, MA 02143.