



## BIRDING PORTLAND'S BACK COVE

by Richard R. Eakin

One of the most accessible and productive birding locations in southern Maine is Portland's popular Back Cove. Although traditionally a favorite spot for observing wintering waterfowl, migrating shorebirds, and other wetland species in the heart of the city, the area was largely untrammled in the early 1970s, when I first took note of the birdlife there. Today, the well-worn path encircling the cove bears a steady procession of walkers, joggers, and cyclists. A shopping plaza, a housing development, and the recently completed expansion of Cheverus High School's athletic field have taken their toll on certain patches of land adjacent to the cove. Such inevitable human encroachment has affected the birds and their habitats, but, in general, birders can still find much of interest year-round in this urban wildlife oasis.

Established as a wild bird sanctuary in 1915 and administered by the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, Back Cove is a shallow, roughly circular, and nearly mile-wide tidal basin bordered by various habitats, including salt marsh (*Spartina*), weedy and grassy (soccer) fields, and man-made rocky shore. Two brooks entering at the northwest corner of the cove and the outlet to Casco Bay (spanned by Tukey's Bridge) at the northeast corner provide corridors for both freshwater and marine organisms entering and leaving the cove. In addition, the daily tidal cycle, which alternately fills and drains the cove (except for a permanent channel along the east shore), ensures a constant flow of birds throughout the area. Gulls, in particular, follow their food sources, be they mudflats, wastewater, or fishing boats. For this reason, it is advisable to check the cove as often as possible, as well as other nearby spots, such as the wastewater treatment plant just outside the cove near the Eastern Promenade, the Portland waterfront, and the mouth of the Presumpscot River and Mackworth Island just to the north in Falmouth. Even the ponds in nearby Deering Oaks (a downtown park) and Evergreen Cemetery, where gulls and waterfowl concentrate and are used to being fed, can produce something of note. I have seen Common Black-headed Gull at these two locations each an easy flight from the species' usual Back Cove wintering ground.

Sightings included in this article have occurred generally within the boundaries delineated by Baxter Boulevard along the north and west shores, Interstate 295 along the east shore, and Preble Street Extension along the south shore. Adjacent areas covered include the mouths of the two brooks, the pond and playing fields in Payson Park along the north shore, and the area just across Tukey's Bridge near the Burnham and Morrill baked bean factory and the sewage plant. A fall hawkwatch site near the mouth of the more westerly of the two brooks (directly behind Cheverus High School), where there is a wastewater

pump station and a small parking area, has been productive and accounts for the majority of the cove's raptor records. While most hawks are distant and moving in a southerly direction to the west of the cove, some fly directly overhead, affording fine views. More observations are needed to assess the cove's value as a hawkwatch site.

One of the most consistently productive bird habitats is the weedy field adjacent to the soccer field along the south shore. This small patch (originally filled by the city for the construction of playing fields) has produced a sizable number of rarities and has long been a roosting area for gulls and shorebirds. Its future is uncertain, especially if the city expands the soccer field, but for now it continues to yield an impressive diversity of birds. Among the more notable finds are Rusty and Yellow-headed blackbirds; Vesper, "Ipswich," and Seaside sparrows; Upland, Buff-breasted, and Baird's sandpipers; American Bittern; Forster's and Caspian terns; and Short-eared and Snowy owls.

Considered as a microcosm of the southern Maine coast, Back Cove reflects the general patterns of species composition, seasonal fluctuations, and dates of arrival and departure of the region's birds. Birders planning to visit the area can get a good idea of what to expect and when by consulting the *Annotated Checklist of Maine Birds* by Peter Vickery (Maine Audubon Society 1978) and *A Birder's Guide to the Coast of Maine* by Elizabeth Cary Pierson and Jan Erik Pierson (Down East Books 1981). Although both are somewhat out of date and in need of revision (the latter is being updated and expanded), they serve well as general references. *Maine Bird Notes*, a publication of the University of Maine at Machias, details the most recent records of the state's avifauna.

To date, the Back Cove list boasts nearly 200 species, approximately one-fourth of which are uncommon to rare in Maine. This number is about half the state total, attesting to the importance of the cove as a birding destination and, more important, as a feeding and resting area for many migrants. It further illustrates the importance of long-term coverage of a single location as a contribution to knowledge of local bird populations. Habitats change, and as they do, so do the birds dependent upon them. Such baseline data may serve to document the value of the habitat and ultimately to save it from development. See my "Annotated List of the Birds of Back Cove, Portland, Maine" (*Maine Birdlife*, August 1984, Volume 6, Number 3) for a detailed account of 150 species then recorded from the area. Some species, such as Common Eider and Sanderling, may be common along the Maine coast at certain seasons or in suitable habitat. But because Back Cove lacks deep water, extensive rocky shore, and sandy beaches, such species are decidedly uncommon there. The list is short on land birds, largely owing to the lack of trees and other extensive cover in the immediate vicinity of the cove.

## Directions

From the south, take Exit 6A from the Maine Turnpike (Interstate 95) onto Interstate 295. Then take Exit 6B (Forest Avenue North) from Interstate 295, and turn right at the first light onto Route 1 (Baxter Boulevard). Turn right at the next light onto Preble Street Extension, and you will see the cove on your left beyond the parking area. Park and scan the cove, then walk through the fields to the right and along Baxter Boulevard to the left. I have seen Grasshopper Sparrow twice, and Lark Sparrow, American Avocet, and Monk Parakeet (!), all within the southwest corner near the parking lot. The flats in this part of the cove are the first to be exposed as the tide recedes, drawing in whatever shorebirds may be present from their roosting areas (which in Portland may include the flat-topped roofs of some of the city's buildings).

From the north, take the Baxter Boulevard exit from Interstate 295, and follow the boulevard along the cove, stopping at Payson Park (well-marked on the right) and, a bit farther along, the brook behind Cheverus High School, to check for ducks, herons, and shorebirds, especially at high tide, when they may roost and feed along the brook or in the small pond in the park. In the warmer months, check the large red oak trees along the brook for Snowy Egret and Black-crowned Night-Heron, which regularly roost there, and also for Great Egret, Little Blue Heron, and Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, all of which have occurred in the area. This brook is also a favorite haunt of Belted Kingfisher and sometimes Green Heron. Two of the most notorious rarities to have occurred at Back Cove chose Payson Park as their headquarters. A Northern Hawk Owl spent the winter of 1981-82 eating and caching Meadow Voles and the occasional pet-store rodent offered to it by admirers from as far away as Washington, D.C. One day the Brookline Bird Club showed up to see the owl. More recently, a Western Kingbird occupied one of the ballfields for three days during a hot spell in mid-September 1992. Then there was the Loggerhead Shrike across the boulevard in a thorn bush one April day in 1982. You just never know.

## Seasons

**Fall (mid-August into November).** As might be expected, fall is the best time to bird Back Cove. This season accounts for the bulk of the rarities, and, with the migrations of herons, shorebirds, waterfowl, raptors, and passerines in full swing, something of interest is bound to turn up. Check the flocks of Savannah Sparrows that concentrate in the weedy field and along the edge of the parking lot at the south end. "Ipswich," Sharp-tailed, Swamp, Vesper, and Seaside sparrows are possible among them, as are other grassland species such as Eastern Meadowlark, Bobolink, Lapland Longspur, Snow Bunting, and American Pipit. An unusual record of a female Red Crossbill among Savannah Sparrows on rocks along the shore occurred in October 1994. Birds are attracted

to this area like a magnet, and every day during migration holds promise of something new. One late August day, I flushed a female Yellow-headed Blackbird that remained for a week and accommodated numerous admirers and photographers at point-blank range. Others have seen American Bittern here.

Autumn also signals post-breeding buildup of herons and egrets that have dispersed from their nesting areas, of which the northernmost for some species, such as Snowy Egret, are Wood Island off Biddeford Pool and Stratton Island off Prouts Neck in Scarborough, both to the south of Portland. Peregrines and Merlins chase shorebird flocks along the tideline. *Spartina* assumes its rich golden color in a thick arc along the boulevard. Diligent searching here might turn up a rail or two. Buffleheads arrive the third week of October.

**Winter (November through March).** Winter can be very rewarding for waterfowl, gulls, and raptors with the possibility of a lingering passerine. Grasshopper Sparrow and Yellow-breasted Chat in January are among my rewards of the "off season." The cove is one of the best spots in Maine (and perhaps second only to Boston's Logan Airport in New England) for Snowy Owl, usually in the weedy field. At least one Common Black-headed Gull is around somewhere along the Maine coast, and Back Cove is as good a place as any to look. Barrow's Goldeneye, the final member of the "special three," is not as frequent as in past years, but should always be looked for. This species is invariably in a tight flock somewhere in the middle of the cove, requiring a scope to locate the birds, but it is worth the effort.

Wintering Buffleheads and Red-breasted Mergansers share the cove with hundreds of Mallards (increasing) and American Black Ducks and lesser numbers of Common Goldeneyes (not so common in recent years). Loons, grebes, and sea ducks are decidedly uncommon to rare in this shallow bay, which they must desert at every low tide. Wintering Cooper's and Red-tailed hawks are sometimes seen in the vicinity, their presence usually announced by flocks of crows. An American Kestrel or two may be around as well.

**Spring (March through May).** Spring can be productive and accounts for an impressive list of unusual birds, including Glossy Ibis, American Oystercatcher, Caspian Tern, and Loggerhead Shrike, to name a few. American Wigeon, Gadwall, and Northern Shoveler also have been recorded only in spring.

**Summer (June and July).** Summer is a rather slow time for birding, because most species are nesting and away from the cove. Only Killdeer, Spotted Sandpiper, and Savannah Sparrow have been confirmed breeding within the boundaries of the cove, and I suspect Mallard and American Black Duck do also. Common Terns feed along the edge of the salt marsh at high tide, and an occasional Common Nighthawk, Chimney Swift, or swallow may be seen hawking insects over the water on a summer evening.

**RICHARD R. EAKIN** lives in Portland, Maine, where he is professor of

biology at Westbrook College. When not birding nearby Back Cove and Evergreen Cemetery, he conducts research on Antarctic fishes and enjoys painting and photographing birds and other natural history subjects. He has traveled widely from the Antarctic to the tropics and has led trips for both Maine and National Audubon Societies.

#### KEY TO BIRD LIST ACCOMPANYING THIS ARTICLE.

The bird list accompanying this article contains 197 species (including two not positively identified—Northern Wheatear and Tennessee Warbler). The list represents the observations of the author and others up to the time this article was written. "Ipswich" Savannah Sparrow is recognized here, but Clapper and King rails and Alder and Willow flycatchers are not identified by sight alone. An unsubstantiated report of Snow Goose in the 1980s is not included, but I have seen the species just north of the cove in Falmouth (11 birds on March 29, 1976). Two exotics, Ruddy Shelduck and Monk Parakeet, are surprising. The latter nested, probably unsuccessfully, in Cape Elizabeth in 1979 and was eradicated.

The numbers in parentheses in the bird list indicate the number of records, not the number of individuals. A record may include one or more birds seen at a time. Dates are given as ranges (early to late); noteworthy records include day and year. Species with no dates given are common seasonally in suitable habitat. Species considered unusual to rare in Maine are indicated by an asterisk (\*). Accidentals are indicated by (A).

Other symbols included in the list are as follows:

- (f) — female
- (m) — male
- (i) — immature
- (dm) — dark morph
- (d) — found dead.

Red-throated Loon	(4)	Oct 6-Nov 14;	Cooper's Hawk	(4)	Oct 28-Jan 6
Apr 9			Northern Goshawk	(2)	Oct 26-28
Common Loon			Red-shouldered Hawk	(5)	Sep 11-Nov 1
Pied-billed Grebe	(3)	Oct 6-Dec 18	Broad-winged Hawk		Sep 13, 1985—
Horned Grebe	(4)	Oct 16-Nov 5	825 in 2 hours		
Red-necked Grebe	(2)	Nov 7-Feb 22	Red-tailed Hawk		sometimes winters
Great Cormorant	(2)	Sep 17-23	Rough-legged Hawk	(1)	Dec 6, 1989(dm)
Double-crested Cormorant		Apr 24-Nov 22	American Kestrel		
(1 on Jan 9, 1976?)			Merlin		May 4; Sep 11-Dec 19
American Bittern	(2)	Sep 23-Oct 21	Peregrine Falcon		Apr 29; Aug-Nov 23
Great Blue Heron		May 4-Oct 16	(1 reported throughout winter 1993-94)		
*Great Egret	(3)	Jun 23-Oct 17	Ring-necked Pheasant	(1)	Oct 22, 1975 (m)
Snowy Egret		Apr 10-Oct 11	Clapper/King Rail	(2)	1 dead King Rail,
Little Blue Heron	(1)	Aug 20, 1975 (i)	winter 1971-1972; 1 "large" rail Nov 20, 1972		
*Tricolored Heron	(1)	Oct 17, 1977	*American Coot	(1)	Feb 1, 1924
Green Heron			Black-bellied Plover		May 22-Dec 19
Black-crowned Night-Heron		Apr 19-Nov 12	American Golden Plover		Aug 12-Nov 11
*Yellow-crowned Night-Heron	(3)	Apr 13-Sep 13	Semipalmated Plover		Oct 30 (late)
(immatures)			Killdeer		Mar 14-Nov 12
Glossy Ibis	(1)	Apr 26, 1982	(pair with young June 15, 1988)		
*Tundra Swan	(1)	Apr 10, 1980	*American Oystercatcher	(1)	May 31, 1980 2 birds
Canada Goose			*American Avocet	(2)	Aug 10-22, 1979;
(A) Ruddy Shelduck	(1)	Jul 29, 1982 (f)	Oct 4-31, 1990		
Wood Duck	(5)	Aug 30-Jan 5	Greater Yellowlegs		Apr 6-Nov 23
Green-winged Teal		Mar 24-Nov 20	Lesser Yellowlegs		Apr 18-Dec 10
American Black Duck			Solitary Sandpiper	(3)	Aug 13-Oct 19
Mallard			*Willet	(7)	May 6-Sep 16
Northern Pintail		Sep 3-Mar 28	(25 on May 21, 1982; breeds Scar. Marsh)		
(formerly regular in winter)			Spotted Sandpiper		May 23-Sep 16
Blue-winged Teal	(2)	Aug 15-Sep 4	(2 downy young July 22, 1976)		
*Northern Shoveler	(4)	Apr 3-May 2	*Upland Sandpiper		Apr 23-Sep 12
*Gadwall	(1)	Mar 25, 1994 (m)	(formerly regular in 1980s; high count 11)		
American Wigeon	(3)	Mar 12-May 4	Whimbrel	(4)	Aug 5-Sep 9
*Canvasback	(7)	Oct 21-Apr 11	Hudsonian Godwit		Aug 8-Nov 5
*Redhead	(1)	Feb 27, 1976 (3 m)	(high count 5 on Oct 30, 1990)		
Ring-necked Duck	(4)	Oct 14-Mar 7	*Marbled Godwit	(2)	Oct 13-Nov 4,
Greater Scaup		Aug 18-May 24	1960; Jan 1, 1974		
*Lesser Scaup	(3)	Feb 22-Mar 14	Ruddy Turnstone		May 17-Nov 23
Common Eider			Red Knot	(8)	May 23-Sep 28
Oldsquaw	(3)	Oct 30-Apr 13	Sanderling	(4)	Aug 26-Sep 22
Black Scoter	(1)	Oct 14, 1990 (m)	Semipalmated Sandpiper		Nov 23 (late)
Surf Scoter	(1)	Oct 13, 1977 (m)	Western Sandpiper		Aug 14-Oct 30
White-winged Scoter	(1)	Oct 16, 1975 (f)	Least Sandpiper		May 3-Oct 25
Common Goldeneye		Oct 24-Apr 10	White-rumped Sandpiper		Aug 24-Nov 30
*Barrow's Goldeneye		Nov 20-Jan 19	(high count 10 on Oct 11, 1981)		
(high count of 23—Dec 23, 1979)			*Baird's Sandpiper	(5)	Sep 1-26
Bufflehead		Oct 12-May 13	Pectoral Sandpiper		Aug 24-Nov 6
(1 female July 25, 1958)			Purple Sandpiper	(2)	Oct 17-26
Hooded Merganser	(3)	Sep 11-Jan 4	Dunlin		Sep 3-May 31
Common Merganser	(4)	Jan 2-Apr 9	(has wintered)		
Red-breasted Merganser		Oct 11-Apr 26	*Silt Sandpiper	(1)	Sep 11, 1983
*Ruddy Duck	(3)	Oct 27-Nov 12	*Buff-breasted Sandpiper	(10)	Aug 20-Sep 19
Turkey Vulture	(4)	Sep 1-Oct 22	(high count 6 on Aug 20, 1940)		
Osprey		Apr 18-Oct 18	Short-billed Dowitcher		Apr 23-Oct 3
(nested on trestle near sewage plant)			*Long-billed Dowitcher	(1)	Aug 31, 1980
Bald Eagle	(9)	Sep 11-Mar 5	Common Snipe		Mar 28-Nov 23
(formerly regular in winter)			(high count 5)		
Northern Harrier		Sep 1-Oct 29	American Woodcock	(2)	Apr 5, 1975
Sharp-shinned Hawk		1 leucistic bird,	(flying overhead); remains found Dec 17, 1991		
Oct 25, 1993; seen again Jan 10, 1994			*Wilson's Phalarope	(1)	Oct 19, 1960

Red-necked Phalarope	(2)	Aug 25-30	Tufted Titmouse		
Laughing Gull		Apr 13-Oct 16	Red-breasted Nuthatch		
*Little Gull	(4)	Aug 2-19	White-breasted Nuthatch		
		(high count 3, spring, date unknown)	Brown Creeper		
*Common Black-headed Gull		Aug 19-Apr 21	*?Northern Wheatear	(1)	Sep 8, 1986
		reg winter visitor; high count 3—Feb 24, 1989	American Robin		
Bonaparte's Gull		Jul 29-Dec 2	Gray Catbird		Dec 19, 1987 late
Ring-billed Gull			Northern Mockingbird		
Herring Gull			American Pipit		Sep 16-Oct 24
*Thayer's Gull	(1)	Dec 15, 1981 (a)			(high count 18—Oct 24, 1984)
*Lesser Black-backed Gull	(1)	Dec 28, 1988 (a)	*Bohemian Waxwing	(3)	Feb 10-14, 1982;
Iceland Gull		Dec 18-May 1			high of 70-80—Feb 14, 1982; 50—Jan 18, 1994
		(summer records; Jun 22, Jul 2, 1975)	Cedar Waxwing		Apr 18-Sep 1
*Glaucous Gull	(7)	Dec 17-Mar 30	*Northern Shrike	(2)	Dec 7-24
Great Black-backed Gull			*Loggerhead Shrike	(1)	Apr 16, 1982
*Caspian Tern	(1)	May 24, 1986 (a)	European Starling		
Common Tern		May 22-Sep 27	?Tennessee Warbler	(1)	Nov 4, 1993
		(high count 30-40 Aug 22, 1984)	Yellow Warbler		
*Forster's Tern	(10)	Aug 8-Sep 28	Yellow-rumped Warbler		May 8-Jan 26
		(high count 6 on Aug 21, 1979)	Pine Warbler	(1)	Nov 15, 1975
*Black Tern	(2)	Aug 22, 1977;	Palm Warbler		Apr 26-Nov 7
		Apr 28, 1984	Common Yellowthroat		
*Black Skimmer	(2)	Jul 27, 1973;	*Yellow-breasted Chat	(1)	Jan 3-4, 1989
		1969 (date unknown)	Scarlet Tanager		
*Thick-billed Murre	(1)	Mar 16, 1988 (d)	Northern Cardinal		
Rock Dove			American Tree Sparrow		
Mourning Dove			Chipping Sparrow		
(A) Monk Parakeet	(1)	Oct 25, 1985	Vesper Sparrow	(2)	Oct 7, 1984;
*Yellow-billed Cuckoo	(1)	Oct 6, 1983			Apr 29, 1994
Great Horned Owl	(1)	Dec 19, 1993	*Lark Sparrow	(1)	Sep 29-Oct 1, 1990
Snowy Owl		Oct 31-Apr 15	Savannah Sparrow		Apr 9-Nov 22
		25 birds, 1974-1993; high count 4—Jan 8, 1988			(adults seen in field with food for young)
*Northern Hawk Owl	(1)	Dec 12, 1981-	*Ipawich" Savannah Sparrow		Oct 17-Mar 28
		Mar 23, 1982	*Grasshopper Sparrow	(2)	Nov 25, 1989;
*Long-eared Owl	(1)	Jan 24, 1982			Jan 10, 1991
*Short-eared Owl	(6)	Sep 27-Apr 3	Sharp-tailed Sparrow		May 16-Dec 10
		(high count 3 wintering, 1981-1982)	*Seaside Sparrow	(4)	Aug 21-Sep 26
Common Nighthawk		Oct 8, 1987 late	Song Sparrow		
Chimney Swift		Jul 17-Sep 1	Lincoln's Sparrow	(1)	Nov 6, 1975
Ruby-throated Hummingbird		Sep 17, 1984 late	Swamp Sparrow		Oct 7-Nov 5
Belted Kingfisher		May 4-Jan 9	White-throated Sparrow		
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker		Oct 6-10	White-crowned Sparrow		Oct 10-18
Downy Woodpecker			Dark-eyed Junco		
Northern Flicker		Apr 13-Jan 25	Lapland Longspur		Sep 29-Mar 25
Alder/Willow Flycatcher		Sep 9, 1984	Snow Bunting		Oct 12-Apr 8
Least Flycatcher			Bobolink		Aug 14-Oct 26
Eastern Phoebe			Red-winged Blackbird		
Great Crested Flycatcher			Eastern Meadowlark		Mar 28-Nov 4
*Western Kingbird	(1)	Sep 14-16, 1992	*Yellow-headed Blackbird	(1)	Aug 31-Sep 6,
Eastern Kingbird					1979 (f)
Horned Lark		Apr 3-Dec 27	Rusty Blackbird	(3)	Oct 6-Nov 8
Tree Swallow		Mar 25-Sep 15	Common Grackle		
Northern Rough-winged Swallow	(1)	May 25,	Brown-headed Cowbird		
		1994 (2 with Tree and Barn swallows)	House Finch		
Bank Swallow		May 13-Jul 7	Red Crossbill	(1)	Oct 12, 1994 (f)
Cliff Swallow		Aug 25-Sep 1	White-winged Crossbill	(1)	Feb 25, 1990; 50 birds
Barn Swallow		Apr 27-Oct 10	Common Redpoll	(2)	Dec 17-29
Blue Jay			American Goldfinch		
American Crow			House Sparrow		
Black-capped Chickadee					

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