

BLUFF POINT COASTAL RESERVE

by Arnold Devine and Dwight G. Smith

Editor's Note. All of the birding sites in this article and some eighty-two other sites are featured in the authors' forthcoming book, *Connecticut Birding Guide*. Please contact Dwight Smith, 241 Shepard Avenue, Hamden, Connecticut 06514, to obtain a copy of the book.

Located in Groton, Connecticut, this 806-acre coastal reserve is best known for impressive fall migrations of warblers and other songbirds, but its varied coastal habitats can attract an assortment of birds throughout much of the year. Bluff Point was first established as a state park and later designated as a coastal reserve by the Connecticut legislature in 1975. Its status as a coastal reserve preserves the unique wildlife, geological features, and scenic qualities of the area.

Bluff Point is a peninsula that juts southward into Fisher's Island Sound. The peninsula is bordered on the east by Mumford Cove, on the west by the Poquonock River, and to the south by Fisher's Island Sound. The northern boundary of the coastal reserve is formed by the Amtrak railroad line. Some unique geological features of the reserve include the rocky promontory known as Bluff Point at the reserve's southern terminus, and a narrow, mile-long sand spit that extends westward from the peninsula out into the confluence of the Poquonock River and Fisher's Island Sound.

Bluff Point Coastal Reserve offers an interesting mix of coastal habitats including open water, a 100-acre tidal marsh, beach, mudflats, river, fields, thickets, and coastal woodland. A well-maintained network of trails provides access to all of the major habitats within the coastal reserve. A 3.5-mile loop trail to the point and back offers varied birding opportunities in most of the park's habitats. A straight walk to the point and return by the same route is about two miles. A spur trail that begins near the headland provides access to the sandy spit and good views of the salt marsh. Several trails access the coastal reserve. A few trails are dead ends but most cut back to the main loop trail.

Bluff Point Coastal Reserve is open to birders and others throughout the year. There is no fee for birding. Picnic benches and pit toilets are located adjacent to the parking area. Additional pit toilets are near the headland just before the spur trail to the sand spit. Bluff Point also offers saltwater fishing, shellfishing, hiking, and mountain biking opportunities throughout much of the year. In winter cross-country skiing is a popular pastime, along with hiking.

To reach the reserve, take Exit 88 (Route 117) of Interstate 95, and follow Route 117 south for 1.0 mile. Turn right onto Route 1, go 0.3 mile, and turn left at the first traffic light onto Depot Road (adjacent to the Groton Town Hall).

Continue for 0.3 mile on Depot Road, and go under the railroad overpass. Just beyond the trestle, the road becomes dirt. Continue on the dirt road for another 0.3 mile to the gravel parking area. To bird the northwest corner of Bluff Point Coastal Reserve, park on the left just beyond the railroad overpass, but do not block the barrier gate.

BIRDING

Birding at the Bluff Point Coastal Reserve can be superb or very slow depending on time of year, tides, and weather. Late summer and fall usually provide the best birding, especially following the passage of a cold front, which often creates a burst of migrant songbirds and other upland species.

Northwest Corner. From August through September the northwest corner of Bluff Point is undoubtedly the best spot to view migrants. Often after a cold front passes, hundreds of migrants funnel down to the headland of Bluff Point Coastal Reserve, then retreat through the northwest corner of the reserve before resuming their southward migration. After a cool, clear night the influx of migrants can produce fast and furious birding activity during the first hours of daybreak. For example, in September 1994 a big-day birding team, virtually standing in one spot, counted seventy species, including nineteen species of warblers, in this part of the reserve.

To bird the northwest corner, walk around the bar-way and explore the grassy patches, small stands of trees, and scrubby growth in the area just to the south of the railroad tracks. On a good morning the area can be teeming with flycatchers, vireos, warblers, tanagers, and other species. On some peak days in September and October, you may spot twenty or more warbler species, including Golden-winged, Tennessee, Cape May, Orange-crowned (rare), Bay-breasted, Mourning (rare), and Wilson's, as well as the more common species. Philadelphia Vireo, an uncommon to rare migrant in the state, is annual in mid-September along with the more numerous Red-eyed and Solitary vireos. Sparrow migration peaks from mid-to-late October, when good numbers of White-throated, Song, Swamp, and Savannah sparrows pass through. Uncommon or rare species that may also occur at this time include Dickcissel, Blue Grosbeak, and White-crowned, Lincoln's, Fox, and Clay-colored sparrows.

Loop Trail. To bird the rest of Bluff Point Coastal Reserve, hike the dirt road that begins just beyond, or south of, the bulletin board by the barrier gate at the southeast corner of the main parking lot. This dirt road parallels the Poquonock River on the right. Check the river, mudflats, and salt marsh for shorebirds, waders, and waterfowl.

In spring, summer, and early fall, some shorebirds to look for include Killdeer; Semipalmated and Black-bellied plovers; Ruddy Turnstone; Greater and Lesser yellowlegs; Spotted, Least, and Semipalmated sandpipers; and occasionally other species. Waders such as Snowy and Great egrets, Great Blue

and Green herons, and Black-crowned Night-Heron are often present in the shallows along the river. The nocturnal night-heron is more often seen in the twilight hours of dawn and dusk. Clapper Rail is a locally uncommon breeder in the salt marsh but is normally heard rather than observed in early morning hours. Osprey nest in the area from April through September and can usually be spotted as they forage along the river.

In the nesting season the thickets and tangles of bittersweet, cat-brier, rose, and poison ivy that border the trail to the point can harbor many elusive species. Check these trailside habitats for Carolina Wren, House Wren, Gray Catbird, Brown Thrasher, Common Yellowthroat, White-eyed Vireo, Northern Cardinal, Rufous-sided Towhee, and other skulkers. During fall migration Mourning Warblers (September) and Orange-crowned Warblers (most records from late September and October) are rare, but regular. The Yellow-breasted Chat is an annual visitor and is most often recorded in September.

In late spring and summer the fields and wetter areas farther along the trail should produce Eastern Kingbird, Willow Flycatcher, Northern Mockingbird, and Chipping and Field sparrows. Northern Bobwhite is a resident that can be quite vocal from April through July.

The upland woods of oak and aspen just beyond the trailside tangles host the usual variety of deciduous woodland birds. Breeding species often spotted are Red-bellied Woodpecker, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Eastern Phoebe, Tufted Titmouse, Wood Thrush, Veery, Red-eyed Vireo, various warblers (Blue-winged, Chestnut-sided, Black-and-white, and Ovenbird), Rose-breasted Grosbeak, and Northern Oriole. Both cuckoos (Yellow-billed and Black-billed) occur, but populations are irregular and closely associated with gypsy moth infestation, and during many years the birds are scarce or absent.

Fall migration can fill the woodland and thickets with an assortment of flycatchers (Great Crested, *Empidonaxes*, and the rarer Olive-sided), vireos (Yellow-throated, Solitary, Warbling, and the rarer Philadelphia), and warblers (Northern Parula, Yellow, Magnolia, Yellow-rumped, Blackpoll, American Redstart, and Canada, among others).

Sand Spit. Just before the headland, a trail diverges on the right to the sand spit. The sand spit offers a pebble beach to explore on the seaward side and also provides a good view of the marsh and mudflats along the bayside. **NOTE:** Please refrain from walking on the dune grass and associated vegetation when exploring the sand spit, as this vegetation is fragile and easily destroyed. Crosswalks have been spaced along the spit to facilitate the passage of visitors from the seaward side to the bay side of the spit (or vice versa). The Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection has initiated a Dune Grass Restoration Project along the spit and requests that visitors adhere to the posted "keep off" policy.

During August and September the mussel beds and mudflats that are

exposed at mid- and low tides attract shorebirds. Species to search for include all shorebirds identified previously and Sanderling (along beach), Dunlin, and Short-billed Dowitcher, as well as the rarer American Golden-Plover, Buff-breasted Sandpiper, and Hudsonian Godwit. Recently the postbreeding dispersal of American Oystercatcher has resulted in the sighting of impressive numbers foraging on the mussel beds. A total of forty-two oystercatchers was observed on September 6, 1992! The endangered Piping Plover has nested on the spit in the past, but not since 1986. With luck, the species will return to nest in the future. Terns (Common, Least, which formerly nested, and the rarer Roseate) are casual throughout the summer and are joined by Forster's in early fall. Small flocks of American Pipits are generally spotted during early October. In winter the Ipswich race of the Savannah Sparrow is sometimes observed scurrying through the dune vegetation. A Snowy Owl perched on a post or sand dune is always a winter possibility as well.

Check the promontory for an unobstructed view of Fisher's Island Sound and the waterbirds that are associated with this ecosystem. From October through April various species of grebes (Horned and the uncommon Red-necked), cormorants (Double-crested are common most of the year but displaced in abundance by Great during winter), waterfowl (American Black Duck, Greater Scaup, Common Goldeneye, Bufflehead, Oldsquaw, White-winged and Surf scoters, and Red-breasted Merganser), and gulls (Ring-billed, Herring, Great Black-backed, Bonaparte's, and the occasional Glaucous or Iceland) may be found. Strong northeast or easterly winds in November and December have blown in rare pelagic visitors such as Northern Gannet and Black-legged Kittiwake.

Continue along the loop trail from the headland back to the parking lot. Again, the woodlands, fields, and shrub thickets host many of the passerines previously listed. At the first Y intersection, a left takes you back to the main trail (about halfway between the headland and the parking lot). If you bear right, you will shortly come to a second Y. The left trail returns to a point near the parking lot, and the right path will bring you along the eastern part of the peninsula to Mumford's Cove and eventually the former railroad bed at the north end of the park. During August and September a variety of wild fruit trees and shrubs are available to attract birds and hungry birders. Be on the lookout for wild grape, wild black and choke cherries, black raspberry, and apple. If the birding is slow, at least you can have an inexpensive lunch.

Groton - New London Airport. A birding trip to the nearby Groton-New London Airport can also be worthwhile when visiting Bluff Point Coastal Reserve. Located on the west side of the Poquonock River, the habitats around the airport frequently yield open grassland species. To get to the airport from the Coastal Reserve, return to Route 1, turn left, and drive 0.3 mile to South Road. Turn left (sign posted for Groton-New London Airport), and follow South Road

0.6 mile. When you see the airport runway and surrounding grassland, park at the pulloff on the right.

The lawns and grassy fields around the airport often produce a variety of grassland shorebirds, especially during the fall migration from August through October. Killdeer and Black-bellied Plover are usually common, while Upland and Buff-breasted sandpipers and American Golden-Plover are rarer, but sometimes occur. A flock of twelve or more Buff-breasted Sandpipers was present at the airport in September 1995. In winter the airport environs often hosts flocks of Horned Lark and Snow Bunting (more regular in November and early December, sporadic thereafter). Check the flocks carefully for the occasional Lapland Longspur, Snowy Owl and Rough-legged Hawk irregularly overwinter in the area.

Nearby Birding Sites. Several important birding sites are located within ten miles of Bluff Point Coastal Reserve. Just a few miles to the east is the Mystic River, which can be good from October through April for waterbirds. Nearby is the Denison-Pequopos Nature Center, a small preserve with a nice mix of woodland, field, and wetland habitats good for nesting birds. Barn Island Wildlife Management Area is slightly farther to the east. Barn Island WMA is an important complex of extensive salt marsh bordered landward by coastal deciduous woodlands. A few miles to the west of Bluff Point Coastal Reserve is the Connecticut College Arboretum in New London, which provides varied habitat for spring and summer nesting species. Impressive winter concentrations of waterfowl can often be observed along the Thames River and at Smith Cove.

Other Area Attractions. The area within ten miles of Bluff Point Coastal Reserve hosts many important and varied tourist attractions. Mystic Seaport Museum and Mystic Marinelife Aquarium are just a few miles to the east at Exit 90 on Interstate 95. To the west is the equally historic Groton-New London area. Groton is home to the Electric Boat Division, responsible for the Seawolf class of submarines, and a major U.S. Naval submarine base. The world's first nuclear-powered submarine, the Nautilus, was also built by Electric Boat in the early 1950s. Today, the Nautilus is on permanent display and may be visited at the USS Nautilus Memorial in Groton. Along with many other attractions, New London features the U.S. Coast Guard Academy, which lies just north of the bridge over the Thames River. The tall ship Eagle, the training ship for cadets, is often berthed at the Coast Guard Academy dock and can sometimes be visited.

LODGING

This eastern Connecticut area is a popular tourist spot in summer, and there is abundant lodging in the immediate area, with easy access from Interstate 95. Fairly large complexes of motels and historic bed-and-breakfast inns are located at Mystic (Exit 90), New London, and Waterford. Stonington and Old Lyme are especially noted for their historic bed-and-breakfast inns.

ARNOLD DEVINE is an environmental analyst with the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection. He is a member of the Connecticut Ornithological Association (COA) board of directors and the Connecticut Rare Records Committee. **DWIGHT SMITH** is a professor of biology at Southern Connecticut State University in New Haven. Dwight is also a member of the COA board of directors and editor of the *COA Bulletin*.

ATTENTION BIRDERS

Special Cape Cod

Centennial Birders' Meeting

Celebrate Massachusetts Audubon's Centennial at a special two-day joint Birders' Meeting/Cape Cod Natural History weekend in September. Because birding on Cape Cod in fall doesn't get much better, this year's meeting will feature a full day of field trip options along with the traditional lineup of indoor presentations and workshops.

Lectures, identification workshops, slide presentations, field trips led by experts, exhibits, banquet speaker, and more

Join the Massachusetts Audubon Society as it celebrates ***THE NATURE OF MASSACHUSETTS*** amid the glory of Cape Cod in autumn.

Date: September 21-22, 1996
Location: Four Points (Sheraton) Hotel
Eastham, Massachusetts

**For costs and registration information,
contact Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary
at 508-349-2615.**

Bird Watcher's General Store

Featuring: The Amazing **AVIARIUM** In-House Window Birdfeeder. One-way mirrored plexiglass allows you to watch the birds for hours but they can't see you!

Come see this exceptional birdfeeder in action.



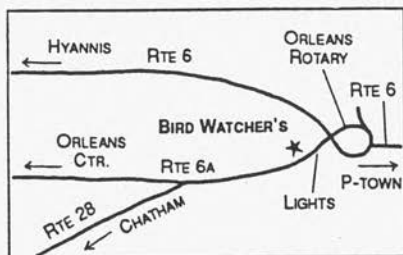
OTHER BIRD-LOVER ITEMS INCLUDE:

- Bird Mugs
- Bird Note Cards
- Bird Carvings
- Bird Field Guides
- Bird Books
- Bird Key Chains
- Bird Jewelry
- Bird Door Knockers
- Bird Telephone
- Bird Houses
- Bird Baths
- Bird Gift Wrap
- Bird T-Shirts
- Bird Photos
- Bird Prints
- Bird Calls
- Bird Recordings
- Bird Potholders
- Bird Towels
- Bird Carving Kits
- Bird Welcome Mats
- Bird Thermometers
- Bird Sun Catchers
- Bird Calendars
- Bird Pillows
- Bird Place Mats
- Bird Mobiles
- Bird Fountains
- Bird Bath Heaters
- Bird Switch Plates
- Bird Puzzles
- Bird Bookmarks

- A complete line of Binoculars, Spotting Scopes and Tripods
- A children's section with birdhouse kits, beginner books, and other fun and educational items

PLUS over 100 different types of bird feeders including Bluejay and Squirrel-proof feeders that work, **GUARANTEED**, plus ten different types of Bird Seed

GIFT CERTIFICATES & U.P.S. SHIPPING • OPEN YEAR ROUND



Bird Watcher's General Store

36 Route 6A • Orleans, MA 02653

(508) 255-6974

or

1-800-562-1512