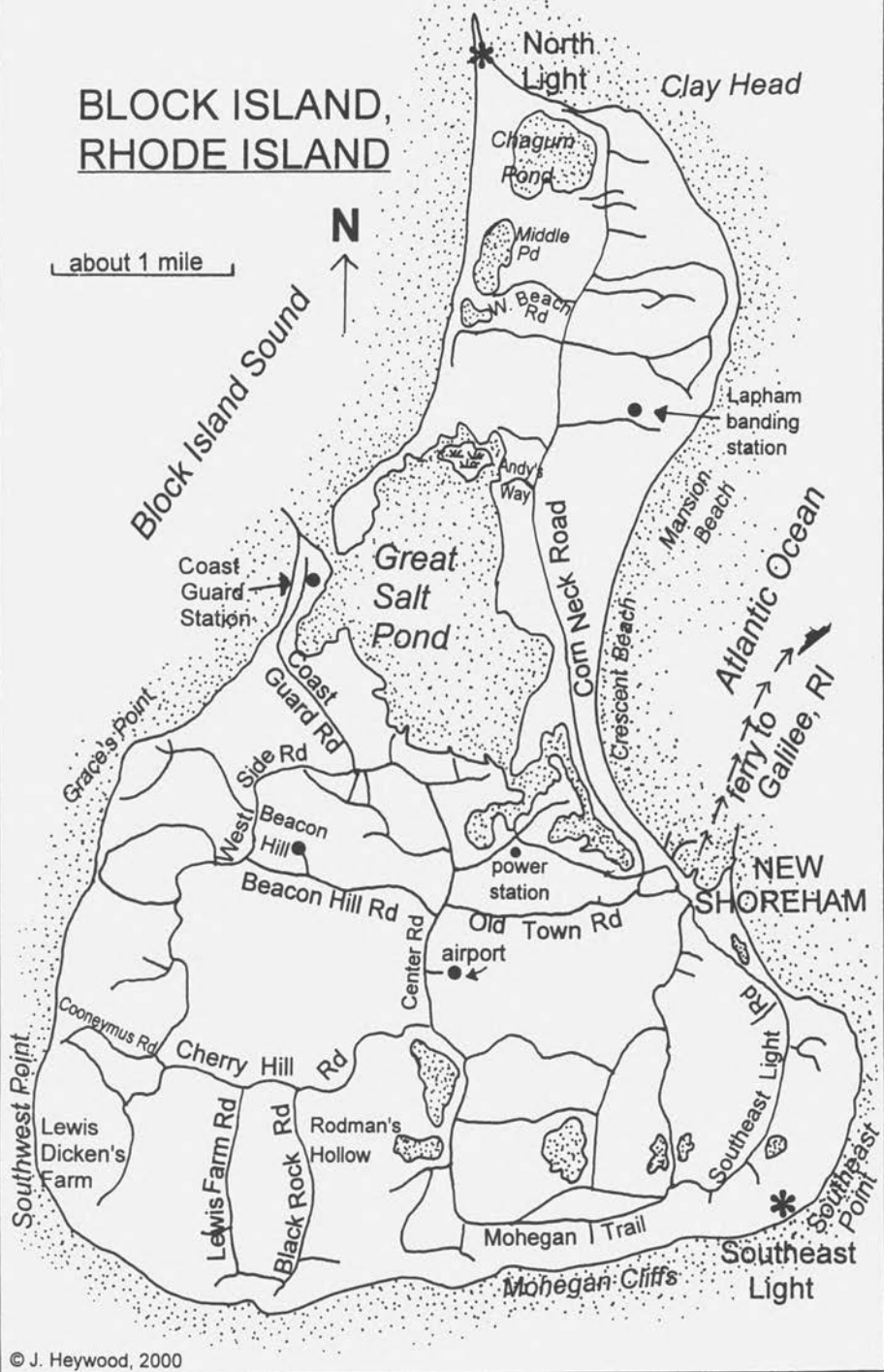


# BLOCK ISLAND, RHODE ISLAND

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# Block Island, RI

Bob Fox

Twelve miles off the coast of Rhode Island, halfway between Long Island and the Elizabeth Islands, lies Block Island, a premier location from which to watch fall migration. The island's small size, low trees, and open spaces make it possible to cover the area in a weekend and have good looks at migrant birds. Whether you are trying to identify various species or studying fall plumages, the island is a laboratory. Some birders may prefer to view aspects of migration, seek rare birds, or establish record counts. Everyone enjoys the peace of island life, the scenery, and the weather (usually). I have spent the first weekend in October on Block Island nearly every year since 1963.

You reach the island by ferry from Point Judith (Galilee), RI, a 70-minute trip (\$11+ round-trip). A car (or bicycle) is needed on the island. A car reservation (\$20+ each way) can be made by telephone but should be made well in advance. The car must be ready for boarding at least 45 minutes before the ferry's departure. For more details call Interstate Navigation Company (401-783-4613). Other ferries leave from New London and elsewhere; there is also a small-plane service from Westerly, RI.

I always bring a ski jacket, hat, and mittens for the wind and morning cold but sunny afternoons can have temperatures up to 70 degrees F. Rain gear is always a prudent item. In New Shoreham, where the ferry lands, there are a variety of places to stay but advanced registration is needed. There are 6-8 restaurants, a few small stores, and a gas station in town.

Now I will highlight eight good birding areas based on the how various birds use the island in fall. This approach focuses on the six migration patterns of the island. The *Offshore Drift* brings the largest numbers and greatest variety of birds. Some migration occurs on most fall nights, but the biggest influxes occur under certain weather conditions. After a series of warm days and southern winds, when birds are feeding 50 to 250 miles inland from the coast, a cold front crosses New England with light northwest winds blowing all night. Eighty species of birds that normally migrate southwest toward Florida start to move. Many birds will drift over the ocean, realize their mistake by dawn's early light, and head northwest to the nearest land they can find. These birds, 95 percent of which are immature, land on the south and east sides of Block Island, feed, and fly north. As the island narrows to a point at the north, birds are concentrated there. From dawn to 11 a.m. they feed, mill about, and form small flocks to head to the mainland just visible to the north.

Get to the **north end** by dawn, parking at the end of the paved Corn Neck Road. Listen for Bobolinks, Horned Larks, or American Pipits in flight, and look for Northern Flickers and flocks of Blue Jays and Cedar Waxwings. Check the bayberry thickets for both races of Palm Warbler and migrant and resident Savannah and Song sparrows. Then, starting where the paved road ends, some five miles north of New Shoreham, walk south toward town. After 100 yards turn left on the first dirt road, which goes to Clay Head 250 yards to the east. On your right is a grove of small pine trees, some of which are dying

from blight. Often there are numbers of Ruby-crowned and Golden-crowned kinglets, White-breasted and Red-breasted nuthatches, Brown Creepers, and a dozen species of warblers such as Yellow-rumped, Pine, Nashville, Blackburnian, Chestnut-sided, Wilson's, and Magnolia.

As you continue toward Clay Head there is a lawn on the left where you can find many varieties of migrant sparrows (Field, Chipping, White-throated, and White-crowned), Dark-eyed Juncos, and even a Lapland Longspur or Snow Bunting. As this is private land and we have spent years building good relations with the home owners, please do not walk through gardens or hedgerows or get close to homes. Most owners welcome birders; we respect the wishes of the few who do not want us in and around their yards. On the right, beyond the pines, are some brushy fields with rough paths (land recently acquired by The Nature Conservancy). The area is usually sheltered from the wind, yet gets early morning sun. It is good for Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Yellow-billed and Black-billed cuckoos, Eastern Phoebe, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Eastern Kingbird, Red-eyed, Blue-headed, and Philadelphia vireos, American Goldfinch, an early Pine Siskin, Gray Catbird, Eastern Towhee, House Wren, and resident Carolina Wrens. Going out and up to the top of Clay Head, there is a stone wall-lined trail on the right, one of many on the island that is good for birding; this one follows the eastern side of the island. Tree and Barn swallows often circle overhead, and small flocks of Red-winged Blackbirds and Common Grackles can be seen heading toward the mainland. From Clay Head watch the migrant birds coming to the point, and check the brush on all sides for good looks at migrants and an occasional vagrant. You now retrace your steps to the paved road.

Heading south some 100 feet from where you rejoin the road, there is an inconspicuous path left into the pines that is sheltered from the wind and a great place to get good looks at feeding migrants. (This is across from a parking area, and you climb over a low stone wall to enter.) Besides the previously mentioned species, it has been a good place to find Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, Orange-crowned, Canada, and Bay-breasted warblers, and a late Blue-winged Warbler.

As you again head south on the paved road, the field beyond the pines has had more than its share of Connecticut and Mourning warblers. The next four or five driveways are good places to see a different mix of the species mentioned earlier. Continue on the paved road up the hill looking especially on the left at a little goldfish pond, then a yard in which there are both water and feeders for birds. By now, migrants are becoming less common, but one stop is important. Mrs. Elise Lapham has an outstanding banding station at her home, which is east from Corn Neck Road. Her dirt road is marked on the northeast corner by a red house with white gingerbread trim. You might want to call before stopping by but the beautiful grounds, home, and station, some 600 yards east of the paved road and almost on the shore, are worth seeing. Hermit, Swainson's, Gray-cheeked, and Wood thrushes, Yellow-breasted Chats, and more common migrants can be found here.

Often, this is a good morning's birding, so I will pause for a moment to comment on two aspects of the Offshore Drift species I have just mentioned. First, they are the most common migrants to be found on any day. Second, during a good flight, certain species can be seen in large numbers. High daily counts include 1000 Northern Flickers, 1200

Red-breasted Nuthatches, 300 Cape May Warblers, 300 Golden-crowned and 250 Ruby-crowned kinglets, and 100 Eastern Phoebes. Once 50 Brown Creepers filled the pines and would alight on birders. Often, you can see more birds of a given species here in a few hours than you will see the rest of the year.

Now let's consider a second group of birds that are headed for the Caribbean Islands and South America by an *Over water route*. They fly south and east crossing over Bermuda, reaching 15,000 feet then dropping slowly for a landfall 80 hours or more after leaving the New England Coast. These birds are more scattered over Block Island but can be found in all the places previously mentioned. While on the island, they are still putting on weight to carry them on this over water journey. A higher percentage of them are adults because they are here by design, not by accident. You will find many Blackpoll Warblers, the archetype of this flight, but also big numbers of Black-and-white, Parula, Black-throated Blue, and Prairie warblers, Ovenbirds, Northern Waterthrushes, Common Yellowthroats, and American Redstarts. Warblers heading for the Greater Antilles are Cape May, Magnolia, and Black-throated Green.

The third group, the *Postbreeding Dispersal Species*, is found all over the island. They come from three areas, the Ohio Valley, the far west, and elsewhere — the true vagrants. The fifteen Ohio Valley rare birds include Common Moorhen, American Avocet, Red-headed and Red-bellied woodpeckers, Western Kingbird, Bewick's Wren, Loggerhead Shrike, Prothonotary, Worm-eating and Yellow-throated warblers, Summer Tanager, Blue Grosbeak, Dickcissel, and Clay-colored and Lark sparrows. Far-western species include White Pelican, Golden Eagle, Say's Phoebe, Western Tanager, and Yellow-headed Blackbird. Vagrants include Northern Fulmar, White Ibis, and Wheatear. Per day in the field, I have seen more of these rare birds more often on Block Island than anywhere else in New England.

Here are some of the good spots to see the rare as well as the more likely birds. **Around the town**, walk west from town toward the power station (two-bladed windmill), checking for sparrows along the way and looking for waterfowl at the power station and the pond immediately beyond. Make a big counterclockwise circle back to town via Old Town Road, stopping at the beginning of Beacon Hill Road — a standard spot for Blue Grosbeak. Check the thickets for other species.

On a second walk go toward **Southeast Light**. Two inns — the 1661 and Manatee — are within 200 yards of the edge of town. Their grounds and nearby gardens have had blackbirds including many western specialties over the years. About 1 1/4 miles south and just before a long hill to the lighthouse, take a dirt road left. Fifty yards from the pavement on the right is a small pond that is good for ducks including Wood Duck, and it has produced Yellow-breasted Chats, Prothonotary Warblers, and other southern stragglers. The first time I visited the Lighthouse, I had six Dickcissels in a bush; something I have not repeated but there have been midwestern sparrows there frequently. While Barn Owls sometimes nest in holes in the banks beneath the Lighthouse, **do not try to climb to them**; it is dangerous. Better, try to find the owls in pine groves in the daytime or see them at night.

This Lighthouse is a good reason to mention a fourth migration pattern, *Falcon and Accipiter Flights*. Block Island is on a flyway, and you can get many good looks at Merlins, Peregrines, and Sharp-shinned and Coopers hawks most days. The Lighthouse is at the east end of the Mohegan Cliffs. Peregrines, especially, perch on promontories, or sail on updrafts along the cliffs. All four of these raptors plus Northern Harriers and Ospreys (but hardly ever a buteo!) can be easily seen at Clay Head at the north end, along both shorelines, anywhere over the island, but especially on the south end.

Besides the Southeast Light, a must-do trip is to **Lewis Dicken's Farm** near the southwest corner of the island. Continue along the Mohegan Trail road. En route there are two small ponds on the left where thicket birds, shorebirds, and western stragglers often appear. Just where the road turns inland is another overgrown small pond on the right, and on the left, check the spruces. Often near evening 500-2500 Monarch butterflies gather on the trees. Circling back onto Cherry Hill Road, there is a sharp right turn and on the left a sign marking Rodman's Hollow. Stop and scan for hawks. As you approach the end of the road, and Southwest Point is not far ahead, you enter the Lewis Dicken's Farm area at the second entrance (off Cooneymus Road), a dirt road to the left that soon shows a sign marking the Farm's formal entrance. You cross the spacious, rolling fields to the cliffs. Looking east across the fields, you can expect to see several Peregrines, a dozen Merlins and Kestrels, plus some accipiters racing past. From here you can watch the hawks take off for Montauk Point, just visible on the southwest horizon. Monarch and other migrant butterflies are common on the flowering pasture lands and crossing to Long Island.

From the southern end of the island and elsewhere, you can watch two other migration patterns, *shorebird* and *waterfowl movements*. To the west of Block Island pass large, mixed flocks of Great and Double-crested cormorants and groups of surface-feeding ducks, all entering Long Island Sound. To the east, well seen from **Southeast Light**, are movements of more ocean-going species. Nearby are flocks of Laughing and Bonaparte's gulls and terns, while farther out are scoters, Common Eiders, and geese. In earlier years, both jaegers, Northern Fulmars, and Cory's, Greater, and Manx shearwaters have been seen occasionally. You often get small flocks of Snow Geese here but in 1998, 5000 Greater Snow Geese were flying high and straight toward the Jersey shores.

*Shorebirds* on Block Island are in small numbers. The best places are at the north end, beside **Chagum Pond or on the sandy spit to North Light**. A second spot, especially from full to half-tide, is a walk on the west side of the **Great Salt Pond**. Drive in the road just north of Andy's Way — it is signed for the town's transfer station. Park at the road's west end, and walk south through soft sand. Egrets and herons, especially Yellow-crowned Night-Heron, as well as rails and salt-marsh sparrows, can be found around this tidal pond. Occasionally there are Buff-breasted Sandpipers and American Golden-Plovers on the outer beach, but you usually settle for yellowlegs, the more common plovers, and a family of American Oystercatchers. The pine grove at the end of this walk usually has migrants and occasionally roosting night-herons. If you are short on time, take Andy's Way to the edge of the pond, and walk 100 yards north working the spartina grasses for sparrows, rails, and migrant bitterns. A third shorebird/gull area is at the **Coast Guard Station**. Drive out Coast Guard Road checking along the shore; Lesser

Black-backed Gulls and American Oystercatchers are often found here. Walk past the station to a stone breakwater where a variety of shorebirds and gulls rest.

Block Island in the fall is usually good and occasionally spectacular. Six migration patterns pass by, each with birds heading for different wintering grounds. The Audubon Society of Rhode Island (401-949-5484) has a trip to the island the first weekend in October each year; many smaller groups come from bird clubs across New England and New York. You can average over 125 species (from a list of over 265) in a weekend here, and see more individual birds on this weekend than on any other in New England during the year. In 35 years, no two weekends have been the same, and none have disappointed me. See you on Block Island this fall! 🦅

**Bob Fox**, a resident of North Andover, Massachusetts, has been an active birder since his college days. He has led trips on Block Island for the Audubon Society of Rhode Island since 1962. In addition, he has led trips for a number of groups in New England and has been a leader in the South Shore Bird Club and Nuttall Ornithological Club. He and his wife, Dana Duxbury-Fox, have birded together across the United States, Hawaii, Central America, England, and China, and look forward to more trips with friends in the coming years.

