

POCKET PLACES

Mattapoisett

Marc Sylvia


On August 19, 1991, while a breeze was rustling the leaves of the trees along Commonwealth Avenue, a storm surge plowed up funnel-shaped Buzzards Bay just fifty miles to the south. Flooding was fifteen feet above mean sea level by the time the surge reached the narrow end of the funnel, at the entrance to the Cape Cod Canal. Today, one can still see the many fallen trees in the woods of southern Bristol and Plymouth counties, all aligned southeast to northwest, toppled by Hurricane Bob's one hundred mile-per-hour winds.

Mattapoisett is one of the off-cape towns that comprise the up-glacier shore of Buzzards Bay. In April and May, no one around here can be made to believe that the glacier has left, as in gloves and hooded parkas we view the returning egrets, while twenty miles inland kids are running under sprinklers. But this is a microclimate that also provides us with midwinter robins and waxwings, bluebirds and blackbirds, Carolina Wrens, towhees, catbirds, and Turkey Vultures. Spring migrants work their way along the coast and forest margins, and then comes the time to watch the breeders settle in.

A little park-and-walk at the end of Mattapoisett Neck Road in Mattapoisett takes you through a woodlot to the southwest shore of the point, which looks out onto Brant Cove. Past the seasonal passerines working the trees and brush along the rutted road, you are likely to find Willets and American Oystercatchers in numbers in the salt meadows to the south and north. This is sharp-tailed sparrow habitat, with several active Osprey nests nearby. Song Sparrows, of course, are all around, and some of the smaller shorebirds may be along the beach. Note the cloud of terns around Ram Island, about a third of a mile to the south. Dick Harlow has been managing this colony, which includes some establishment of Roseate Terns in the last few years. Mattapoisett Neck Road is a spur running a little over two miles south beginning at Route 6, about a mile-and-a-half east of the Fairhaven line. There is a circular widening of the road at the end, before the entrance to Antassawamock. Park along the circle, and walk past the vehicle gate to the right of the circle to get to the rutted road.

Mid-to-late fall is a good time to check Angelica Point, in the southeast corner of Mattapoisett. This is a scrubby teardrop dangling southward from a short barrier beach. The transition from the sand spit to the area of bushy growth is a stretch of boggy flats and littoral shallows. The inland side of the beach is familiar salt marsh cut by mosquito ditching, leading to a salt pond before meeting the uplands. You can access the point from Route 6 by turning south onto Prospect Road, which winds through the community of Crescent Beach, past a creek which empties into Pine Island Pond. Across this pond you will see a couple of dozen new cottages on stilts.

These houses are on Cove Street, which is the barrier beach, and each is a replacement for one demolished by Hurricane Bob in 1991. To get there, continue along the same road as it bends ninety degrees to the right and ends at the shore. You can take a right onto a hard sand road and park near the beginning of the road. This is Cove Street. Walk to the end of the road, with the tidal marsh to your right and Buzzards Bay to your left, as you look out under the houses. The road ends, but you can walk to the point, no more than a half mile from where you parked. Angelica Point can afford sightings of a variety of shorebirds and bay ducks, as well as Common Yellowthroats and Yellow-rumped Warblers in the tangles. Being of mixed habitat and peninsular configuration, it is also a place to find Bird "X", such as the Snowy Owl that showed up for the Christmas count several years ago.

Dress warmly and post that Yellow-breasted Chat on MASSBIRD. 



The Old Dump and Vicinity, Northfield, MA

Mark Taylor

One of my favorite birding spots in Northfield, especially in the spring, is a place I affectionately refer to as the Old Dump. This is an area just off the main street in the center of town and was the town dump many years past. Now, it has no resemblance to a landfill, except for an old glass bottle poking through the vegetation here and there. This area also includes the Northfield Center Cemetery, which precedes Old Dump, a wetland region, and a large tract of cornfields after that. These cornfields extend to the Connecticut River. All together the area includes several diverse habitats in a relatively small area.

To get there, you take a left, if heading north, off Main Street (Routes 10 and 63), on Parker Avenue (this is the first left after the first pedestrian crossing). Follow this road a short way, and park just before the set of railroad tracks. The dump access road begins just the other side of the tracks.

The cemetery itself, which is the highest in elevation of the four habitats, is surrounded by large white pines, locust, and maple trees with a mature spruce, yew,

and several arborvitae scattered about. This is where I look for many of the migrating warblers and breeding species that prefer the canopy, but have also found Swainson's Thrush occasionally in the spring perched on the gravestones.

Continuing past the cemetery, down the access road, there is an overgrown but walkable path off to the left, marked by a pile of organic debris (the town still uses this area to discard leaves and fallen trees). This is the Old Dump and is the second tier in elevation. This short, one-way walk through grasses mixed with sumac and willow takes you out to a somewhat overgrown lookout. From here you can scan the cattail wetland and the tangle of wild roses and alder below, a great place for those scrub- and ground-loving bird species.

Back to the access road you head down through to the third habitat, which is the wetland area, with a cattail pond on the left and alder swamp to the right. This is one of the most reliable places, I've found, to see Wilson's Warblers in the spring, along with Wood Ducks and many other species of birds such as Virginia Rail and Warbling Vireos. The bittersweet-entangled trees bordering the road also attract a variety of berry-eating species in the fall and winter. This wetland area extends north and south along the edge of the cornfields, so once out to this opening, you can walk in either direction and be able to view both habitats.

The cornfields (fourth and final habitat) are best viewed in spring before planting time, and in fall after the corn has been harvested. This vantage point gives great long-distance views west toward the Connecticut River. Horned Larks, American Pipits, Canada Geese, and a variety of hawks are frequent visitors here, but as in any area a rarity could appear. I have seen a Common Moorhen in the cattail pond here and Peregrine Falcons hunting along the cornfields.

Northfield, because of its rural location and its placement along the Connecticut River (the town is divided practically in half by it), has many more great birding places to explore, but the Old Dump area is one of the good ones and I highly recommend it. The town itself has a beautiful main street with set-back sidewalks and colonial homes on both sides, so it's an attractive place to visit also. 