

Birding the Boston Harbor Islands

John Nove

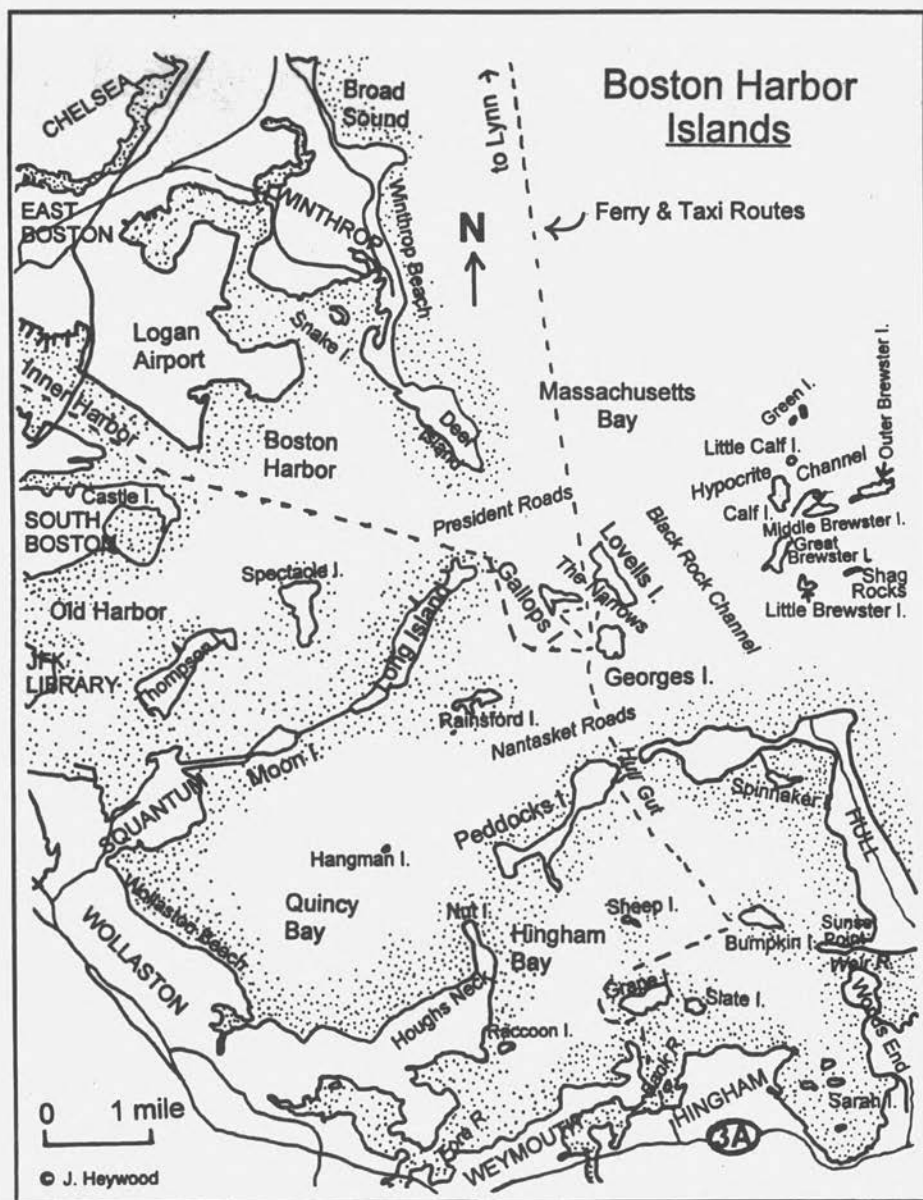
Introduction

After nearly a decade of lobbying by Representatives Gerry Studds and Joe Moakley and Senator Edward Kennedy, the Boston Harbor Islands National Recreation Area was created by an Act of Congress in 1996. Unique among sites in the National Parks system, it is managed by a partnership made up of the twelve owners and operators of the thirty islands named in the legislation together with several advocacy groups and the National Park Service (NPS) itself. After a five-year process of study and public input, a management plan was recently released that will guide the park as it moves into the new millennium. Of interest to birders and to visitors in general is the recommendation that calls for increased public access to the islands. At the same time, several of the more remote islands, traditionally used by colonial nesting species, are to remain undeveloped.



In operation since the early 1970s, the Boston Harbor Islands State Park, now a part of the Boston Harbor Islands National Park Area (the name it now goes by after Native Americans objected to using the phrase "recreation area" to describe islands on which some of their ancestors were imprisoned and died), is co-managed by the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Management (DEM) and the Metropolitan District Commission (MDC). Currently, six of the nineteen state-owned islands make up the nucleus of the Area, hosting nearly 125,000 visitors annually. They are staffed seasonally and are accessible by ferry and water-taxi link from Boston as well as from the North and South Shores. Of the six, Georges and Gallops are strictly day-use (following the convention used on nautical charts, apostrophes are not used for the islands' names in this article: Georges, not George's), while camping is permitted on the other four (Grape, Bumpkin, Lovells, and Peddocks). Public access to a seventh island, Thompson, owned by the Thompson Island Outward Bound Education Center, is somewhat limited, with transportation being provided by the Center's boat. In addition, regularly scheduled trips to Boston Light on Little Brewster Island began during the summer of 1999.

This article will focus on the six islands served by the park's ferry/water-taxi system during the summer season and on the logistics of getting around the park and the islands themselves. Some of the birding highlights of specific islands are mentioned in the text, but for the most part readers are referred to the list of breeding species at the end of the article. It was compiled during the 1980s and 1990s using the *Massachusetts Breeding Bird Atlas* criteria, and is a fairly comprehensive most-likely-to-be-seen list for the summer season. Off-season access is discussed at the end of the article as are the Harbor's heron rookeries.



Getting To and Around the Islands

Regular visitors to the islands have become accustomed to surprises, and the past season held its share: Peddocks, long a favorite for birders because of its varied habitats, and closed for several years because of a damaged pier, finally reopened. As if to balance the situation, structural damage to the pier on Lovells required that island to be closed for most of the 2000 season to all but private boaters. (Piers destroyed in

the early 1990s on Great Brewster and Calf Islands have yet to be rebuilt.) In addition, Gallops was closed for several weeks while asbestos from the debris of demolished World War II-era structures was removed. Several parts of the island still remain off-limits.

Understanding the water transportation system and its schedule is vital to enjoying a day of birding on the islands. Schedules designate two shoulder seasons that run from late April to mid-June and from Labor Day to Columbus Day. During these seasons, ferries depart every two hours from Boston starting at 10:00 a.m. and less frequently from Hingham and Salem; a single water taxi makes a loop of all the islands on weekends only. The summer season, extending from around the time of the third week of June to Labor Day, features hourly service from Boston, from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. daily, with at least two water taxis providing northern (Lovells/Gallops) and southern service (Peddock/Bumpkin/Grape/Hingham) seven days a week. It's best to study the printed schedule beforehand and to stop by the NPS's information booth at the foot of Long Wharf (if you're traveling from Boston) on the day of your trip to inquire about last-minute changes. Schedules can be obtained by calling the NPS (617-223-8666; <www.BostonIslands.com>), by stopping by the park information booths at Long Wharf and Fan Pier, or by contacting Boston Harbor Cruises (BHC) (617-227-4321; <www.bostonharborcruises.com>).

Ferry transportation from Boston is currently provided exclusively by BHC. In addition to their Boston-based operation on Long Wharf and their South Shore hub at the commuter dock at Hewitts Cove in Hingham, BHC ran boats during the 2000 season from the Blaney Street pier in Salem. Boats from Boston travel to Georges Island, transportation hub of the park, in about 40 minutes. Current individual round-trip fares are \$8 for adults, \$7 for seniors (and individuals in groups of 25 or more with prior arrangement), and \$6 for children under 12. These prices include unlimited use of the water taxis. (Kids under 3 are free; the school group rate is \$2/student with one adult riding free for every 10 students.) Boats have a snack bar, toilet facilities, and a historical narration on the way out. (It's wise to avoid the hotdogs that have been spinning around on their wiener-wheel all day.) There is a snack bar and water on Georges. All the islands have composting toilets.

From Georges Island, free water taxis transport visitors to the five other islands. Although scheduled connections between ferry arrivals and taxi departures (and the reverse on the way home) were fairly smooth during the mid-1990s, the current schedule can be inconvenient. Arriving on Georges and having to wait 40 minutes for a taxi to Gallops, or arriving by taxi on Georges just as the ferry back to Boston is departing, can be aggravating on a humid, 90-degree day. The trip from Georges to Gallops or Lovells is about 10 minutes long, while the cruise from Georges down to Grape takes about 45 minutes with two stops along the way (Peddocks and Bumpkin). I strongly recommend taking the first (10:00 a.m.) boat out of Boston or Hingham to maximize your interisland taxi options during the day. I also recommend that, if you're taking the boat from Boston and hope to take the water taxi, that you quickly make your way from the ferry, once it docks on Georges, over to the taxi dock to get



in line for your boat. Island staff and volunteers from the Friends of the Boston Harbor Islands will be there to guide you.

On the Way

The ferry ride from Long Wharf, Boston, out to Georges Island can provide an interesting start to your day. Check the top of the Custom House Tower for the resident pair of Peregrine Falcons (and their offspring by mid-June) as you wait for the boat to leave. Since being reintroduced in downtown Boston over fifteen years ago, a pair has usually nested in the box

constructed just inside the topmost of the six tower-top windows that face the harbor. They're often seen perched on or flying around the tower, and lucky observers may have a chance to watch young birds learning to fly. Pigeons, Blue Jays, and other large songbirds seem to be their primary diet.

The three most ubiquitous species you'll encounter along the way are Great Black-backed and Herring gulls, and Double-crested Cormorants. All three species nest on several of the islands. Look for the latter fishing, stretching, perched on pilings, or flying by. Once beyond the Inner Harbor, other species become more common. Common Terns can usually be seen flying past the ferry or fishing nearby. Laughing Gulls are also regular summer visitors with from 50 to 100 present in the area each summer. The sewage discharge pipe off Deer Island has traditionally been the best place to observe them and other species of gulls, but with the opening of the new 9.5-mile wastewater discharge tunnel out into Massachusetts Bay, it will be interesting to see how the Harbor's gull population is affected.

Up until the mid-1990s, Common Terns nested on the remains of an old pier on Long Island Head. Damage to the pier left it unattached to the island and effectively kept mammalian predators from the nests. The derelict pier was eventually removed, eliminating a prime tern-nesting site. Other likely fly-bys include Black-crowned Night Herons, Great and Snowy egrets, and Glossy Ibis, all of which nest in colonies in the Outer Harbor.



As the ferry makes its turn into the Nubble Channel, just beyond Long Island Head, it passes a gravelly bar called Nixes Mate, with its black and white pyramidal structure poised on a granite base. This eighteenth-century navigational marker is located on all that remains of what was once a ten-acre island. When the tide is low, birds, mostly gulls and cormorants, line up on the base and along the bar. It's also a place to sometimes find American Oystercatchers, a species that extended its breeding range north to and beyond the Harbor in the early 1990s. Oystercatchers have nested on Slate Island and now nest on Lovells Island and

Snake Island in Winthrop Bay. My most surprising in-transit bird has been Wilson's Storm-petrel. Small groups of them are most often seen from the Boston ferry on foggy mornings in August when the wind is blowing from the east; they are even more common on the boat down from the North Shore.

On-Island Camping

Camping is a good way to learn about Harbor birdlife. From the departure of the last taxi at the end of the afternoon through to the arrival of the first one late the next morning, campers have the islands pretty much to themselves. (Staff is on hand 24 hours a day for emergencies.) Grape, Lovells, and Peddocks are open for camping spring through fall; Bumpkin is open summers only. Each of the islands has about a dozen single-tent sites and one large group site. Peddocks has field-camping only; the sites on Lovells are sparsely vegetated and sandy, a short walk from the beach; Grape has forested sites and grassy paths, the most unspoiled of all the camping islands; Bumpkin's sites are in an old orchard, but the island's proximity to Hull with its police, fire, and ambulance sirens can be disconcerting. Reservations for Lovells and Peddocks are free and can be made through the MDC at 617-727-7676. Reservations for Grape and Bumpkin cost \$5/night and must be made through the DEM's computerized reservation system at 1-877-I CAMP MA. It is hoped that in the near future a single phone call will provide information and camping reservations for all the islands.



Exploring the Islands

What follows are some suggestions for trails to walk and places to visit on each of the islands. They have been favorites of mine over the past fifteen years, but as is the case with many things in the Harbor, and as you'll learn as you read what follows, change seems to be the only constant (how's that for a disclaimer!). Anyhow, use the suggestions as a starting point, and then explore the islands for yourself. In addition to the island maps/brochures available at information booths and on each of the islands, on-island staff is usually friendly and well informed. Roughly speaking, the trails on Gallops, Grape, and Bumpkin can be walked in about an hour and a half; allow two hours for Georges and Lovells, and three for Peddocks.

Georges Island (MDC)

From Seawall to Parade Ground – The most interesting walk on Georges follows part of the island's shoreline atop a granite seawall. Dating back to the early 1830s, the wall, now badly damaged in some areas, was built to secure the island from the forces of erosion prior to the construction of Fort Warren, the heart of Boston's nineteenth-century harbor defenses. From the ferry pier, walk left around the outside

of the fort, cutting diagonally across the picnic area with its catalpas and exotic pines. The seawall walk begins just beyond the chain-link fence and the island's compost heap (often a good place for Song and Savannah sparrows). The channel ahead of you, running between Georges and Gallops on one side and Lovells on the other, known as The Narrows, is a remnant of the ancient bed of the Charles River as it made its way to a then-distant sea as the last glacier was retreating. As the glacier continued to melt, sea level rose, flooding the area, isolating the Harbor's drumlin hills, and turning the riverbed into the Harbor's primary deep-water channel. It was the proximity to that channel that led to the siting of Fort Warren.

A walk around the perimeter of Georges Island, in addition to affording scenic views of the outer islands (including Little Brewster Island, oldest lighthouse site in the nation), can provide a window on the Harbor's seabird life. In the spring, Brant by the hundreds congregate in the offshore waters and often feed on the front lawn of



Fort Warren. Migrating ducks congregate in The Narrows as well, with a few eiders and scoters lingering through the summer. (In recent years, there has been only a single record of breeding Common Eiders, presumably on one of the outer islands, as evidenced by a hen with two babies seen feeding off Gallops.) In summer, both Common and Least terns are regulars here, along with Double-

crested Cormorants and Herring, Great Black-backed, Ring-billed, Laughing, and Bonaparte's gulls. Oystercatchers are a likely fly-by, and in late summer, migrating shorebirds, including Ruddy Turnstones, feed on the rocks below the seawall. The wall continues around the island with the expanse of the outer islands giving way to views of Hull and Peddocks Island to the south. As you go through the opening in the fence and the picnic area comes into view, notice the small *Phragmites* marsh on your right (probably no larger than forty square feet) that is fed by run-off from the fort and drumlin. As tiny as it is, it's a regular haunt in the spring for Red-winged Blackbirds. Mallards have also successfully nested in the area.

Cross the picnic area, then follow the sidewalk and steps running along the near side of the brick Administration Building (originally a mine storage facility) into the fort. The area inside the pentagonal ramparts of Fort Warren, the parade ground, is the domain of the Barn Swallow. Arriving in late April, they build their mud and straw



nests on the walls of the rooms in the fort. In addition to taking advantage of the lack of doors and windows, the birds can also get into these interior spaces through the cannon embrasures and narrow gun loops on the fort's outer walls. Look for a room with swallow activity, walk in and locate the nest, and then observe it from a more distant part of the room. Throughout the season you'll be rewarded with an up-close view of nest building, feeding and caring for young birds, and other aspects of their domestic life.

A half-filled cistern in the parade ground played host to a family of Mallard ducklings one spring. They toppled (were led?) into it before they could fly and were captive there until they could. The nearby horse chestnuts, the largest trees on the island, attract migrants each spring. While giving a tour one May, I was asked by a student, "Mista, what's that red bird?" Prepared for a Northern Cardinal, I was surprised to see a male Summer Tanager hopping along a branch.

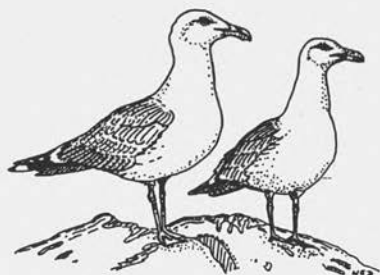
During the summer of 1999, a large World War II-era amphibious landing craft spent the season tied up and unused at one of the docks. Unlike the vessel that has valiantly served the islands for many years and continues to do so, this new one had several-inch-square perforations on its bow door which were discovered by a passing group of Rough-winged Swallows. They settled in and successfully raised families inside — a Harbor first. The following season, the landing craft was gone, and so were the swallows.

Gallops Island (DEM)

The Gull Colony and Peggys Point — Just 16 acres in size, Gallops is a 10-minute water-taxi ride from Georges. The island's most prolonged use was as the site of a quarantine station from the close of the Civil War through the 1930s. The station's physician-in-chief during the 1920s and 1930s, a horticulturist, was responsible for introducing many exotic ornamentals and fruit trees to the island. With the coming of World War II, a school for Merchant Marine radio operators, cooks, and bakers was established. It was primarily the debris from the buildings of that era that contaminated parts of the island with asbestos.

From the pier, take the main trail up the drumlin. Turn left and follow the trail past the two composting toilets. It was in this area, among the *Forsythias*, that about a dozen pairs of Black-crowned Night Herons nested for many years. Increased visitor pressure in the mid-80s eventually drove them off to the outer islands. It's also in this area that you're likely to encounter your first giant rabbit (technically, a European hare). In the late 1940s and the 1950s these animals were transported to islands around the world where they bred and were hunted seasonally for their meat. Others may have been introduced more recently. A 1999 literature search by the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife (MDFW) suggests that of all the hare populations studied to date, the animals on Gallops are, on average, the largest in the world.

The trail circumnavigates the island in a clockwise direction and leads to several scenic overlooks as well as to the gull colony located on the island's northeast corner. Although the area was primarily used by Herring Gulls through the early 1990s, the number of Great Black-backed Gulls has increased during recent years. The size of the entire colony presently stands at about thirty pairs. They nest in the ledges of the sandy cliffs as well as on the grassy areas above. Island staff members usually attempt to discourage nesting directly on the path, but sometimes the gulls prevail — and can often become quite indignant when walkers pass by. From mid-May through mid-July it's best to walk parts of this trail with a stick held vertically over your head. If conditions are truly dangerous (there have been several gull-scratched scalps over the



years, and the claws on gulls' feet are not known for their cleanliness), trail detours are set up by island staff.

Several scenic overlooks provide vistas of the Boston skyline, the massive new Deer Island water treatment plant, and the outer islands. They also provide vantage points from which to look for waterfowl. Small numbers of nonbreeding eiders and scoters remain in the Harbor all summer along with an occasional Brant as well. Sitting on one of the benches

overlooking The Narrows and Lovells Island, enjoying the sea breeze, contemplating how the different the area would be if the Statue of Liberty had been erected on Lovells (it was the runner-up site!), and watching birds fly by is a *very* pleasant way to spend an afternoon.

The path continues down steps to the Parade Ground. Turn left and continue parallel to the shoreline down to Peggys Point at the island's easternmost end. At low tide, the point — named after a lighthouse-keeper's daughter — is a feeding place for shorebirds, including the American Oystercatcher. Sanderlings are often found there from July on as well as Ruddy Turnstones later in the season. Several pairs of gulls also nest in this area. To complete the loop back to the pier, you can choose either the sandy beach or the upland path. The former has pieces of white mess-hall dinnerware that continue to wash ashore after nearly 60 years, while the latter has the islands' usual mix of resident Yellow Warblers, Gray Catbirds, and Song Sparrows.

Lovells Island (MDC)

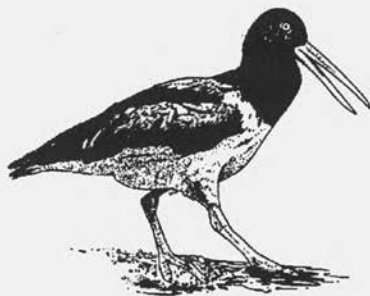
From the Tern Colony to Battery Terrill — Lovells features an interesting mix of habitats, including the Harbor's only significant dune system. At the end of the pier walk to the right along the beach toward the island's sandy southern tip. This area and the grassy/gravelly habitat behind it are favored nesting sites for both Killdeer and Spotted Sandpipers. Early in the 1990s, Least Terns began arriving, and at their peak, forty pairs attempted to breed here. Unfortunately, the area was subject to tidal flooding and disturbance by both dogs and people. Symbolic taping-off of the nesting-site had little effect, and the population fluctuated between five and twenty pairs, still the case today. The area around the point attracts feeding American Oystercatchers as well as migrating shorebirds.

From the island's southern tip, walk inland a short distance onto the now-sandy parade ground. One May morning about ten years ago, an old apple tree here had a bouquet of six hummingbirds in it. Take the main (paved) trail north, up the drumlin and along the spine of the island. Structures that were part of Fort Standish, built in the early years of the twentieth century, dominate the island. The areas in and around the conifers on the drumlin-top have resident Black-capped Chickadees, White-breasted Nuthatches, House Finches, Brown Thrashers, Northern Cardinals, and Cedar Waxwings. The area is also visited by the Great Horned Owls that feed on the island's hares.

As the trail descends to the bottom of the drumlin, you'll see a lowland with a small, dilapidated brick building at its center. The area surrounding this oil house has some of the characteristics of a marsh, but it is not truly tidal. It is inundated by seawater only during the winter storms that sometimes cut the island into three. Beyond it is a small drumlin that was hollowed out by the military to create a coastal-defense gun battery and underground ammunition storage bunkers. Walk counterclockwise around the drumlin. At low tide, the northern end of the island and the mudflats along the west-facing adjacent beach are among the best shorebird-watching areas in the Harbor. From mid-August on, migrants stop to feed on the small crustaceans that inhabit the sandy areas between the rocks as well as the mud. In addition to the more usual species of sandpiper and plover, the area attracts Whimbrels each fall. Continue counterclockwise around the island along the beach that faces Gallops Island and the Boston skyline. The area with the remains of a wooden pier and riprap is a favorite feeding area for American Oystercatchers. On at least two occasions, they successfully nested on the upper beach here, but in more recent years the pressure of humans and dogs in the spring has become intense. Follow the beach back to the pier, or take the inland path that passes the island's camping area.

Peddocks Island (MDC)

Four Heads Are Better Than One — The geology of Peddocks makes for interesting geography, which, in turn, makes for interesting birding. Made up of four heads (East, Middle, Princes, and West) connected by narrow, gravelly tombolos, this tied island system, shaped primarily by the last glacier, combines inland birding on and around the drumlins with coastal birding along the beaches and pocket marshes.



The water taxi docks at East Head, where the MDC maintains a Visitors Center and a field-camping area just beyond the pier. The highest of the four heads, it is made up of two drumlins with turn-of-the-century Fort Andrews and its mortar pits nestled between them. Follow the paved path that goes left from the dock past the chapel and up the drumlin. The trees among the deteriorating brick buildings to your right and the woods beyond them attract migrants in the spring and fall. Two resident newcomers, the Carolina Wren and the Red-bellied Woodpecker, can sometimes be heard calling in this area during the summer. The barking dog you may encounter as you approach the first tombolo is fairly friendly. Continue along the trail that leads to the Middle Head.

Middle Head, a former Portuguese fishing colony, now has a summer community of cottagers whose bungalows are being bought out, one at a time, by the MDC. Walk past the cottages staying on the trail that follows the right-hand (west) shoreline, and continue on toward West Head. To the left is the island's struggling salt marsh as well as access to Princes Head tombolo. Be aware of the status of the tide if you venture

out along the narrow spit to Princes Head — I once had to lead a group of seniors back through calf-deep water. In the mid-1980s, both Belted Kingfishers and Bank Swallows nested in the eroded cliff-face of Princes Head. At low tide during the late summer, the tombolo out to Princes Head is a gathering place for shorebirds. That, combined with the proximity of the salt marsh, makes it a good place to explore.

Just beyond is West Head, the fourth of the island's drumlins. It has been designated a wildlife sanctuary by the MDC, but the significance of the designation is unclear. It has a small fresh-water pond, usually with a few American Black Ducks; the area beyond the pond had a colony of Black-crowned Night-Herons through the early 1980s. The increase in commuter boat traffic past West Head has accelerated its erosion.

Depending on the tide, you may want to walk back along one or more of the beaches that face south toward Hingham Bay. As you approach East Head, walk inland, and then turn left and follow the paved road that leads up the drumlin. This trail will take you through the remains of many of the buildings of Fort Andrews, now pretty much overgrown. When the road forks, take the path to the right that leads past the mortar pits and back to the pier. As well as the usual Yellow Warblers and Common Yellowthroats, there have been summer sightings on East Head of Black-and-white and Blue-winged warblers as well as American Redstarts. And since the island is 188 acres in size, it's one of the best in the Harbor for raptors.

Grape Island (DEM)

Around the Island — Grape is the least disturbed of the Harbor Islands, having been used primarily for agricultural purposes from the time of the arrival of the first European settlers. Before them, Native Americans used it (and most of the other islands) as a summer camping area. They harvested fish, mollusks, and wild fruits, preserving some for winter use. The extent to which shellfish — primarily clams — were harvested is suggested by the shell midden (waste heap) on Grape that extends for more than an acre. (One edge of the eroding midden can be seen to the left of where the dock meets the island.) At low tide during the late summer and early fall, the exposed mussel and gravel bars that connect the Weymouth mainland to Grape Island at one end of the island, and Grape to Slate Island on the other, are good places to check for shorebirds. In the 1980s, Slate was the northernmost North American nesting site for American Oystercatchers, but they have since moved elsewhere in the Harbor to breed.

Grape has many grassy paths with a wider variety of trees and shrubs than most of the other islands. There are clumps of birch and poplar as well as the more urban tree of heaven. In addition to the usual staghorn sumac, the expanse of bayberry on the island's eastern end is the most extensive in the harbor. My recommendation here is to follow the beach to the right of the dock. It passes an area that was once inundated by the highest tides each month. A storm created a berm of sand and mussel shells that cut the area off from the sea. (Look for patches of the tiny, coral-flowered scarlet pimpernel in this area.) Because of its lowness, rain now collects in it, and the vegetation has begun reverting to species more characteristic of a fresh-

water marsh than a salt-water one. The area usually attracts a good mix of birds, especially during migration. It was near this area that a pair of Northern Harriers successfully nested in the mid-1980s, the only documented breeding of this declining species on the Islands in recent years.

Continue along the beach past the path to the left that heads into the camping area. The trail passes a young *Spartina* marsh then ascends a low bluff with a large willow and a view out toward Slate Island and the Hingham shoreline. Look over the edge of the bluff, and you'll see the slate that gives the nearby island its name. Used in the past for construction and for gravestones, this slate is one form of the Cambridge argillite that makes up the bedrock of the Harbor region. As mentioned above, when the tide is low, the exposed mussel beds just offshore are a popular feeding ground for migrating shorebirds. It's also a good place to watch Common Terns and the occasional Osprey look for fish. Ospreys nest nearby in the Back River estuary.

From here, depending on your schedule, you can head back to the dock for the next water taxi, or you can continue around the island, exploring its woodland habitats. The short walk described here can be done in the time it takes the taxi to drop you off on Grape, go from Grape to Hewitts Cove in Hingham, pick up passengers, then return to Grape on its way to Georges — but be sure to check the water taxi schedule to see what your time constraints actually are. Although Grape was once home to a substantial population of hares, (friendly) skunks are now the dominant mammals, with a few native eastern cottontails surviving as well. After six years of colonization, the skunks have yet to spray anyone.

Bumpkin Island (DEM)

Around Round — Formerly called both Pumpkin Island and Round Island, probably because of its shape, Bumpkin has the distinction of being the only Harbor island that was once owned by Harvard University. It was purchased early in the twentieth century by philanthropist Clarence Burrage who built a summer hospital for paraplegic children on its summit. The hospital was among the first in the nation to have its floors connected by ramps for ease of wheelchair accessibility. He offered the building — and his sloop — to the government when World War I broke out.

The island has a paved road that follows the long axis of the drumlin, a remnant from its years as a U.S. Navy training station. A second paved path starts at the foot of the dock and follows the coast to the left. Take that path, and follow it around the drumlin. After a scenic lookout on the left and the remains of both the Navy mess hall and an old barn on the right, the trail becomes grassy as it continues around the island. In addition to the more usual nesting species, Bumpkin has a resident Eastern Screech Owl whose pellets are often found along this path. Also look for roadways made in the grass by the island's large population of meadow voles, an attraction to mainland-based Red-tailed Hawks that often stop by Bumpkin for "dinner out."

When the trail reaches the paved road, take a left and walk down to the island's southeastern tip across from Sunset Point in Hull. Access to the mainland along a sand and mussel bar is possible at the time of the lowest tides each month. Pizza

deliveries to island staff are also possible at this time of month. This is an excellent place to watch herons returning to Sarah Island in Hingham Harbor at dusk through mid-July. Shorebirds migrating south in August and September also gather here to feed.

If the tide is low, you can walk along the shoreline and back to the dock. Otherwise, trace your steps back along the paved road to the first major — but grassy — left turn, which will take you back to the island's Visitors Center and the dock.

Island Heronries

For at least the past two decades, Middle Brewster Island in the outer Harbor and Sarah Island in Hingham Bay have been the sites of significant heronries. In early May of 1998 I stepped off a small boat onto Middle Brewster and was greeted by well over 100 Black-crowned Night-Herons, several dozen Great and Snowy egrets, and 20 Glossy Ibis. An MDFW survey in the mid-1990s tallied 207 pairs of night-herons on Middle Brewster. That same year, 148 pairs of Snowy Egrets were counted on Sarah Island along with a staggering 547 pairs of Black-crowned Night-Herons. Neither of these islands is accessible by public transportation.

Off-season Access

Late each winter, usually in February or March (sometimes both), the MDC sponsors a Winter Wildlife Cruise. Departing from Long Wharf in Boston, the ferry travels out among the Brewsters at low tide in search of hauled-out harbor seals. Along the way there are usually rafts of eiders and scoters as well as small flocks of most of the other winter sea ducks. I counted 11 Black Guillemots one year along with 6 Razorbills and over 150 Purple sandpipers. The trip usually includes an hour stopover on either Peddocks or Georges. Snow Buntings and Horned Larks are common on the islands in winter, and Georges Island is a favorite haunt of the Snowy Owl. On one trip in the early 1990s, in addition to a Snowy, there were three Short-eared Owls and one Barn Owl all in flight over Georges simultaneously. (Barn Owls successfully nested on Georges in the late 1980s, but were eventually driven off by workmen who disturbed their nesting site inside Fort Warren and by pressure from a growing population of Great Horned Owls.) In recent years, the New England Aquarium has also sponsored boat-based winter birding trips that explored the Harbor more extensively.




The BHC Hingham Commuter boat, which runs six days a week from Rowes Wharf, is another way of getting out among the islands off-season. The 30- to 40-minute trip takes the sheltered route under the Long Island Bridge and through Quincy Bay. A round-trip commuter boat from Hull to Long Wharf runs once a day on weekdays.

Land-based opportunities for observing Harbor waterfowl are available though Take a Second Look's Boston Harbor Winter Censuses. For more information, consult TASL's website at <www.szgraphics.com/TASL.htm>. In addition, Webb State Park in Weymouth, located on a peninsula that juts out into the Harbor toward Grape Island, and the drumlins of World's End in Hingham, managed by the Trustees of Reservations, are great places to watch winter sea ducks.

What's Next?

The future looks bright for public access to the islands. The perimeter path around the edge of Deer Island and its new wastewater treatment plant, accessible by car from Winthrop, and a great place to watch sea ducks and gulls in winter, is scheduled to open in 2001. Similarly, Nut Island, connected to the mainland by a causeway at the end of Hough's Neck in Quincy, and the former site of a wastewater treatment plant, is also in the process of becoming visitor-friendly. Spectacle Island, once the site of a horse-rendering plant and dump for the City of Boston, has been capped with a massive amount of fill from the Big Dig/Third Harbor Tunnel project. Plans call for it to open as a park in 2002 complete with trails, beach, marina, campsites, and Visitors Center designed and staffed by the New England Aquarium.

Slowest of the partners to become involved in increased public accessibility is the City of Boston, owner of Rainsford and Long Islands. The latter, accessible by car from Quincy via Moon Island and the Long Island bridge, is likely to provide excellent birding. Its piney landward end was a favorite roosting site for Barn Owls a decade ago, and its seaward end, jutting over a mile out into the harbor, offers sweeping views of the main harbor shipping channel on one side and Quincy Bay on the other. As of this writing, the island is open on a who-do-you-know basis and to special groups with permits. Plans are also underway for the Department of Environmental Management to acquire a conservation restriction on part of Thompson Island. A consequence of that may be easier access to the island, site of the Harbor's one true salt marsh as well as large grassy fields that were once mowed for hay.

Please note: As of mid-April 2001, plans call for Gallops Island to be closed during the 2001 season so that asbestos-containing waste may be removed. In its place, DEM hopes to open Great Brewster Island in June. This will require the installation of a temporary float system for docking and a modification of the water-taxi schedule. No other details are currently available. 

John Nove worked on the Harbor Islands for fifteen years as a volunteer with Friends of the Boston Harbor Islands and then as Visitors Services Supervisor for the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Management. He is currently Visitor Services Supervisor at Halibut Point State Park in Rockport. He wishes to thank Polly Stevens and Dennis Oliver for information on Peddocks Island and Liz Sorenson for a critical reading of the manuscript. Polly leads a Brookline Bird Club trip to the Islands each summer.

Breeding Species of the Boston Harbor Islands

Based on observations made during the summers of 1980-2000; single records are denoted by an asterisk (*)

Double-crested Cormorant	Red-eyed Vireo
Great Egret	Blue Jay
Snowy Egret	American Crow
Little Blue Heron	Tree Swallow
Green Heron	Northern Rough-winged Swallow
Black-crowned Night-Heron	Bank Swallow
Yellow-crowned Night-Heron*	Barn Swallow
Glossy Ibis	Black-capped Chickadee
Canada Goose	Tufted Titmouse
American Black Duck	White-breasted Nuthatch
Mallard	Carolina Wren
Common Eider	House Wren
Osprey	Marsh Wren
Northern Harrier*	Wood Thrush
American Kestrel	American Robin
Ring-necked Pheasant	Gray Catbird
Northern Bobwhite	Northern Mockingbird
Killdeer	Brown Thrasher
American Oystercatcher	European Starling
Spotted Sandpiper	Cedar Waxwing
American Woodcock	Yellow Warbler
Herring Gull	American Redstart
Great Black-backed Gull	Common Yellowthroat
Common Tern	Eastern Towhee
Least Tern	Chipping Sparrow
Rock Dove	Savannah Sparrow*
Mourning Dove	Song Sparrow
Barn Owl	Swamp Sparrow
Eastern Screech-Owl	Northern Cardinal
Great Horned Owl	Red-winged Blackbird
Ruby-throated Hummingbird	Eastern Meadowlark
Belted Kingfisher	Common Grackle
Downy Woodpecker	Brown-headed Cowbird
Northern Flicker	Baltimore Oriole
Willow Flycatcher	House Finch
Eastern Phoebe	American Goldfinch
Eastern Kingbird	House Sparrow