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Coastal Birding in Fairhaven, MA

Michael Boucher and Dan Zimmerlin

Birding Fairhaven has grown in popularity over the past few years because of the preservation of important tracts of land and the increase of birders coming to this area to view rarities. This article's primary focus will cover coastal locations and farmland south of U.S. Route 6. Although there are many great areas in Fairhaven to bird, including the upper reaches of the Acushnet River and Riverside Cemetery, we have described an itinerary that can be covered in one day.

Shaw Road Area

From Interstate 195 take Exit 18, which is Route 240. Head south to the second set of lights, and take a left onto Route 6. Travel east for 1.3 miles, and take a right onto Gелlette Road. After about half a mile the residential neighborhood quickly gives way to farmland and open fields. Immediately to your left, you will see high-tension lines that parallel a bike path; the wires and poles should be searched for raptors at any time of year. During the fall, Canada Geese frequent the field on your left, and we have found as many as four Greater White-fronted Geese feeding with them on the remaining corn harvest. All the cornfields in this area should be checked for these northern rarities during fall and winter. From this point Gелlette Road takes a sharp left and turns into Shaw Road. The cornfield on your right can be a good spot for Eastern Meadowlarks in winter. Just past the cornfield you will see Berkley Road on your right. The field to the east is patrolled by birds of prey in fall and winter, including Northern Harrier, Red-tailed Hawk, Red-shouldered Hawk, and Short-eared Owl. American Kestrels can often be seen on the telephone lines bordering the west side of the field.

Just past the field on the right is a thicket with a stream running through it. Gray Catbirds are present year-round. During late fall and winter you might find a Yellow-breasted Chat or a Winter Wren, which can be brought out into the open by imitating a screech owl. The field to the east of this thicket is home to nesting Red-winged Blackbirds. Bobolinks have been seen flying over this grassy meadow in late spring, while American Woodcocks can be seen at dusk performing their nuptial flights.

The next right is Shaws Cove Road. The large weedy cornfield on the left has been very productive over the years. On at least two occasions we have found as many as three



FLOODED FIELD ON SHAWS COVE ROAD BY MICHAEL BOUCHER

Sandhill Cranes during late fall and winter. Also seen at this time of year are Rough-legged Hawks, Canada Geese, Greater White-fronted Geese, Horned Larks, American Pipits, and Eastern Meadowlarks; the last can be heard singing on mild, calm mornings. During March be sure to check the flooded sections of this field for Wilson's Snipe and Killdeer. In spring migration many shorebirds can be seen, including Greater and Lesser yellowlegs, and Pectoral, Least, and Semipalmated sandpipers. In November 2002 we saw a Hudsonian Godwit and a White-rumped Sandpiper feeding in the same flooded field a couple of days after a strong nor'easter. Duck species can include American Wigeon, Blue- and Green-winged teal, and Wood Duck.



HUDSONIAN GODWIT ON SHAWS COVE ROAD BY MICHAEL BOUCHER

Toward the end of Shaws Cove there is a cow barn with silos. The people who run the farm request that you park on the side of the road before the barn and when leaving turn around at this point so as not to interfere with the milking operation. The cows go from one barn to another right next to the road, and vehicle traffic might spook them. During the winter there is a large mound

of silage next to the road. It attracts a number of birds including Song, Savannah, White-crowned, and Vesper sparrows. American Pipits and Palm Warblers also make appearances in late fall and winter. American Kestrels and Merlins have been seen feeding on mice that ventured out onto the pile for a quick bite, only to become a meal themselves. There is a thicket that runs the length of the road on the east side, another good place to look for sparrows and Northern Shrikes in winter.

Head back on Shaws Cove, take a right onto Shaw Road, and then a quick left. (It is still Shaw Road after it turns left.) Just past the house on your right, be sure to check the thickets along the road for sparrows in fall and winter. Eastern Bluebirds and Cedar Waxwings have been seen feeding on multiflora rose hips.

Fairhaven Soccer Fields

Continue north on Shaw Road until you come to Route 6 again. Take a left and travel west for 1.3 miles. Take a right just past the sign for Lifestyle Plaza. This short road will take you to the right of the plaza. You can park on the left side and walk north down a short road to some soccer fields. The Fairhaven soccer fields have been a productive spot for birding, and, besides the open grasslands, they also contain a stream, two ponds, and an area of thickets. These fields are known for their flocks of Canada Geese in the fall, which sometimes contain Greater White-fronted Geese. The open fields are also good for raptors, including Red-tailed, Red-shouldered, Cooper's, and Sharp-shinned hawks.

Since the fields are private property, please park outside the gate, and stay off the fields themselves. You can walk into the parking lot and view most, if not all, of the fields from there. Two of the most productive areas are the thicket on either side of the gate and the stream that runs through it. During the winter, there is often open water to attract birds such as Rusty Blackbirds, Ruby-crowned Kinglets, Winter Wrens, Hermit Thrushes, and Eastern Towhees.

As you walk in, you will notice a pond on the right. In spring and summer it might harbor Great Blue Herons, Black-crowned Night-Herons, and Belted Kingfishers. The trees around the pond are good for nesting Yellow Warblers. At the back of the interior parking lot (which is open only for soccer games), there is a hedgerow with cornfields behind it. In fall and winter numerous sparrow species, such as White-crowned, Savannah, Field, American Tree, Swamp, Song, and White-throated, can be seen feeding along the weedy edges of the fields close to the thickets. Partially hidden near the left end of the hedgerow is a smaller pond, which is best viewed from the cornfields. Wood Ducks have been seen here along with Green Herons.

Mill Road Waterworks

When you are finished, turn right onto Route 6, drive 0.2 mile west, and take a right onto Mill Road. Travel north on this road for about half a mile, and you will see a wide stream on your right that flows from the Fairhaven water supply. Ducks can be found here at almost any time of year, and the occasional Belted Kingfisher can be seen hovering over the water looking for a meal. Just past this area on the right is a building with a pond behind it, a good spot for ducks in fall migration. This is yet another spot to look for Greater White-fronted Geese mixed in with flocks of Canadas. The stream that flows out of the pond is another good place for spring migrants, and for the last two years has been home to a pair of Warbling Vireos. Baltimore Orioles and Eastern Kingbirds nest in and around this park-like setting. This is the public water supply for the town of Fairhaven; do not trespass beyond the pond.

Fairhaven Bike Path

Turn back, take a right onto Route 6, and travel west for half a mile. Turn left onto Sconticut Neck Road, and take your first right onto David A. Drown Boulevard. At the end of this street are a couple of parking spaces, but if they are filled, you can park at the Carousel Skating Rink. You will see a bike path, which is the same path that runs through the Shaw Road area. We have recently found that this bike path can harbor a number of good birds at any time; walking the path to the west seems to be the most productive. During the last few Christmas Bird Counts, this area has provided high totals of species such as Hermit Thrush, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Winter Wren, Eastern Towhee, and Yellow-breasted Chat. Toward the end of the bike path at Egypt Lane, nesting species include White-eyed Vireo, Yellow Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, and Willow Flycatcher. During a good spring fallout a wide variety of passerines can be found along this path.

Edgewater Drive

When you are finished here, turn back, and take a right onto Sconticut Neck Road. Travel south for 0.9 mile, and take a left onto Edgewater Drive. After the first few houses you will see woods to the left and thickets on the right that border the road. This is a good area to look for spring and fall migrants. Just past this area the woods end, and a salt marsh can be seen on either side of the road. At extreme high tides this road will be covered with water. During the late spring, summer, and fall, Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrows, Willets, Whimbrels, and Black-bellied Plovers can be seen on the marsh. Mosquito ditches run through here, and at low tide many other shorebirds can be found in migration. Yellow-crowned Night-Herons have shown up on a few occasions.

There is an expansive view to the north, east, and south of more salt marshes. This area can be productive at any time of the year. One of the first shorebirds to show up during spring migration is the American Oystercatcher. They have nested in this area for several years. They can be seen along the eastern shoreline as you look across the water of Little Bay. Late spring and summer bring many types of shorebirds. Terns such as Least, Common, and Roseate can be seen feeding close to shore next to the boat ramp, and Forster's Terns show up later in the season. Herons and egrets abound in the summer. At twilight Black-crowned Night-Herons can be seen flying into the mosquito ditches to feed on fiddler crabs, while Clapper Rails have been heard in the past calling across the marsh. Canada Geese and a host of duck species can also be seen in this sheltered cove. We have seen Sandhill Cranes on the opposite marsh on two occasions, and Bald Eagles have been known to show up in winter. There is a boat ramp allowing easy access to Little Bay; many people canoe and kayak from this location. Much of the shoreline is inaccessible except by this mode of transportation.

Winsegansett Heights

Head back, and take a left onto Sconticut Neck Road, traveling south for 2.3 miles. Turn right on Winsegansett Street, and drive for half a mile. Here is a tidal creek that runs under the road where American Bitterns and Black-crowned Night-Herons have been seen. Continue a short distance, and take a right onto Wamsutta Street, and then a left onto Murry Street. At the end of this street is a small parking area limited to two cars. On your right is Winsegansett Pond with salt marshes and shoreline. The east side of this tidal pond and uplands were recently purchased by the town of Fairhaven and will eventually be open to passive recreation, affording another view of the area.

The advantage of this spot is quick access to shorebirds and other waterbirds. During migration birds can congregate in Winsegansett Pond in great numbers, and low tide is the best time to visit. Check the tide charts for New Bedford harbor, and plan your trip accordingly. From the road, head north on the path that separates the harbor from the barrier beach. To the right is a section of marsh with exposed flats at low tide. This is a good spot for Semipalmated, Least, and White-rumped sandpipers, from mid-May until early September – even in the month of June, when shorebirds

are hard to come by. During late fall and early winter Killdeer can be found here and an occasional Greater Yellowlegs. The shoreline to the left is quite rocky, with the upper reaches consisting of sand and brush. Piping Plovers and Least Terns have nested along the beach. At low tide shorebirds such as Dunlins, Ruddy Turnstones, and Black-bellied Plovers can be seen year-round. In late summer Common, Least, and Roseate terns can be seen feeding and resting at the western tip of the beach. American Oystercatchers have been seen at the northeastern tip.

Fall and winter bring Brant and a host of sea ducks within easy viewing distance. Bonaparte's Gulls can be seen feeding out in the harbor; be sure to check the shoreline for possible Iceland, Glaucous, and Lesser Black-backed gulls mixed in with the regular lot. Along the beach look for Savannah Sparrows, American Pipits, Horned Larks, and Snow Buntings. On the other side of the beach there is a much larger tidal flat, which can be teeming with shorebirds and wading birds during the summer months. All the shorebirds previously mentioned for this area have been seen on these flats along with Short-billed Dowitcher, Lesser Yellowlegs, and Spotted, Pectoral, and Stilt sandpipers. Egrets and herons forage side by side with the shorebirds, and once we found a Tricolored Heron.

Wilbur Point

When you have finished birding this area, go back, and take a right onto Sconticut Neck Road (which turns into Wilbur Avenue at Goulart Memorial Drive), and travel south for half a mile. At this point take a right onto Potter Street, and be sure to check the thickets on either side of the road for sparrows and possibly a Yellow-breasted Chat in fall and winter. At the end of the street turn left onto Saltmarsh Road, and pull to the left at the end. There will be a break in the phragmites that affords a good view of the northern end of a 3 1/2-acre tidal pond. Species seen over the years include American Wigeon, Eurasian Wigeon, Gadwall, Blue- and Green-winged teal, and Pied-billed Grebe. Shorebirds abound at low tide in the summer, along with terns, egrets, and herons. Marsh Wrens and Common Yellowthroats can be heard singing throughout the summer months. On rare occasions one might see an American Bittern or Black Skimmer. Retrace your steps, and take a right onto Wilbur Avenue, keeping an eye to your right for more views of the pond.

Continue south on Wilbur Avenue all the way to the end. There are homes on stilts here, and past them are rock outcrops just offshore called Angelica Island. During the winter months Purple Sandpipers, Ruddy Turnstones, and numerous sea ducks can be seen on and around the rocks. Summer brings nesting Double-crested Cormorants and Great Black-backed Gulls. Black Terns have been seen in late summer.

West Island Area

Head back north on Wilbur Avenue for 0.7 mile, and take a right onto Goulart Memorial Drive. As you drive down this road, look left where it opens up to give great views of marshes and estuaries. In late summer egrets and herons fly to roost toward evening at Round Island and can be seen foraging along the shoreline during

the day. On your right is a beautiful view of Buzzards Bay. Shorebirds can be seen working the wrack line, while terns dive for fish close to the road.

A short distance past the causeway, take your first right onto Alder Street, which shortly merges with Balsam Road. Follow Balsam Road for 0.7 mile, where it turns left and becomes Bass Creek Road. Turn right after the two houses on stilts. There are so many spots to view sea ducks and shorebirds in this area that you might get tired of



PIPING PLOVER NEST BY MICHAEL BOUCHER

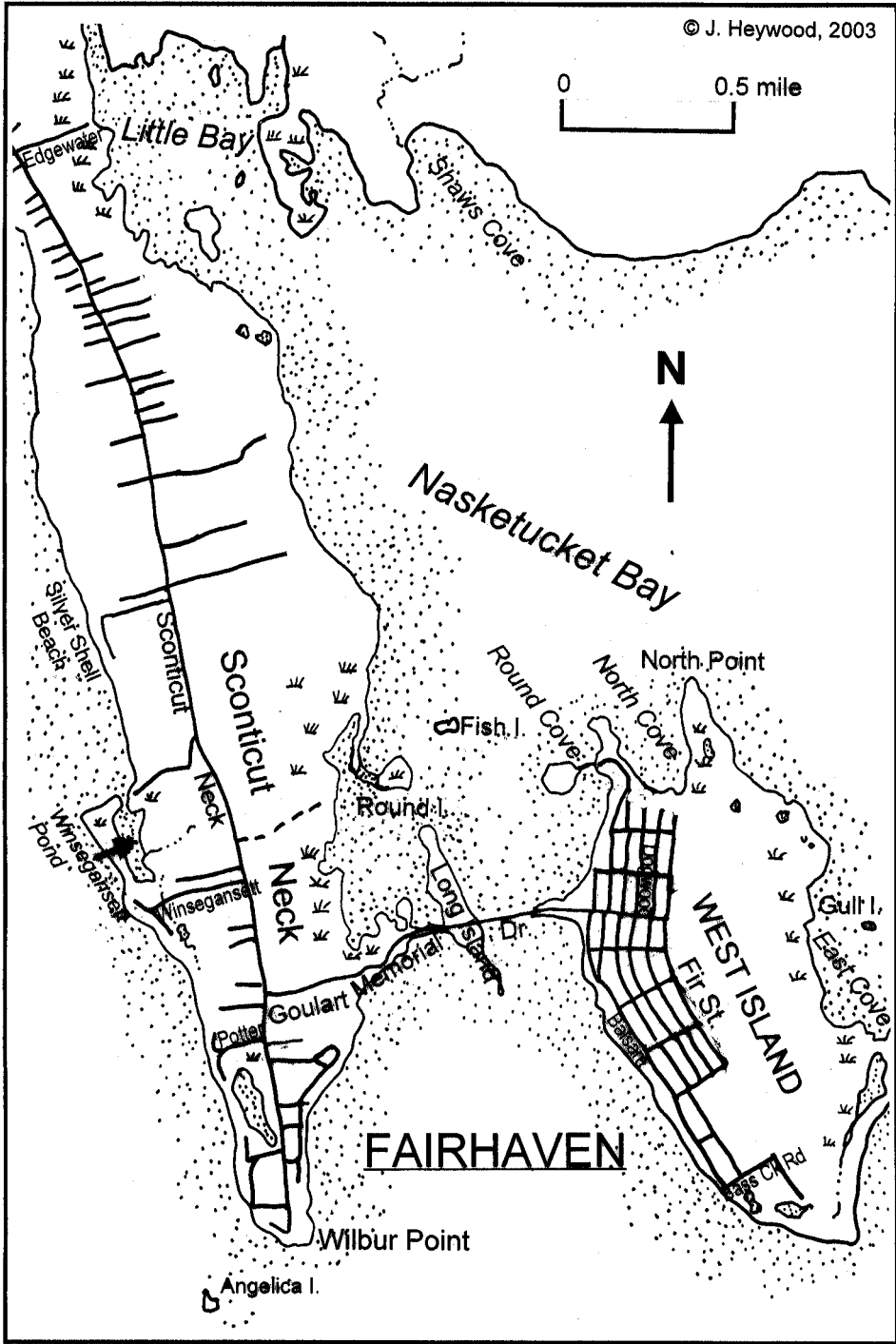
looking at them. Well, if you are like the two of us, no amount of birding will tire you out. This location is mentioned because of its great concentration of shorebirds feeding along the rocky shore at low tide. From late winter until early fall any resident or migrating shorebird can be found here. Looking south along the shoreline from the house on your left to the point will afford good views. Many sea ducks are present

throughout the winter, including all three scoters, Common Eiders, and on rare occasions a Barrow's Goldeneye. Northern Rough-winged Swallows have been seen in summer and might nest nearby in the seawalls.

Continue northeast on Bass Creek Road, keeping an eye on the roadway thickets for resident and migrant passerines. Turn right on Fir Street, and shortly you will see the parking lot for West Island Beach. It is open year-round, but from late June until Labor Day there is a charge to park here. You will see a tower, which was used during World War II for observing German U-boats. It is now home to Rock Doves, but fall migration can bring Merlins or Peregrine Falcons, which perch on top to survey the area for an easy meal. The winter months might reward you with a Snowy Owl as well as Snow Buntings, Horned Larks, and "Ipswich" Sparrows. Short-eared Owls occur in every season but summer.

This is another great area for shorebirds and sea ducks. Piping Plovers nest along the east-facing shoreline. During high tide the southwest-facing shoreline is a great place to view resting shorebirds along the wrack line from a fairly close distance. From the east side you can see in the distance Bird Island off the coast of Marion. This island hosts one of the largest breeding colonies of Roseate Terns in the Atlantic, and they can be seen feeding right off the beach in summer along with Least and Common terns. Winter brings Common and Red-throated loons, all three scoter species, Long-tailed Ducks, Northern Gannets, and, on rare occasions, Razorbills.

Head back the way you came, take a right onto Goulart Memorial Drive, and then take your fourth left onto Dogwood Street. Travel down this street for 0.3 mile, and when the road abruptly turns left, you will see an area on the right where you can



park. This will give you a great view of North Cove. Facing north, you will see a peninsula that juts out into Nasketucket Bay called North Point. Over the last few years American Oystercatchers have successfully bred on this point. In late spring scan the shoreline between the wrack line and upper beach for the oystercatchers, as they sit on or attend their nest. To your right is a marshy area with mud flats, a good spot for shorebirds and egrets in summer. The bay itself is home to ducks for most of the year. As you continue down the road, salt marshes border it on either side, and you can get out of your car again at this point and look for Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrows and Willets. Turn around, turn left onto Goulart Memorial Drive, and take your second left onto Fir Street. On the right look for a sign for West Island Reserve.

West Island Reserve

We are very fortunate that a number of people banded together 15 years ago in an effort to save this pristine 338-acre habitat from development. It is composed of sandy shores, salt marshes, brackish ponds, mud flats, rocky headlands, forests, and wetlands. There are 160 acres of maritime hardwood forest, mainly composed of black oak and white oak, with red maple and tupelo growing in wetter areas. There are numerous paths that crisscross the property with beautiful views of Nasketucket Bay. Birding is at its best during spring and fall migration. The summer can be productive for shorebirds and marsh-dwelling species.

Early mornings in late spring, with favorable southwest winds, can bring a surprising number of passerines to this coastal location. Park at the gate, and follow the gravel road heading east for a couple hundred yards. The road forks to the left, and this will take you to a clearing, allowing good views of migrants. On the northern edge of this clearing, continue down a wide path for another couple hundred yards, until it intersects with another gravel road. Going right will take you back to the main gate. Going left will take you to the shoreline between North Point and the point that looks south to Gull Island. During both spring and fall migration the road through this area can be teeming with birds. The morning sun warms the east side of the island first, and the insects are more active here. Although birds can be seen throughout the island, this is one of the most productive spots.

Vireos, such as Blue-headed, Yellow-throated, and Philadelphia, if you are lucky enough to see them in the spring, will serenade you, along with a number of warbler species including Chestnut-sided, Black-throated Blue, Black-throated Green, and Blackburnian. Other spring migrants encountered are Scarlet Tanagers, Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, Great-crested Flycatchers, and Rose-breasted Grosbeaks. The variety in the woods during fall migration can rival or exceed that of spring. Fall highlights include Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers, Brown Thrashers, Eastern Towhees, and both kinglets. On one occasion we found a Prothonotary Warbler not far down the road from the main gate. Other warblers of note seen in fall are Connecticut, Northern Parula, Prairie, Blackpoll, and Northern Waterthrush.

Continue walking north to the shoreline south of North Point. From this spot you can walk along a sandy trail to your right, and after a short distance there will be a small pond on the right. This is a good spot for wading birds throughout the summer,

and Spotted Sandpipers have nested here. As you walk along the shoreline, you will have a beautiful view of Nasketucket Bay, with Ram Island in the distance. Summer months will bring terns feeding close to shore, while winter brings the sea ducks. The shoreline gets pretty rocky at this point, so it is best to turn back. Once you enter the woods again, continue walking south down the gravel road. There will be a few side paths on your left that will give you a good view of a salt marsh with grassy uplands. During the fall this is one of the best spots for first views of migrating White-throated Sparrows and Dark-eyed Juncos.

Continue south, and go past the path that intersected this gravel road. Keep your eyes on the tree line to your left for migrants. After a few minutes the road bears sharply to the right, leading you back to the main gate. At this point you will notice a small path that breaks off to the left. This will take you to a more heavily wooded area, which can also be loaded with migrants during spring and fall. Shortly you will come to a small clearing with pine trees that have harbored Blackpoll and Pine warblers, Brown Creepers, and Golden-crowned Kinglets. The path heads east and a few hundred feet farther opens up into a salt marsh, with a short walk to the shoreline at East Cove. The same birds we wrote about at Edgewater Drive can be found here. This area is seldom visited, and the solitude that envelops this part of the island is a welcome change from the other places in Fairhaven.

Little Bay Conservation Area

When you have finished taking in the beauty of the marsh and surrounding views, head back toward the main gate. Return to the west on Goulart Memorial, and turn right onto Scoticut Neck Road. Travel north for 3.1 miles, and take a right onto Little Bay Road. Very quickly you will see a sign for Little Bay Conservation Area. The road going in has a few major potholes, so watch out! After heavy rains it is almost impassable unless you have a four-wheel-drive vehicle. The road winds 0.6 mile through a mixture of forest and thickets with a salt marsh at the end.

This is an area where you can find your typical year-round woodland species, such as Black-capped Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse, White-breasted Nuthatch, and Downy Woodpecker. The extensive thickets will have Eastern Towhees, Northern Cardinals, Hermit Thrushes, Carolina Wrens, Northern Mockingbirds, and different sparrows, depending on the season. Migrants during spring and fall find this reserve a welcome stop. At the end of the road you will see a salt marsh with another view of Little Bay. The birds that were mentioned earlier in this article for Edgewater Drive might also be found here.


Fort Phoenix Area

After birding this area, take a right onto Scoticut Neck Road, and go 0.6 mile to Route 6. Turn left, and travel west for 1.4 miles. At Fairhaven High School take a left onto Main Street. Head south for 0.7 mile, where Main Street abruptly ends. Look to your right toward New Bedford harbor for ducks during fall and winter. Turn left on Church Street, and take the first right on Fort Street. Travel south for 0.6 mile, where the road comes to an end at a parking lot.

This is Fort Phoenix, a historic landmark. Mounted cannons still overlook Buzzards Bay, and it is worth a few minutes of your time to read the plaques describing the rich history of the fort. This area is most productive in the winter, but there are birds to be found throughout the year. Keep in mind that from late June through Labor Day there is a fee to park at the beach. During the day it can be quite crowded with people, so an early evening visit is best. The bluffs in front of the main parking lot and the path to the hurricane dike are great spots to view numerous wintering waterfowl. Brant, Common and Barrow's goldeneyes, all three scoter species, Common Eiders, Long-tailed Ducks, and both scaup species can be seen. Also present during the winter are Common and Red-throated loons, Horned Grebes, and a good assortment of gulls. Summer brings Laughing Gulls, Common Terns, Least Terns, and American Oystercatchers.

The woods and thickets to the east of the parking lot can hold migrants in spring and fall. In winter several species of sparrows can be seen feeding along the grassy edge, with an occasional Yellow-rumped Warbler working the bayberry bushes. Hermit Thrushes and Yellow-breasted Chats can also be found in the thickets at this time of year. The large area of lawn sometimes has Snow Buntings and Horned Larks.

You are now ready to head back to Route 6, where there are many places to eat if you did not pack a meal. We hope this article will allow you to maximize your time to cover as many places as possible. There are many side roads and thickets in Fairhaven, but we have tried to describe the most productive places. The Paskamansett Bird Club leads walks to this area; if you are interested in either the trips or recent sightings in Fairhaven, contact Michael at britmm@juno.com.

Note: As we were finishing this article, a terrible tragedy occurred that will greatly affect birding in Fairhaven. A barge carrying number-6 fuel oil suffered a gash, and almost 100,000 gallons of oil leaked out into Buzzards Bay. The prevailing winds and currents made Scoticut Neck and West Island ground zero. The devastation that has occurred along this pristine shoreline is truly appalling. At this date, May 1, 2003, most of the outer shoreline south of Winsegansett Heights to Wilburs Point and continuing to the southern tip of East Cove is covered with oil the consistency of liquid tar. Hundreds of people are working to control this oil slick, but apparently there is still a lot of oil out there. We hope Winsegansett Heights and Edgewater Drive will be spared, but only time will tell. Many loons and eiders have already washed ashore where volunteers are doing their best to save them. The greatest concern is for the nesting colonies of Roseate Terns on Ram Island off Mattapoisett and Bird Island off Marion. We hope enough of the oil can be cleaned up so it will not interfere with their nesting success. If you would like to be updated on closed areas or sections still accessible in Fairhaven, please contact Michael at 1-508-990-3910 or brittmm@juno.com. 

Michael Boucher has had a great passion for birding and nature photography for over 20 years. He is a past president of the Paskamansett Bird Club, compiles the New Bedford Christmas Bird Count, and participates in numerous local bird surveys. Michael has written previously for Bird Observer ("Birding in Dartmouth and Westport During Fall and Winter," BO 23:4, August 1995, pp.192-98). He resides in North Dartmouth, Massachusetts, with his

wife and daughter. **Dan Zimmerlin** has been an avid birder for at least 25 years, with a special interest in bird taxonomy and distribution. He is the author of *A Field Checklist of the Birds of Bristol County, Massachusetts*. For a copy of the checklist, please send a self-addressed stamped envelope and \$1.00 to: Dan Zimmerlin, 88 Norwood Avenue, Warwick, RI, 02888.



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