

BIRDING IN PROVINCETOWN

by Blair Nikula, Harwich

Provincetown, that overgrown sand dune at the tip of Cape Cod, has long been neglected by birders visiting the cape, in spite of (or perhaps because of) its unique "isolated" location. However, increased observer activity in recent years has proven the area to be an exciting birding spot at any season, usually well worth the extra driving time required to get there (about two hours from Boston, thirty minutes from Orleans).

Wallace Bailey has always claimed that P'town--as it is known locally--is the best spot on Cape Cod to observe the spring passerine migration, and this has been amply confirmed in recent years. Pay no heed to those who portray the cape as an avian wasteland in the spring! While it is true that the occurrence of spring migrants is more unpredictable than on the mainland and that the volume of migration is usually considerably less, the species variety is every bit as diverse and the birding can be spectacular. An added attraction has been the discovery of a substantial movement of hawks over the outer cape at this season with the resulting concentration of these birds in the P'town area.

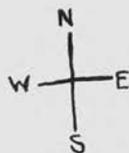
The fall is also proving to be a very productive time for the birder and the area seems to be on a par with the better known coastal landbird traps. A northwest wind at this time of the year will often result in tremendous numbers of migrant passerines which can literally flood the dunes with sparrows, thrushes, vireos, etc. There has also been some indication that a southerly wind can be worthwhile (reverse migration?), but this has yet to be substantiated.

Perhaps the most alluring aspect of birding in P'town for many landlubbers is the presence of varying numbers of pelagic birds within sight of land at almost any time of the year but especially in the fall. On a day to day basis, this has been, at least in recent years, the best locale in the state and probably the east coast for land-based observations of pelagic birds. The frequent sightings of baleen whales serves as an icing on the cake.

That P'town often yields the rare and unusual has been amply demonstrated. In spite of rather limited coverage, the following "exotics" have been recorded recently: Mississippi Kite ('76), Swallow-tailed Kite ('72), Black Vulture ('76), Skua ('76), Le Conte's Sparrow ('76) and (probable) Arctic Loons ('76 and '78). Among the more "routine" rarities have been (most in the last two years!) Northern Fulmar, Manx Shearwater, Sabine's Gull, Common Murre, Common Puffin, Royal Tern, Red-headed Woodpecker, Western Kingbird, Prothonotary Warbler, Yellow-throated Warbler, Blue Grosbeak, Western Tanager and Lark Sparrow. This impressive list reflects the wide range of possibilities that the region offers.

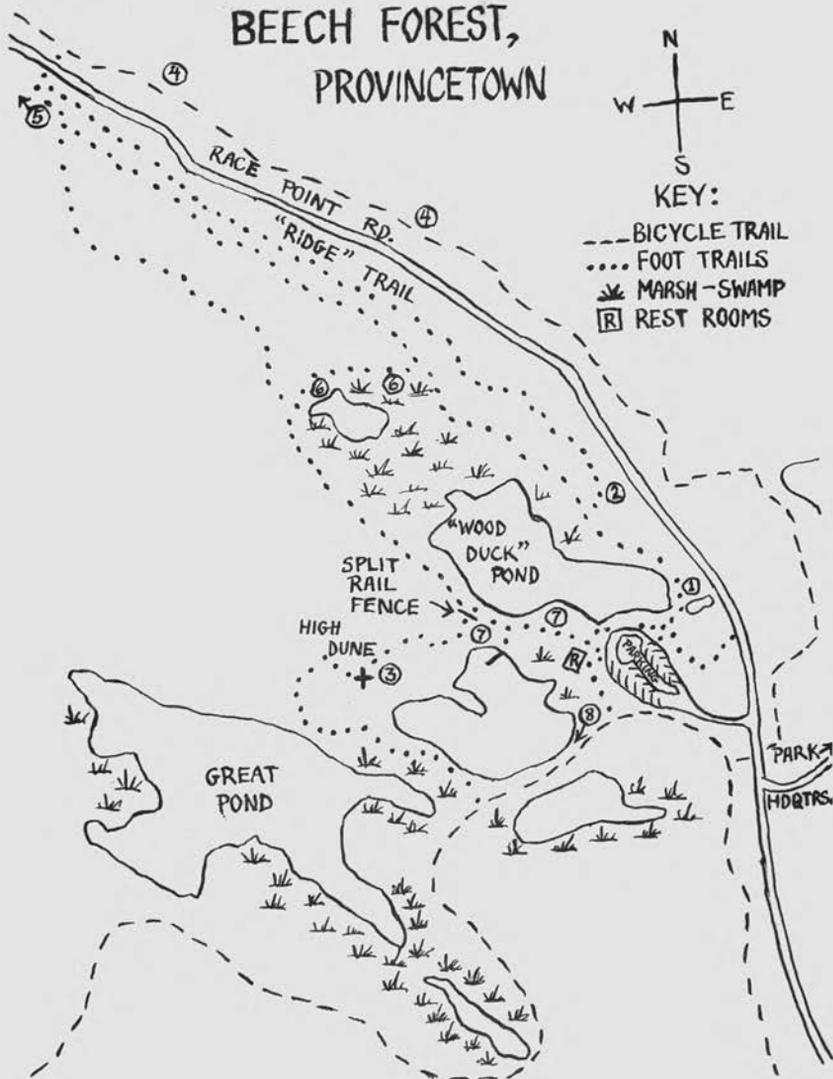
Since birding in P'town is still more or less in its infancy, much of the information that follows is tentative and in some cases speculative, and as such, is subject to future revision. Accordingly, this article is intended merely as a guide and as encouragement to further exploration.

BEECH FOREST, PROVINCETOWN



KEY:

- BICYCLE TRAIL
- FOOT TRAILS
- 🌿 MARSH-SWAMP
- Ⓜ REST ROOMS



Pilgrim Lake: During the first part of this century, this lake, created in 1869 by the diking of what was originally a saltwater harbor, was teeming with marsh birds and ducks. However, the encroaching sand and a 16-inch, man-induced drop in the water level (in the name of mosquito control) in 1958 have led to its demise. It is doubtful that any marsh birds are now breeding here and ducks, other than the ubiquitous Black, are a rare sight. A sandbar toward the west end attracts Double-crested Cormorants (April to October) and gulls including Iceland (November to April). The thickets along the east end of the lake occasionally harbor migrant landbirds and can be explored from a dirt road off Route 6 just before you reach the lake. To check the lake, you can pull off Route 6 onto the grassy shoulder, being careful to avoid the soft spots and storm drains. The grassy borders of the highway from here to the end (at Herring Cove) should be watched for sparrows, pipits, and similar birds during the spring and fall migrations. The high dunes at the dune parking area just past the lake may prove to be a good vantage for watching the spring hawk flight, but as yet they are unexplored.

Provincetown dump: If there are any vultures or eagles around, they are apt to be frequenting the dump. A Black Vulture spent a few days in May, 1976, in this area.

Beech Forest: This unique area is without a doubt the finest spot on Cape Cod to witness the spring passerine migration and is also worth checking in the fall, particularly late August to late September when the warblers are passing through. It is an oasis among the dunes with a couple of small marshy ponds surrounded by, among others, beeches, alders, six species of pines, and, most notably, oaks. Those places where oaks predominate are where one is most likely to encounter spring migrants. Fall migrants are more widespread and are apt to be found anywhere. Consequently, the following remarks pertain to the spring season when the location of the birds seems to be more predictable according to habitat. Species to be expected include all of the typical eastern Massachusetts migrants. Some of the better areas in the Beech Forest are as follows (numbers correspond to those on the accompanying map):

1) "Wooden Bridge." So far, this area adjacent to the parking lot has been the most consistently productive. If there are any birds around at all, they are apt to be here. Check the oaks on the opposite side of Race Point Road as well.

2) "Ridge Trail." This ill-defined and unmaintained trail branches off from the main trail approximately 100 yards from the parking lot. After passing a small stand of Scotch and Austrian pines on the right, bear right up the sandy slope and onto the trail along the top of the ridge. This is one of the highest spots in the Beech Forest and is usually good for warblers, vireos and thrushes. One advantage to this trail is that the birder is at tree-top level making observations easier. It also offers refuge from the nonbirding and often noisy weekenders.

3) "High Dune." So far this has proved to be the finest location in P'town to see the spring hawks. To reach it, watch for a section of split rail fence on the south side of the main trail. Turn south here (away from "Wood Duck Pond") and follow the sandy trail through the scrub pine to the highest vantage point. A clear view is provided in all directions and most of the town can be seen. It seems that sooner

or later most of the hawks present in the area on a given day will pass by this dune as they mill about, and the birder is often afforded excellent looks. All of the common raptors of the northeast can be expected here and some of the accidental southern species have been recorded as well. (Both the Mississippi Kite and the Black Vulture were seen at fairly close range from this dune.)

Other spots in the Beech Forest that are worth checking for landbirds are 4) the bicycle trail on the northeast side of Race Point Road, 5) the oaks at the far (northwest) end of the forest, 6) the west corner of "Wood Duck Pond," 7) the main trail from the split rail fence to the rest rooms, and 8) the bicycle trail from the rest rooms south between the ponds.

One final suggestion: try to avoid weekend afternoons as the crowds are often large and noisy and definitely interfere with the birding which of course is slow at that time of day anyway.

Visitors Center: This is another spot from which to see hawks; however, the light is often a problem here. Viewing can be done from either the parking lot or, better yet, the observation deck at the top of the building where the outer beach can be watched for falcons.

Airport and vicinity: This is mainly of interest in the fall when the many thickets attract numerous passerines, and accipiters and falcons are frequently seen in transit. Park at the Race Point parking lot and walk back to the airport (the airport parking lot is reserved for customers). From here, one may proceed southwest following the line of wet thickets that run between the dunes and the runway, keeping well away from the runway! If you are ambitious and continue far enough (approximately $1\frac{1}{4}$ miles), you will eventually end up at Hatches Harbor (see below). On a good day the complete route is, although arduous, definitely worth the effort. Another walk that can be worthwhile begins across the road from the airport, through the densely vegetated ravines that run eastward for about 2 to 3 miles through the dunes. Following a northwest wind in October this entire area can be packed with migrants and offers some lively birding.

Race Point parking lot: This is an excellent site for viewing pelagic birds at almost any season although mid-August to mid-December is the most fruitful. All of the regular northwestern Atlantic pelagic birds have been seen here, and the commoner ones can be seen regularly and occasionally in great numbers when conditions are favorable. Exactly why these birds occur with such consistency in this vicinity remains somewhat uncertain. Undoubtedly P'town's "at sea" location results in many seabirds being intercepted by this land mass as they move southward from the Gulf of Maine during the fall. Another possibly more important factor may be the presence of deep water (100 feet) close to shore in this area. Presumably this sharp drop-off results in some upwelling and in conjunction with the strong rips and currents characteristic of the region may provide a rich food source. This deep water line can easily be seen from the parking lot, if the sea is not too rough, approximately 800 yards out from the beach. Farther to the west this line occurs progressively closer to shore and is closest--approximately 200 yards--just north of the tip of Race Point (see map).

Generally the best weather conditions consist of cloudy skies with light to moderate northeast winds, although during the peak season (September and October) a few birds can be found under any conditions. When the winds are strong (40+ mph) from the northeast, viewing is difficult and usually little will be seen. Strong northwest winds following a northeaster can provide a good show as the pelagics that were blown into Cape Cod Bay by the storm stream back out into the open ocean. During the warmer months fog can be productive but one must be on hand at the precise time that the fog clears since little if anything can be seen before it does and the birds move out rapidly as visibility improves. As might be expected, southerly winds are the least productive.

This is perhaps the finest place in the Northeast for seeing jaegers. I know of no other region where they occur with the consistency with which they are found here. On any day from mid-August to late October, with a little patience one can expect to see at least two or three jaegers, and if conditions are right, counts of 50 or more are possible. Additionally, impressive counts of shearwaters have been made here in recent falls-- totals of 1,000 to 5,000+ being recorded on a number of occasions.

During the spring and fall be alert for falcons moving along the outer beach as well as other migrating landbirds flying over. From May to October Vesper Sparrows can be found in the adjacent dunes.

While scoping, keep an eye out for whales as they occur throughout the year with largest numbers during the spring and fall. "Have you seen any whales?" is a question often hurled at the scope-wielding birder. Fin and Humpback whales are the most common but other species are possible and dolphins are occasionally seen as well.

Race Point: This point is unsurpassed for close observations of pelagics from land, presumably because of the proximity of deep water 200 to 300 yards offshore. Unfortunately, it is accessible only by foot or four-wheel drive vehicle from the Herring Cove or Race Point parking lots. Another drawback is that the conditions which bring the birds in the closest are strong northwest winds following a northeaster and observing then is very difficult, particularly if one is on foot. Watching pelagics from land is rarely a comfortable endeavor at any location. Much of the information on the Race Point parking lot above pertains to this area as well. During the winter months guillemots, Razorbills, and murrens have been regularly found along the outer beach between the point and the parking lot. A calm day at this time of the year is often the best as these alcids are often seen sitting and feeding in the vicinity of the deep water line.

Hatches Harbor: As its name implies, this area once served as a harbor but has since sanded in, a fate to which every body of water in P'town seems doomed. It now consists of a small patch of salt marsh and some tidal flats separated from the bay by a spit of sand. On the east it is bordered, at this writing, by the remains of a man-made dike which was partially destroyed by the Great White Hurricane of '78. To the east of the dike lies the airport with its border of wet thickets. The flats and spit attract large numbers of gulls year round and terns in July to September, and occasionally the rarer members of their clan can be found. A few shorebirds are also usually present in season. Although the habitat is limited here, the "lands-end" location makes it the type

of spot where almost anything is apt to drop in. Access is by four-wheel drive or foot.

Herring Cove: This is another vantage point for viewing pelagics but, because the observer is at a very low elevation and the birds are usually at a considerable distance, it is generally inferior to the Race Point area (which is visible to the north). Poor light can also be a problem during the afternoon hours. Large numbers of terns feed here from late summer to early fall and often attract jaegers into easy viewing range.

Shank Painter Pond: This swampy pond is one of those places that looks so good yet has yielded little. Wood Ducks are sometimes present and night herons often fish the edges, but otherwise there is little to be said about the area. However, it is easily checked from Route 6 and probably should not be passed by without a quick look. Someday it will have a "biggie!"

The grassy edges of the highway along this stretch can be good for sparrows during migration and other passerines can sometimes be found in the surrounding thickets.

Wood End, Long Point and dike: I know little about this area but it would seem to have some potential as a birding spot. Access is gained only by foot or four-wheel drive from Herring Cove. The driving is very difficult--the toughest stretch of beach on the cape. The area is comprised of a typical barrier-type beach with saltmarsh and mudflats on the inside and vegetated with a few scrubby thickets. Black-crowned Night Herons nest here as well as do some terns. It is possible to park at the west-end rotary and walk out on the dike to Wood End, but this should be attempted only during the warmer months and only at low tide. Be very aware of the tides as the higher tides occasionally cover the dike. A young woman drowned here a couple of years ago when she became trapped by an extreme tide.

The mudflats may prove to be good for shorebirds in season and the thickets may harbor fall migrants. Small numbers of pelagics can probably be expected off the beach in summer and fall.

Provincetown Harbor: This has been one of the best known and most frequently birded locations in P'town. It is best during the winter when it attracts white-winged gulls, kittiwakes, guillemots, other alcids (mainly after storms), cormorants and numerous ducks. There are several vantage points from which to check the harbor, all accessible from Commercial Street. The best known is McMillan Wharf which is a fine spot to see the gulls, cormorants, and alcids (except guillemots). Alcids, when they are present, often occur very close to the wharf so be sure to look over the edge. There are also a couple of public parking lots off Commercial Street which offer good views of the harbor. The most favorable is on the west end (see map). From here, guillemots can occasionally be seen out towards the center of the harbor. They apparently are regular here and up to a dozen have been counted. There are extensive mudflats in the east end of the harbor but they seem rather unproductive.

Although I have outlined some of the more productive birding locations

in P'town, keep in mind that the dunes throughout town are full of wet, swampy thickets and during a good wave, any of them are apt to have birds. Keep an eye out for "pockets" as you drive around the area and be prepared to do a little exploring of your own. However, be aware that parking on the side of the road is prohibited along Race Point Road, Provincelands Road and sections of Route 6. This ban is strictly enforced and with good reason, so stick to the designated parking areas. Because parking is rather limited and many areas are not accessible by paved roads, considerable walking is necessary to cover the region well unless you are fortunate enough to own a four-wheel drive.

If you find some of your old birding spots are getting a little too predictable and you're ready for a change, give Provincetown a try. I think you will find it always intriguing, often exciting, occasionally disappointing, but rarely predictable!

NATIONAL WETLANDS INVENTORY MAPS ISSUED

The National Wetlands Inventory Program of the Department of the Interior's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service moved a step forward with the publication of the first maps depicting wetland areas in the nation. The last national wetlands inventory was completed in 1954; since then much wetland modification has occurred.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is currently required to process approximately 35,000 permit applications per year for activities using wetlands. A recent court decision broadened the scope of Section 404 of the Federal Water Pollution Control Act amendments of 1972 to include all waters of the United States, thus adding to this work load. The National Wetlands Inventory Program will identify wetlands; help establish boundaries of controlled areas; and allow an area, region, or flyway analysis. This will reduce costly field examination and time-consuming permit-by-permit procedures.

Each year considerable funds are authorized for migratory-bird wetland acquisition. The inventory program will allow critical areas to be identified to help set priorities for acquisition.

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THE PEREGRINE FUND

The Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife has moved to support a program for the reestablishment of the Peregrine Falcon in Massachusetts. Three were released in 1976, another 3 in 1977 at Mt. Tom, and more are scheduled to be released. The whole operation has been successful. Nationwide the fund needs \$1.6 million for its work. Those interested in contributing should write: The Peregrine Fund, Massachusetts Audubon Society, South Great Road, Lincoln, MA 01773.