



NEWBURYPORT AND VICINITY

- KEY:**
- PARKING
 - BOAT RAMP
 - BREAKWATER
 - CAMPGROUND

TURNER RIVER NATL.
WILDLIFE REFUGE

Atlantic

Ocean

NEWBURYPORT AND VICINITY

By William C. Drummond, Haverhill

Newburyport and vicinity is certainly a renowned birding area. Probably no other area in the country is so carefully birded. On almost any day of the week, at any time of the year, you are likely to see at least a few birders. And on weekends, it's not uncommon to see a hundred or more birders. This contrasts sharply with a birding trip I took out west in the summer of 1977, in which I stopped at 17 different national wildlife refuges without ever once seeing another birder.

Yet the Newburyport area is often a disappointment for an out-of-state birder who expects to see a bonanza of specialty birds in a short time. Actually there are very few of the so-called specialty birds that may be found there. The great advantage is the birding coverage -- a low probability of a "good bird" escaping undetected. And birding there is a very social experience. This fact cannot be overlooked. Your birding will be most rewarding if you stop to ask other birders for tips and significant reports. The majority will be very glad to help you.

The following self-guided auto tour of the region is intended as an introduction to the Newburyport vicinity. Newburyport Harbor and Plum Island will be the subjects of special articles in future issues of Bird Observer.

Begin at Sportsmen's Lodge on Water Street in Newburyport. To get there from Rte.1A in Newbury, turn east onto Rolfe's Lane at the traffic light and drive toward the harbor. At the end of the road (.6 miles), turn right and then look for Sportsmen's Lodge immediately on your left.

The birding can be good right from Sportsmen's Lodge parking lot, especially if the tide is "right." The best time to do shorebirding in the spring, late summer, and fall (other times are generally not productive) is about 3 to 4 hours after high tide and from about 2 to 3 hours after low tide. The Newburyport tides are listed in the local newspapers. Be careful in birding the tides! Wind or other factors may tend to hold in the tide or send it out faster than usual. It's better to allow yourself extra time before the birding becomes productive rather than to miss the tide.

But shorebirding in Newburyport Harbor (Joppa Flats) is tremendously exciting. It's especially fun to follow the tide out by walking along and 'scoping from the edge of Water Street. The tide goes out first from the area behind Sportsmen's Lodge. As the edge of the tide begins to get too far away, walk or drive from the parking lot and turn right on Water Street. Pass Rolfe's Lane which goes off on the left and stop at a few places immediately beyond. First there is a transformer and then three clam shacks. Shorebirding can be good at each of those places. Keep checking the shorebirds until you get to the boat ramp at the seawall (.8 miles from Sportsmen's Lodge).

Aside from Short-billed Dowitchers, Dunlin, Black-bellied Plover, and all the peep (including White-rumped Sandpiper), there is always a chance for

a rarity such as a Ruff or a Curlew Sandpiper. Also keep your eyes peeled for migrating Merlin, Peregrine Falcons, or other raptors. Whenever you see all the shorebirds fly up at once, scan quickly for some avian predator.

To continue the tour, return on Water Street in the direction of Sportsmen's Lodge (which, incidentally, is a fine place to eat) heading toward Plum Island. Shortly you will see Plum Island Airport on the right. Scan for hawks on both sides of the road (Plum Island Turnpike). Most of these will be Red-taileds, or kestrels, but in winter, Rough-leggeds and Snowy Owls will often be seen. During summer, Upland Sandpipers can sometimes be found, and during migration, the wet area on the left side of the road just beyond the airport can be good for shorebirds, especially at higher tides. In February and March, watch for the rare and elusive Gyrfalcon, which might make a sweep through the area. I have seen exactly one there in nine years.

The next regular birding spot is known as Plumbush, less than a mile from the airport. It is just beyond the large pink house of the J.Stott Realty. Take the next dirt driveway going off on the right. (If you come to the bridge, you've gone too far.) There is hardly a bush at Plumbush, just a couple of dilapidated hunter's blinds. But the birding can be good there. Look for Buff-breasted and Baird's Sandpipers in August and September; during the nesting season, you can walk out to where first Savannah Sparrows, then Sharp-tailed Sparrows, and then Seaside Sparrows can usually be found. If you walk out for the Seaside Sparrows, you'll need water-proof boots and insect repellent in ample supply.

The tour then continues by returning to the main road, turning right, and then crossing the bridge over the Parker River to Plum Island. At the next intersection you have three choices. In winter turn left to check for Short-eared Owls or hawks.

By going straight and then following the road as it curves sharply to the left and then continuing for another 2.3 miles after the curve, you come to the very north end of Plum Island. This area is usually good except in summer. Behind York's Tackle Shop, 'scope for sea ducks, alcids, and white-winged gulls. Most of the latter will be Iceland, but occasionally a Glaucous is seen. If there seems to be a lot of activity, and if the weather is not too cold (a big "if"), you might try walking to the right along the dunes for about a mile until you come to the south jetty at the mouth of the Merrimac River. This area is often good for Horned Grebes and Common Loons, along with the previously mentioned birds.

Turning right after the Plum Island bridge brings you to the Parker River National Wildlife Refuge. Birding on "Plum Island," as it is known universally, will be covered fully in future issues of Bird Observer.

Absolutely the best way to bird Plum Island is to time your birding there with one of the many scheduled club field trips. The Brookline Bird Club offers almost one field trip there per week all year long. Non-members are welcome and there is no charge. For information on these field trips or on any birds in the area, feel free to call me from 6:30 a.m. to 11:30 p.m. at 617-375-0292. And whatever the birding, try not to miss one of the beautiful sunsets on Plum Island in summer.

To complete your birding day, you can take two side trips, both of which begin at Sportsmen's Lodge. The first, best in spring and early summer, goes to Pikes Bridge Road in West Newbury. Pass Sportsmen's Lodge on your right and turn left at Rolfe's Lane. Turn right at the traffic light on 1A and then turn left after .2 miles on Parker Street by the Citgo station. After .5 miles turn right through the gate into Oak Hill Cemetery, an excellent spot for warblers in migration. Return to Parker Street, turn right and go to the next intersection where the stop sign has been taken down. There is a Dandy Donut Shop on the left where the coffee rolls are delicious. Go straight across Rte.1 staying on Parker Street for .5 miles until you come to another intersection. Turn left there onto Scotland Road (not marked). As you follow this road you will see fields to your right, the "Common Pastures." Upland Sandpipers breed here, as well as Bobolinks, Meadowlarks, and Black-billed Cuckoos; Rough-legged and Red-tailed Hawks frequent the area in winter.

Stay on Scotland Road for 2.9 miles and turn right onto Turkey Hill Road. (First right after I-95.) Go .8 miles and bear left onto unmarked dirt road (Pikes Bridge Road). Walk the length of this road looking for Blue-winged, Golden-winged, and Prairie Warblers, Empidonax Flycatchers, American Bittern, and Bobolinks. Be careful on the songs. I have seen Golden-winged singing the Blue-winged song and vice versa.

To check Salisbury State Beach, pass Sportsmen's Lodge and stay on Water Street. At the end of the seawall, there is room for a couple of cars to park. It's a great place to check the harbor from, and it is an excellent place for Barrow's Goldeneye in winter. Stay on Water Street, bear right at the next fork, and continue until you get to Rte. 1 until you come to Salisbury Center. Turn right onto Rte 1A, and follow this for over a mile until you see the sign for Salisbury State Reservation on your right. Turn right onto State Beach Road. In winter, the marsh to your right is frequented by Snowy Owls, often seen perched on old shacks or posts, and by Rough-legged Hawks. Driving on, you will come to an intersection. Turn right onto Cable Avenue (not marked) to get to the boat ramp where there is a large parking lot and a good view of winter ducks, including Common Eider, Red-breasted Merganser, and Common Goldeneye. Occasionally a Tufted Duck, which has seemed to favor the channels flowing into the marsh, is seen. From the boat ramp slowly drive among the campsites and you should have excellent views of Snow Buntings. Then drive to the large parking lot near the beach to look for loons, grebes, diving ducks, gulls and occasional alcids.

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