



## THE FOUR SEASONS AT PLUM ISLAND

by Herman D'Entremont, Brookline

and Soheil Zende, Somerville

(PART II - SUMMER-FALL)

Located 35 miles north of Boston, at the confluence of the Merrimack, Parker, and Ipswich rivers, Plum Island is reached by driving southeastward on Water Street, Newburyport. Geologically, the island is a barrier beach backed by swampy hollows. A salt marsh dominates the western half of the island, and fresh water from the rivers combines with tidal flow to produce a brackish environment full of nutrients. Plants, crustaceans, insects, and rodents thrive and, in turn, attract the migrant and resident birds that make Plum Island so inviting to bird and nature lovers.

The southern two-thirds of the island is part of the Parker River National Wildlife Refuge, managed by the U. S. Department of the Interior. Information, maps, refuge regulations, and bird lists are available from:

1. Parker River N. W. R. Headquarters, Northern Boulevard, Plum Island, Newburyport, Massachusetts 01950 (telephone 617-465-5753). This location is at the north end of the island, at the Coast Guard lighthouse.
2. The booth at the refuge entrance, which is staffed most of the year during daylight hours.

Since the appearance of Part I of this article (Winter-Spring) in Vol. 6, no. 6, of BIRD OBSERVER (Nov.-Dec. 1978), the refuge management has initiated a series of alterations which will take several years to complete.

Several modifications have already been completed. The seasonal bathhouse at Parking Lot #1 has been converted to an all-year comfort station (the showers have been removed). Parking lots formerly numbered 2, 4, 7 and 9 have been closed. Parking lots previously numbered 3, 5, 6, 10 and 11 have been enlarged. (See map for the new parking lot numbers and locations.) The roadbed in the vicinity of Stage Island has been shifted westward to permit natural dune development.

Projects underway but not completed include the elevating, widening, and surfacing of the refuge road as far as the Rowley line. If additional funds are obtained, the project may be extended the length of the refuge. The refuge management is also reintroducing a number of animal species not recently found on the island, including Beaver, Red and Gray Squirrel, Bobwhite and Wood Duck.

In the near future, a new headquarters and visitor center will be built at the area known as the Warden's. This complex will house displays on the natural history of the island and include a blind overlooking the North Pool of Hellcat Swamp. The current refuge headquarters, at the northern tip of the island, will be closed.

The refuge is open to the public, without charge, every day on the following schedule: May 1 to October 15, 6 a.m. to 9 p.m.; October 16 to April 30, dawn to dusk.

## SUMMER

Greenhead flies and mosquitos, nature's guardians, post their best troops at Plum Island during the summer months. The beach is beautiful, however, and on any summer weekend if you're not at the entrance by 9 a.m. you may find yourself turned away. After 300 cars have entered the refuge, it is closed to all traffic--including pedestrians--after 3 p.m.

Arriving early has its rewards. An early-morning high tide at the salt pans (mile 1.2) often provides the unmatched spectacle of a hundred or more Snowy Egrets stalking prey and squabbling among themselves. Interspersed among them are Great Blue, Little Blue, Louisiana, and Green Heron, together with Glossy Ibis.

The majority of the Little Blues seen at this time are white immatures, which presents a difficult identification problem for the birder who looks for "greenish" legs. Immature Snowy Egrets show lots of green on the backs of their legs; hence one must take full advantage of the aspect of the birds and the excellent morning light to study the birds carefully. Snowy Egrets are apt to show their bright yellow "slippers" when they stir the water in search of food, a gesture the Little Blue never employs. Snowies also appear to be slightly larger with a thinner, longer, black bill in contrast to the fatter, bluish-pink bill on the Little Blue.

High tide also brings resting, feeding, and preening shorebirds to these pools. Least and Semipalmated Sandpiper, Short-billed Dowitcher, and Hudsonian Godwit--starting their southward fall migration--begin to appear by the first week of July and build up to their highest numbers in early to mid-August. Though the godwits are pretty unexciting when they huddle up with their bills tucked under their wings, flocks of these birds should be perused carefully for an occasional Marbled or a rare Bar-tailed. The chances for picking up one of these rarities increase as summer slips away into fall.

Much more active and interesting are the dowitchers, which seem to feed continuously. At high tide their sewing-machine bills probe the salt pans, at low the flats of Newburyport Harbor. In late July a fair number of Stilt Sandpipers appear at the salt pans. Long-billed Dowitchers arrive in August and must be carefully differentiated from the Short-billeds. Throughout the summer it is possible to run into an occasional Willet.

Lingering too long at the salt pans may mean that no parking lots will have room for your car, except #4 (Hellcat Swamp), which is "reserved for nature study." It is worth walking the swamp trails to observe breeding Willow Flycatcher, Gray Catbird, Yellow Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, and Swamp Sparrow.

The observation towers here and at Stage Island Pool (Parking Lot #7) are fine places to catch the light ocean breezes that keep one cool and the bugs away. Rails with young are often seen from both towers, and the southern one is a good place to wait out the elusive Least Bittern. Late July and August are best for seeing the latter, for the adults are actively feeding their young.

The Plum Island State Park, located on the southern tip of the island, is

a good place to look for that southern wanderer, the Royal Tern, as well as Black Tern and Black Skimmer, during late July and August. Look for these species associating with members of the resident tern colony.

#### FALL

As summer wanes and fall begins, the shorebirds build up in variety and numbers. Warblers filter in almost imperceptibly during the last three weeks of August. Purple loosestrife finishes blooming; wild rose and beach-plum approach fruition. Suddenly, in late August the air is full of swallows--tens of thousands of Tree Swallows interspersed with Barn, Bank, and Rough-winged course over the marshes and bushes. Sometimes they sit on the outer beach, turning it dark with their fluttering masses; at other times they swirl over the ponds or perch on the fences and wires around the Warden's. Chattering incessantly, the swallows herald fall as the Snow Geese do spring.

September and October are hawk-watch months. Although few buteo species are ever seen at Plum Island (Red-tailed Hawk is relatively common, however), accipiters, falcons, Marsh Hawk, and Osprey migrate regularly over the outer dunes. Particularly after a cold front has passed, hours spent facing northward on the dunes at the Kettlehole or Hellcat Swamp can reward one with excellent closeup views of Sharp-shinned Hawk and American Kestrel as well as an occasional Merlin or Cooper's Hawk. Peregrine Falcon is also seen regularly during the early fall, and even a Gyrfalcon is not beyond hope in late fall or winter.

#### Salt Pans to the Warden's

September brings the largest variety of shorebirds to the salt pans. As always, high tide is best, and early morning light is even better. Black-bellied Plover in all stages of moult predominate; most adults have extremely mottled breasts and bellies. But very buff-brown immatures are also seen, tempting one to call out Golden Plover. However, a look at the long heavy bill or the white rump convinces us otherwise.

Dunlin begin arriving, mostly in their drab gray basic (nonbreeding) plumage. Their smaller cousin, the White-rumped Sandpiper, is regular in small numbers--look for a very gray peep with gray vermiculation on the breast extending as a series of spots down the flanks. The bill is long and thin, though not so long or downcurved as the Dunlin. Western Sandpiper should be logged by a regular visitor, who in September might catch the second "wave" of Stilt Sandpiper (mainly immature birds).

Among the larger sandpipers, Hudsonian Godwit is seen in small numbers until October. Though continuing to diminish drastically, Greater Yellowlegs last well into November. In September Long-billed and Short-billed Dowitcher intermingle, but the former predominates during October. Red Knot can be expected, though Ruff, Reeve, and Curlew Sandpiper are more often hoped for than seen.

If the shorebirds suddenly take flight and scatter, look skyward for a Peregrine Falcon. Though only a speck in the sky, it can cause havoc among the shorebirds. But don't be too quick, for sometimes the scourge that puts the shorebirds into flight is a Merlin, itself an exciting

species to see. Or it may turn out to be a Marsh Hawk, gliding on stiff wings to be mobbed by the shorebirds themselves or the ever-present Starlings.

During October's peak waterfowl migration the salt pans hold large numbers of Green-winged Teal. At the roadside during this time of year, Sharp-tailed Sparrows are literally underfoot. Also, keep a lookout for Eastern and Western Kingbird, Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, and Cedar Waxwing perched on high vantage points along the next few miles of road.

Moving on to the Kettlehole (Parking Lot #3), we quietly follow the circular path in search of fall warblers. This migrant trap is as good in autumn as it is in spring; stay especially alert for Western Kingbird, Olive-sided Flycatcher, and Connecticut Warbler.

The Warden's is the next stop (mile 2.6). Look for Clay-colored and Lark Sparrow amid Chipping, Field, Savannah, Song, Swamp, White-crowned, and White-throated Sparrow. If you have a parking permit, why not walk to the New Pines (mile 2.9-3.4) while checking both sides of the road for warblers? After crossing the dike, check all the waterfowl in the open water to the right; Pied-billed Grebe, Black-crowned Night Heron, Common Gallinule, and American Coot should be seen here. South of the dike is the Town Marker Field, which is cultivated with grains to feed the resident Canada Goose population. This is a good place to seek American Golden Plover, Baird's Sandpiper, and Buff-breasted Sandpiper; you might also find Horned Lark, Water Pipit, and Lark Sparrow. From the Town Marker, enter the New Pines for Saw-whet Owl, which is found every fall.

#### Hellcat Swamp

As in the spring, the variety of habitats accessible from this parking lot makes it a most enjoyable stop. After you cross the road heading toward the beach, the entire hillside is covered with poison ivy, which together with the bayberries are important foodstuffs for many migrating birds. Take your time and enjoy the solitude and the fall colors. From the highest dune perhaps you will see lines of cormorants migrating over the ocean or loons, or ducks, or Gannets, or ...

After returning to the parking lot at Hellcat, there is one more place to visit--about 50 feet west of the men's restroom a small trail goes through the bushes to the left. Soon you are on the extensive mudflat that borders the South Pool, an area favored by Baird's and Buff-breasted Sandpiper. Though only a few individuals occur annually, on a good day you will have an excellent opportunity to compare their sizes, proportions, and habits with the numerous Semipalmated Sandpiper, Semipalmated Plover, and Killdeer. The Buff-breasted Sandpiper is particularly enchanting--soft pink underparts, narrow white eyering, and the flash of white on the underwings during its zigzag flight.

#### Stage Island

While heading southward, stop at mile 6 and inspect all the geese atop Cross Hill Farm--you might find a White-fronted. (Three have been reported over the last three decades; the most recent record is September, 1978.) The next stop is Parking Lot #6. Search the grasses for Savannah

and Lincoln's Sparrow and also Water Pipit.

The evening heron flight is one of the major highlights of late summer and early fall. If you are willing to stay until dusk, you will witness long lines of all species arriving to roost for the night. In early morning these birds disperse to feed all over the extensive salt marsh to the north and west.

#### Plum Island State Park

The park provides easy access to the beach, and the surrounding dunes accent the advancing season by assuming their stark winter dress under a waning sun. Sanderling and Dunlin might be working the water's edge and the flats, while Common and Forster's Tern may be seen, often accompanied by an avaricious jaeger in pursuit of a meal. But now we concentrate our attention on the waterbirds that will spend harsh months offshore: the sea ducks and, hopefully, a few alcids. Who knows what might show up?

As we return northward, look for what was missed on the way down the island. If high tide is approaching, carefully check the marshes for herons and rails. Snow Buntings might now be feeding in the field north of the Old Pines, or a peregrine might be buzzing Dunlin in the Salt Pans. Enjoy the beauty of the island. Many regulars believe that "Plum" looks best in late October and early November. As you leave the island in the chilly twilight of a late fall evening, you can contemplate the birds of the day and look forward to another year at the best all-round birding spot in Massachusetts.

#### ACCOMMODATIONS NEAR NEWBURYPORT

The severity of the fuel crisis might encourage many birders to spend an entire weekend in the Plum Island-Newburyport area. One of the better inexpensive motels in this region, the Susse Chalet is located on Rte. 110 west of Rt. I-95 in Amesbury. To reach it from Newburyport, take Rte. 1 north to Salisbury center, then turn west on Rte. 110 and continue until you pass under I-95; the motel will be on your left. Many other motels, some of them open all year, can be found along Rte. 1A east of its intersection with Routes 1 and 110 in Salisbury.

There are many fine restaurants in the area. The Sportsmen's Lodge on the Plum Island Turnpike is one of the most convenient and has good food at very reasonable prices. Good sandwiches and soups can be purchased at the Roast Beef Corral at the intersection of Rte. 1 and State Street in Newburyport. The Riverview, an inexpensive seafood restaurant, is located on Rte. 1 in Salisbury, a half mile north of the Merrimack River. The Hungry Traveller, located on Rte. 1A east of Salisbury center, is also quite popular.

Even though they may be in the Newburyport-Plum Island area for only a few hours, many regulars believe that no birding day in the region can be complete without a visit to Esbensen's Danish Bakery at 127 Water Street, Newburyport, near the seawall. If you are heading out to the island early in the morning, a cup of coffee or tea with your Danish can help get the day off to a good start.