

BIRDING ORLEANS AND EASTHAM, FALL - SPRING

by Robert Prescott, Orleans

ORLEANS

Orleans, "gateway to the lower Cape," has become a very busy spot, but it still offers some little-trampled areas for good fall, winter, and spring birding. Because of its location on the Sandwich Moraine (the "backbone" of the Cape), Orleans is characterized by knob and kettle topography including kettle ponds, upland woods, and salt marshes.

The Outer Beach

The focal point in Orleans is Nauset Beach, a public beach on the Atlantic Ocean. Exit 12 from Rte. 6 will take you to Orleans; turn right at the first traffic light and follow the signs to Nauset. A hike south from the parking lot will take you to Pochet Island and a hike north to Nauset Inlet.

Access to Pochet Island is limited to those with 4-wheel drive vehicles or the desire to hike a mile down the beach. This has kept the island a virtual sanctuary. A well-kept system of trails covers the island, which include two swampy areas and one pond. If there is a rare bird around, chances are good that it will show up at Pochet. In the past, a Gyrfalcon, an immature Bald Eagle, and Long-eared, Short-eared, Great Horned, Barn, and Snowy Owls have been seen around the island. Some of the more common birds seen here, in season, are Marsh Hawk, American Kestrel, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Great Blue and Green Heron, Mockingbird, Cardinal, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Ruffed Grouse, and Bobwhite. In the spring and fall, migrating hawks and warblers pass through here. During the winter, the bluff at the south end of the island gives the quiet birder a close look at many kinds of waterfowl feeding in the marsh below.

Pochet Island is deserted most of the year. The island's residents, who arrive in late May and stay until October, are very accommodating and welcome most visitors, but please respect their privacy. Even if there are no rare birds to be found, a hike to Pochet Island is well worth the effort. The beach buggy trail north from the Nauset Beach parking lot will take you through the back dunes and marshy area behind Nauset Beach and eventually to Nauset Inlet. In this area there is a variety of bird-life which goes all but unnoticed by the average beachgoer. Migrating warblers are attracted to the bayberry thickets; several species of sparrows are year-round residents. Marsh Hawks, Merlins, and American Kestrels might be seen hunting for food. The brackish pond is good for waterfowl. Blue-winged and Green-winged Teal, Hooded Mergansers, Black Ducks, and American Coot have all been seen here. Occasionally a Common Gallinule can be found feeding along the marshy pond edge.

Farther out on Nauset Spit you will find the usual complement of dune birds: Horned Larks and Snow Buntings in fall and winter, Piping Plover and Least Terns in spring and summer. There is also a chance that a Snowy Owl will take up winter residence here, as one did three years ago. The inlet offers some excellent views of waterfowl, especially sea ducks.

feeding in the mussel beds.

The best spot on the outer beach for birding is the rocky area just north of the bathing beach. (The only problem is that at high tide the rocks are underwater, making it difficult to find this spot.) Beside the usual contingent of sea ducks, Oldsquaw, Red-necked Grebes and loons can be seen feeding around the rocks. The real treat, though, are the Harlequin Ducks, which appear regularly. In 1977 there were five; in 1978, six. If any King Eiders are around they can usually be seen at this location. In 1978 an immature was in among the Common Eider.

If you have access to a canoe, a trip through Nauset Marsh can be one of the most rewarding shorebird trips this side of Monomoy Island. The marsh is dotted with pools and pans where shorebirds, herons, and ducks feed.

Town Landings

Orleans has set aside many areas for conservation, but often the best birding is from the public town landings. The Orleans Yacht Club landing on Cove Road can be very good. In the fall herons usually gather in the trees on the southwest side. Rare waterfowl are sometimes attracted by the resident group of feral ducks and geese. Two years ago there was a Richardson's Canada Goose; last year a Snow Goose. During February and March, Killdeer regularly show up along the shore, and there is always the possibility that a resident snipe will make an appearance.

If it's shorebirding you are after, then a stop at Mill Pond/Roberts Cove landing is a must. At low tide the mussel flats are exposed, attracting many shorebirds, including yellowlegs, dowitchers, plovers, and peep. Occasionally a Snowy Egret will fly in to chase minnows. This area is best birded in the afternoon because of the position of the sun. Avoid Wednesday and Sunday, which are the days when the flats are open for clamming.

Two other locations for good shorebirding are Asa's Landing off Gibson Road and Snow Shore Landing off Champlain Road. Oystercatchers often come up into Town Cove as far as Asa's Landing whenever they leave the confines of Monomoy Island. In the winter, Snow Shore Landing is an excellent place to see the huge rafts of eider that come into Nauset Marsh to feed on the mussel flats.

Barley Neck in East Orleans is also worth a visit. This landing which overlooks a small cove separating it from Pochet Island, is a good spot for waterfowl. Baldpate and teal, in particular, frequent this area.

The best known pond in Orleans is probably Crystal Lake, two miles south of Main Street off Rte. 28. A beautiful kettle pond deep in a hollow, its semi-feral Mallard population is frequently joined by other dabbling and (sometimes) diving ducks.

The upland spots in Orleans are either private or not very productive. When looking for upland birds I head for Eastham.

EASTHAM

The topography of Eastham is different from that of Orleans. The low rolling hills of south Eastham give way to the higher Eastham plains area around Nauset Light. Here many acres of prime habitat have been preserved by the Cape Cod National Seashore.

Fort Hill Area

Eastham has a host of good upland spots, the most prominent of which is Fort Hill, just off Rte. 6, overlooking Nauset Harbor. Around the base of the hill are several low wet spots used as nesting sites by teal and Black Ducks. Also check the pans on the upper marsh for waterfowl. The many thickets in the area provide cover for a variety of songbirds, including: Grasshopper, Savannah, and Song Sparrow; Cardinal; Gray Catbird; Mockingbird; and an occasional shrike. Down the back side of the hill is a spring-fed pool well-known as a heron roosting spot. Rails and bitterns have also been seen and heard here. In winter the spring keeps the pool ice-free, attracting crowds of waterfowl. A Wood Duck is regularly found here during February and March.

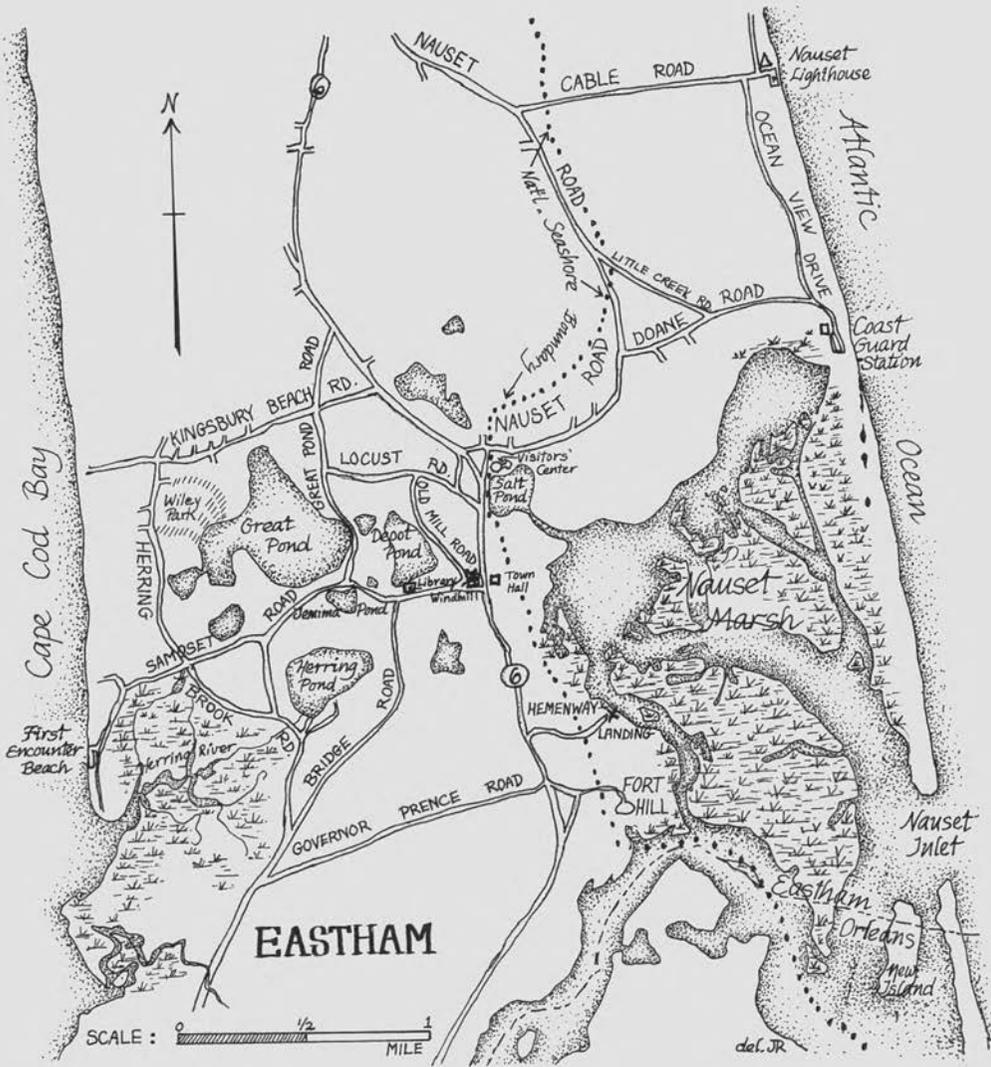
As long as you are in the Fort Hill area, visit the adjacent Red Maple Swamp. An elaborate boardwalk constructed by the National Seashore winds through this dark swampy woods where sphagnum moss and catbrier drape over large twisted maples and tupelos. Often warblers and occasionally Veeries, take refuge in this hollow, which hosts a variety of breeding birds, especially cavity nesters.

Just to the north of the Red Maple Swamp is Hemenway Landing, one of the best heron spots on Nauset Marsh. Tucked in behind the parking lot is a small pond where Black-crowned and Yellow-crowned Night Herons gather. Great Blues can also be seen perched in the trees surrounding the small marshy cove next to the parking lot.

Coast Guard Beach to Nauset Light

Coast Guard Beach has a lot more to offer since the Great Blizzard of '78 rearranged it. In addition to an increase in the number of nesting Least Terns, Piping Plover also appear to have benefitted from the overwash sand. The marsh just under the Coast Guard Station is also filled with more sand; during the fall of 1978 groups of Marbled and Hudsonian Godwits and Willets were regularly seen feeding here. The usual fine selection of yellowlegs, plovers and peep was also present. The best time for observation here is morning low tide. A walk down the spit may reveal Lapland Longspurs or Whimbrels; a Wheatear was found in the upper marsh grass in October, 1976. The pond in front of the Rescue Museum is good for nesting redwings, several species of sparrows, and three species of swallows. Occasionally Indigo Buntings, shrikes, and warblers are found here.

North of Coast Guard Beach is Nauset Light, a high vantage point good for viewing pelagic birds. In the spring and fall, Gannets soar along not far from shore; during the winter, alcids can often be seen from this spot. If you are lucky you may see a Finback or Humpback Whale spouting offshore.



The Western Ponds

During winter, the Eastham ponds to the west of Rte. 6 provide some of the best waterfowling on the Cape. Depot Pond on Samoset Road is marked private but birders are usually tolerated. You can park behind the Eastham Public Library for a better view. Usually there are several species of ducks on this pond and there is always the chance that you will see something uncommon. Continue down Samoset Road to Jemimah Pond on the left. If there are any Hooded Mergansers in the area, they are sure to be found on this small pond. Herring Pond on Herringbrook Road is good late in the day with the sun over your shoulder. This pond seems to be preferred by Canvasbacks, Redheads, ringnecks, Pied-billed Grebes, and coot.

If you go north on Herringbrook Road for about a mile and enter Wiley Park on the right, you will be on the west side of Great Pond. From noon on, this is the best side for birding. The row of cedars acts as a blind and is the perfect place for scoping the Ruddy Ducks, Common Mergansers, coots, and Pied-billed Grebes which frequent this pond.

First Encounter Beach

Whenever a cold front follows a nor'easter, hardy birders head to First Encounter Beach for close encounters with pelagic birds. In the spring and fall you might find Gannets, kittiwakes, Sabine's and Bonaparte's Gulls, petrels, jaegers and shearwaters. In the winter the cast changes to Razorbills, murres, Dovekies and Black Guillemot.

The areas I have described are the cream of the many birding spots in Orleans and Eastham. I make no guarantee that you will see any of the rare birds mentioned, but you will most likely see plenty of other birds. As all of us know, birding is not an exact science. It is a combination of luck, patience, and knowing where to look.

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