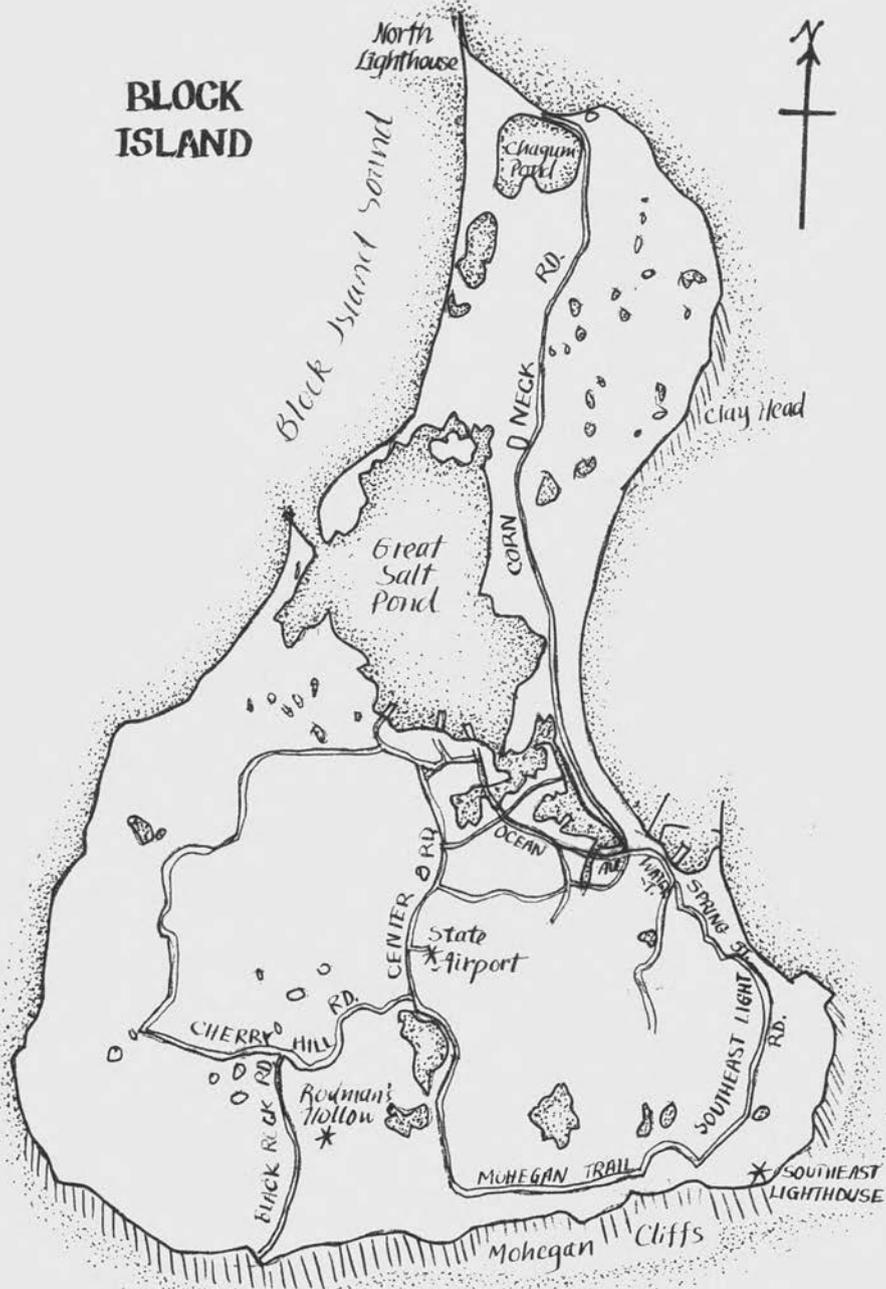


BLOCK ISLAND



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by Robert P. Fox, Hingham

My idea of a perfect getaway is to spend the first weekend of October on Block Island, Rhode Island, where fall bird migration is at its best. On the past 14 annual Rhode Island Audubon Block Island Weekends (held on this first October weekend) the leaders have averaged 140 species. The total list for this weekend is 240 species, which includes 7 species of woodpeckers, 11 flycatchers (including Olive-sided and Say's Phoebe), 5 wrens (including Bewick's), 6 vireos, 29 warblers (including Connecticut, Mourning, Worm-eating, and Prothonotary), 3 tanagers, and 15 sparrows (including Grasshopper and Lark).

Many species seen infrequently on the New England mainland throughout the year are regular and numerous on Block Island during early October. Land-birds, which normally breed in the coniferous forests of northern New England and Canada, are not only regular, but also easily seen and studied because of the bushes and low trees on the island. Birders have had the unforgettable experience of seeing 5 kinds of warblers in one bush and 12 species of sparrows on a small lawn!

Orange-crowned, Mourning, and Connecticut Warblers are seen on the majority of trips, as are Winter Wrens, Gray-cheeked Thrushes, Philadelphia Vireos, and Lincoln's Sparrows. Rare landbirds seen on Block Island in October include Red-headed Woodpecker, Western Kingbird, Carolina Wren, Yellow-breasted Chat, Blue Grosbeak, Dickcissel, and Clay-colored Sparrow. Among shorebirds, Louisiana Herons, Yellow-crowned Night Herons, American Oystercatchers, and American Avocets can be seen.

In addition, Block Island is an excellent place to see Peregrine Falcons, which have been observed here every year during the Audubon Weekend. Peregrines are usually seen circling high over town or the moorlands at Rodman's Hollow, dashing over a ridge at the north end of the island, or coursing below the clay cliffs at Southeast Light. Other falcons, as well as accipiters, are also commonly seen on the island as they migrate southwestward along the New England coast. Off the coast, loons, cormorants, geese, scoters and mergansers follow the same southwestward route, cutting between Block Island and the mainland on their way into Long Island Sound.

Field trip leaders are often asked why so many southern and western stragglers occur with such frequency on Block Island during October. One explanation is that some birds, upon leaving their breeding grounds in the Ohio Valley or southern Great Plains, instead of heading south, drift northeastward on surges of warm, southwest winds. They are finally stopped by the ocean and pile up on bits of land such as Block Island. This post-hatching drift may also explain the presence of migrant butterflies (such as the Buckeye) and the small Carolina mantises.

Nearly all the birds on Block Island in October are migrants. There are relatively few year-round residents, and even birds common on the mainland are scarce here. For example, Tufted Titmouse has not yet been recorded, and Black-capped Chickadee is not seen every year. However, with good conditions for migration - the passage of a cold front with clear skies, light northwest winds, and a 10° drop in temperature - thousands of birds appear.

During fall migration most species of birds move southwestward parallel to the coast some 20 miles inland. With strong northwest tailwinds, less fortunate individuals move out over the ocean and become disoriented. They head back to shore in the early morning, when radar has shown from 10 to 150 times as many birds over Boston heading southwestward as over Cape Cod heading southeastward. Species known to use this southwest route often occur in spectacular numbers on Block Island and can even be seen in the act of migrating. At Southeast Light at dawn these birds can be seen coming off the ocean, over the cliffs and into the shrubbery, and often streaming north along island roads. In the early morning at the north point, one can see Bluejays, Bobolinks, Rusty Blackbirds, warblers, and others circling upward for several hundred feet before heading northwest on a short low-level flight to the Rhode Island shore, where they rejoin the rest of the "pack."

Probably the most fascinating migration route to the Caribbean and South America is over the ocean. On Block Island one can be part of the send-off for this notable endurance trek, which is dominated almost totally by warblers. Radar has shown that on peak nights up to 12 million birds head southeastward from Cape Cod. Typically, the birds leave from a staging area somewhat inland in early evening, rise to 6,500 feet, and with strong tail winds cross Bermuda some 18 hours later. Then, using the light trade winds, they take another 48 hours to reach the Lesser Antilles after having climbed to 10,000 to 21,000 feet. Heading down the Lesser Antilles and being blown toward the South American coast, the birds fly for 18 more hours and drop in altitude until they are at 2,500 feet over Tobago. Finally, they reach coastal South America.

Some of these over-ocean migrants stop at or return to Block Island because of unfavorable weather, and are seen in numbers while they await more favorable conditions before heading southeast. Occasionally, species which normally take the southwest route head out over the ocean, often at low elevations, and come to rest on board ships or even reach Bermuda. None of these species, such as Barn Swallow, Red-eyed Vireo, Indigo Bunting, and Savannah Sparrow, is seen farther along the route.

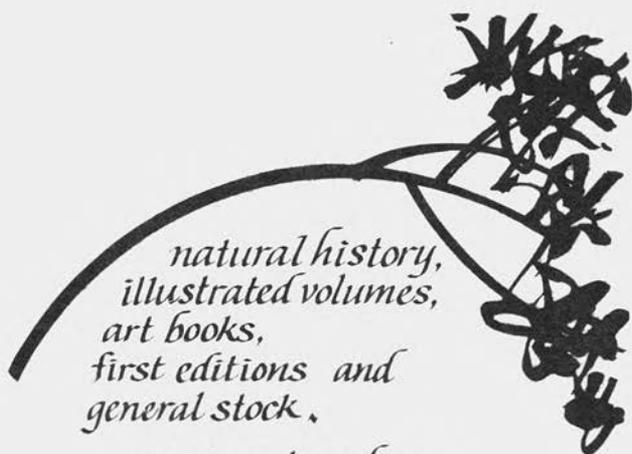
A trip to Block Island, even in the off-season, should be planned well ahead. Birders and many others take advantage of the opportunities to visit the island at this time and accommodations are limited. The Interstate Navigation Company, Box 482, New London, CT 06320, runs the ferry and should be contacted for reservations and the latest schedules. I prefer to take a 11:00 a.m. or 6:30 p.m. ferry from Galilee, Rhode Island, on a Friday, returning Sunday at either 11:00 a.m. or 3:30 p.m. The cost one way is \$4.00. If you take a car, the fare is \$23.00 round-trip for the car, but be sure you can get the car off the island when you plan to leave since car space is limited. For those who prefer to fly, there is a field on the island. I have taken a small charter from the Westerly, R.I., Airport.

Once on the island, you can hire a taxi; many are available at reasonable rates. The hotels do have van transportation, but this has to be worked out with your hotel, especially if you want them to meet a boat. There is also a rental car office on the island. For birding trips, bicycles are the best. They can be rented near the boat landing area or from the Surf Hotel. From the boat landing the most interesting birding areas -

North End and Southeast Light - can be reached by walking for an hour or more, birding en route.

The three hotels most used by birders are the Surf Hotel, just 500 yards from the boat landing; the Narragansett Inn, several miles away but located near the alternate landing site; and the 1661 Inn. The management of these inns can be contacted by mail in care of Block Island, R.I. 02847. All have plain, good quality rooms, fine island food, similar prices, and a loyal following.

Each fall the Audubon Society of Rhode Island, 40 Bowen Street, Providence, R.I., telephone: (401) 521-1670, runs very successful trips to the island. A number of bird clubs in the northeast also sponsor group trips.



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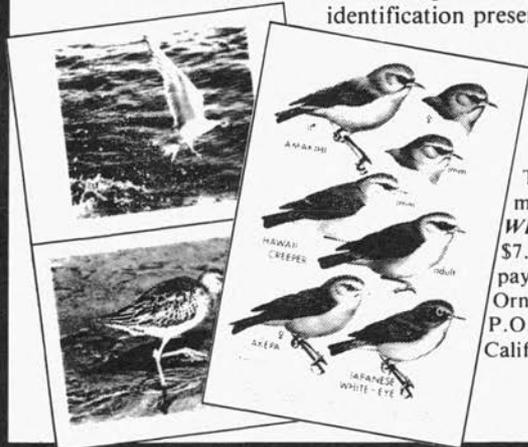
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