



NEWBURYPORT AND VICINITY

KEY:

- ▣ PARKING
- ⊠ BOAT RAMP
- ##### BREAKWATER
- ⊗ CAMPGROUND

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BIRDING NEWBURYPORT HARBOR AND THE SALISBURY BEACH STATE RESERVATION

by Richard Forster, Framingham

Perhaps no other location in Massachusetts has received as much coverage over the years as the Newburyport area. Its proximity to Boston and a vast birding community contribute to its continued popularity. The drawing card is Newburyport Harbor, a stopover area for thousands of gulls, ducks and shorebirds of great variety. Diligent search through the vast numbers of birds present will often reward the observer with discoveries of rare or unusual species.

Newburyport is located on the coast about 35 miles north of Boston, near the New Hampshire border. It can be reached by going north on Route 95 and taking the Rte. 113 exit (east), which leads into Newburyport. An alternative is to take Rte. 1 north, which also leads to Newburyport Center. This route is more scenic and offers birding stops along the way. Foremost of these stops is the Topsfield Fairgrounds. In spring, the adjacent Ipswich River floods the meadow and attracts migrating shorebirds. Species to look for are Glossy Ibis, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Solitary Sandpiper, Pectoral Sandpiper, Least Sandpiper, Killdeer and, rarely, Ruff.

Newburyport Harbor

Newburyport Harbor is a tidal estuary located at the mouth of the Merrimack River. The surrounding salt marshes are among the most extensive in the state. The main attraction is the tidal mud flat area known as Joppa Flats. At dead low tide these flats occupy a major portion of the harbor. Viewing birds at low tide can be an extremely frustrating experience because the birds are spread over a vast area and can be viewed only from a great distance. Consequently, the observer should schedule a visit to the harbor at a time when the tide offers optimum viewing conditions. Although the height of the tide varies according to the cycle of the moon, wind speed, and wind direction, a general rule of thumb is to be at the harbor about 4 to 4 1/2 hours after Boston is high tide. At this time, the flats should just be beginning to uncover and the birds should be viewable at close range. If it isn't possible to visit the harbor on a falling tide, then another good option is to reach the harbor on a rising tide about 4 hours before high tide. A rising tide is less satisfactory because the tide rises fairly rapidly and there is less time to watch the birds.

In Newburyport itself, the harbor is best observed from Water Street, which borders the south side of the harbor. There are three principal vantage points along this road. From west to east, these are popularly referred to as the boat ramp/sea wall, the clam shack and the Sportsmen's Lodge. All of these should be visited, since each affords a different perspective of the harbor.

In spring the initial surge of migrants, consisting primarily of ducks, occurs in early March. There is usually a noticeable buildup in the numbers of the wintering species like Common Goldeneye, Bufflehead and Oldsquaw. Generally speaking, the diving ducks are best seen from the sea wall. Puddle ducks, however, are best seen from the Sportmen's Lodge at high tide. Black ducks predominate, but lesser numbers of other species

often consort with them. Green-winged Teals, Blue-winged Teals and Pintails are frequently encountered, and American Wigeons and Gadwalls are occasionally found.

Also in mid-March, there is a noticeable increase in the numbers of Ring-billed Gulls. From then until May is a good time to be alert for Mew Gull, a species which has occurred with increasing regularity in recent years.

When April arrives, the activity in the harbor increases. Early April, like March, is dominated by waterfowl, with Brant and Snow Geese frequenting the harbor and surrounding marshes. By mid-April the vanguard of the shorebirds arrive. These include Greater Yellowlegs and Killdeer. In the third week of April, small numbers of Pectoral Sandpipers can often be found. The first Little Gulls may be encountered at this time, often in striking breeding plumage, but they are most reliably found in mid-May.

The Ruff, one of the featured species in the harbor, has usually put in an appearance by the end of April. The male Ruff is unmistakable. Its variety of plumages is amply illustrated in current field guides. The female Ruff (Reeve) is less well marked and may be overlooked in the company of the yellowlegs. Ruffs are usually seen in late April and early May, with stragglers occasionally present until Memorial Day.

The shorebird migration is in full swing by the end of the first week of May. The species that peaks earliest is the Least Sandpiper. The maximum number occurs about May 10th and may be 2000-4000. Shortly thereafter, the other shorebirds become increasingly more common. Species that occur in appreciable numbers are Semipalmated Plover, Black-bellied Plover (peak late May), Greater Yellowlegs, Dunlin, Short-billed Dowitcher and Semipalmated Sandpiper. Species which occur sporadically or in small numbers include Golden Plover (rare), Ruddy Turnstone, Red Knot, White-rumped Sandpiper and Sanderling. Newburyport is probably the most reliable location in the state for Curlew Sandpipers. The last week of May is the most likely time to discover them. In recent years three species of Godwit - - Marbled, Hudsonian and Bartailed - - have been seen in spring. Obviously, it would be wise for the observer to be alert for any possibility.

Raptors are often drawn to these shorebird concentrations. A sudden panic of shorebirds often signals the presence of a Peregrin Falcon (most frequently seen in the first half of May). Merlins are occasionally seen darting along the edge of the harbor. Sharp-shinned Hawks and Ospreys are often seen migrating over the harbor.

During June there are just a handful of non-breeding shorebirds present in the harbor, but by early July, shorebirds on their southward trek from the northern breeding grounds begin to appear. The first species to arrive - - usually by the end of the first week of July - - are Hudsonian Godwit, Lesser Yellowlegs, Short-billed Dowitcher and Least Sandpiper. Of these, the species that peaks earliest is the Short-billed Dowitcher, which reaches maximum numbers by about July 20. Peak numbers of sandpipers usually occur in early August, while peak numbers of Black-bellied and Semipalmated Plovers occur in late August. From late August

through early September, there is often a noticeable buildup of shorebirds coinciding with the southward flight of juvenile birds. Species that can reliably be seen during this period are Semipalmated and Black-bellied Plover, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Short-billed Dowitcher, Semipalmated Sandpiper and Hudsonian Godwit. Newburyport Harbor is one of the easily accessible places to see Hudsonian Godwits. The first individuals arrive by July 4th and are continuously present until mid-September. The peak often reaches 50 or more individuals. Other species that are often present, but which may require a bit of expertise to identify, are Willet, Red Knot, White-rumped Sandpiper, Western Sandpiper and Marbled Godwit. Both Ruff and Curlew Sandpiper are often recorded in late July and early August.

By late August several sections of the salt marsh are mowed to harvest the grass. The area opposite the Plum Island Airport and the area about 100 yards west of the bridge to Plum Island (known locally as Plumbush) are mowed annually. At high tide shorebirds often gather in these mowed areas, particularly where tidal pools are present. Some species which are seldom found in the harbor are often found here. These include Killdeer, Golden Plover, Upland Sandpiper, Pectoral Sandpiper, Baird's Sandpiper (rare) and Buff-breasted Sandpiper.

In summer and fall the tall grass along the edge of the harbor and along the creeks contains Marsh Wrens, Sharp-tailed Sparrows and Seaside Sparrows. They are best seen at high tide.

Terns are often found in the harbor during the summer. Usually Common and Least Terns, local breeders, can be found feeding along the edge of the harbor. In August, other terns begin to appear on their post-breeding wanderings. Forster's Terns have occurred with regularity in recent years. They often make their appearance by early August, certainly by late August, and they may remain until October. Fortunate observers may find a Roseate Tern in the middle of August.

A small contingent of Bonaparte's Gulls is usually present in summer, and Little Gulls occasionally associate with them. In August, Bonaparte's Gull numbers are augmented by early arriving migrants. Both the terns and the small gulls can often be found resting on moored boats near the sea wall at high tide.

By September, individual numbers of shorebirds have decreased, but species diversity has increased. The shorebirds that breed in Alaska and north-western Canada are most common at this time. Western Sandpipers and Long-billed Dowitchers can be found if the problems in identifying these species can be overcome. Dunlin make an appearance in early September and reach a peak in late October.

Again in the fall, hawks are frequently encountered in the harbor and over the adjacent marshes. Species seen on a somewhat regular basis include Sharp-shinned Hawk, Northern Harrier, Osprey, Merlin and Peregrine Falcon. A panic of shorebirds or ducks often indicates the presence of a raptor.

In the latter part of September and during October, the numbers of migrant gulls increase. Little Gulls and Black-headed Gulls are frequently encountered, although the Black-headed Gull has appeared with decreasing

frequency in recent years. In late September or early October, the fortunate observer might see a small flock of migrating Caspian Terns. Their passage through the state is direct, usually without stops to rest or feed.

The first wintering ducks (specifically, Greater Scaup) begin to arrive in late September, but it isn't until December that the ducks are present in numbers. Typical wintering species are Oldsquaw, Common Goldeneye, Bufflehead and Red-breasted Merganser. Barrow's Goldeneye can often be found feeding around the group of rocks exposed at low tide on the western side of the harbor. Occasionally, species like Canvasback, Redhead and Ruddy Duck can be found, especially during the migration period.

In winter, birds can often be found up the river from the harbor. There are two excellent vantage points in this area. One is Cashman Park, a public park along the shore of the river. The other is the parking lot of the Gould Shawmut (Chase Shawmut) building. Waterfowl and gulls are usually present here, including Iceland, Glaucous and Black-headed Gulls on occasion. This is an excellent area for raptors. Scan the woodland edges along the marsh for perched birds. Likely species are Rough-legged Hawk, Red-tailed Hawk and Northern Harrier. Bald Eagle, Goshawk and Red-shouldered Hawk are other possibilities. Common Mergansers often concentrate here when ice forms farther up river, and Belted Kingfishers are often encountered.

In recent years the Bald Eagle has apparently rediscovered the Merrimack River as a wintering area. A reliable place to see wintering eagles is along Main Street on the Amesbury side of the river.

Salisbury Beach State Reservation

The Salisbury Beach State Reservation lies on the north side of Newburyport Harbor at the mouth of the Merrimack River. It can be reached from Newburyport by taking Rte. 1 to Salisbury Center and then taking a right on Rte. 1A to the reservation. A fee is charged from April to October, but early birders may avoid this.

Salisbury is best during migration (particularly fall) and in winter. In summer the campground and the beach parking lot are so crowded that a visit then is an experience to be avoided.

Salisbury offers a view of the ocean and of the jetties at the mouth of the river, and a different perspective of the eastern portion of the harbor. The meager thickets often host numerous landbirds, particularly during "waves". The variety of rarities that have been seen in a relatively small area here staggers the imagination.

In late summer and early fall, Loggerhead Shrikes are sometimes found along the access road to the reservation complex. This is one of the more reliable localities for this rare species. When approaching the campground area, take the right that leads to a boat-launch area. Almost immediately on your right is a small copse consisting of sumac, pines, and other shrubby vegetation. This is an excellent spot to look for migrants. Almost any warbler is conceivable and Yellow-breasted

Chats are often recorded. These thickets are also attractive to sparrows. Most of the common sparrows are found here and White-crowned Sparrows are a sure bet in October. The weedy patches of the adjacent campground are also worth checking. Savannah Sparrows, Vesper Sparrows and Chipping Sparrows are regular here. Occasionally a Lark Sparrow or Clay-colored Sparrow is discovered.

In late September the first Lapland Longspurs put in an appearance in the campground. They usually remain until at least mid-November. Snow Buntings put in an appearance in late October and reach a peak during the first half of November, when flocks totaling hundreds of birds are often seen.

In fall, shorebirds roost on the parking lot at high tide, particularly when rain has formed puddles there. Whimbrels, Golden Plovers, Western, White-rumped and, rarely, Baird's Sandpipers can sometimes be found with the commoner species.

In winter, Salisbury can be feast or famine. The marshes are attractive to raptors; Red-tailed Hawks, Rough-legged Hawks, Northern Harriers and Snowy Owls are likely to be seen. The thickets at the junction of Rte. 1A and the reservation road are worth checking for roosting Long-eared and Short-eared Owls. Short-eared Owls are often found early in the morning and late in the day hunting over the marshes. Check exposed perches for Northern Shrikes.

The ocean in winter often holds Common Loons, Red-necked and Horned Grebes, Common Eiders and other sea ducks. The jetty usually has Purple Sandpipers (hard to see) and Great Cormorants, while Iceland Gulls are usually present in fair numbers and an occasional Glaucous Gull is found. Black-legged Kittiwakes sometimes feed between the jetties with the other gulls. On rare occasions, Razorbills or Thick-billed Murres are seen.

From the boat launch area, the bay ducks can be observed to good advantage. Canada Geese, Black Ducks, Goldeneyes, Buffleheads, Greater Scaups, and Red-breasted Mergansers can be seen, and less common species are sometimes found. Also keep in mind that this was the location for a Ross' Gull one winter and an Ivory Gull the following winter.

In spring many of the same species are present, but in greater numbers. The ocean should produce Common and Red-throated Loons, Red-necked and Horned Grebes, and ducks and Gannets offshore. Along the edge of the harbor, on the marsh embankment, Brant congregate until late May. In April, Snow Geese often put down on the marsh in flocks and may sometimes linger for a week or more.

Salisbury is not an impressive looking area, but it certainly draws the birds. Few areas produce such a high proportion of stragglers. Coupled with a visit to Newburyport Harbor, a visit here will seldom disappoint even hard-core birders.

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