

The Site Guide

Presque Isle State Park, Pennsylvania

Location Erie, Erie County, northwestern Pennsylvania.

Description A low-lying seven-mile long peninsula anchored to the mainland just west of the city of Erie, extending northeastward into Lake Erie. The Park's 3200 water-girt acres form and enclose Erie Bay. The western half of the park is a sand spit varying in width from a few hundred feet to approximately one-half mile, with sandy beach on the lake side giving way to beach grasses, poplars, and willows in the middle, and marshy shore on the bay. The mile-and-one-half broad eastern part has been formed by centuries of deposits from the eastward lake current; it is characterized by east-west ridges of old sand dunes (oaks, maples, hemlocks, pines), sand plains and filled lagoons (grasses, bayberry, poplars, elders), and ponds, lagoons, and bays, some enclosed relatively recently (200-300 years) by the south-curving growth of the east end of the peninsula. Erie Bay is about 2 miles wide (north-south), and is relatively shallow. It is connected to Lake Erie on the east by a channel deep enough for ocean-going vessels. Both the bay and the lake freeze over in winter (late-December - mid-March), although patches of open water are usually present.

Access Nearest major airport is Erie. By car, 125 miles north of Pittsburgh, 90 miles east of Cleveland, 90 miles west of Buffalo. Pennsylvania Rt. 832, which runs north-south in the area, goes directly north to the Park entrance and intersects all of the following east-west roads: Pa. Rt. 5, Pa. Rt. 20, and Interstate 90. The Park is open year-round, and roads are paved. Visitors should stop at the Park Administration Building (one mile beyond the entrance) for a map, information on foot trails in the Park, and permission to enter Gull Point Bird Sanctuary at the Park's east end.

Accommodations As the Park is adjacent to a major city, year-round motels, restaurants, and markets are readily available. Camping is not permitted inside the Park, although campgrounds are available in the Erie met-

ropolitan area. An annotated bird checklist can be obtained by sending a self-addressed stamped envelope, and 25¢ to Presque Isle Audubon Society, P.O. Box 1783, Erie, Pa. 16507. A booklet, "Finding Birds on Presque Isle," with map and checklist, can be obtained by sending 35¢ to the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy, 204 Fifth Avenue, Pittsburgh, Pa. 15222.

Birdwatching Presque Isle State Park's sheltered waters of Lake Erie and Erie Bay serve as important resting and feeding places for many water birds during migration. Pied-billed and Horned Grebes and Whistling Swans are common. Diving ducks congregate in large rafts of several thousand birds, and Common Goldeneyes, Canvasbacks, Buffleheads, both scaup, and all three mergansers often remain throughout winter. Migrating Canada Geese — and Blue Snow geese can occasionally be seen. Ospreys and Caspian Terns sometimes linger in the park. Herring and Ring-billed Gulls are year-round but not breeding residents. Bonaparte's Gulls are present, particularly in spring and fall, and Great Black-backed Gulls can be seen in winter. During nesting season, Common Gallinules and Black Terns breed in the cattail marshes of the west bay; parking lots along the road provide good observation points in all seasons. The marshes at the West Boat Livery should be checked for bitterns, rails, marsh wrens, and sparrows, as well as waterfowl; Warbling Vireos should be present in spring and summer. The area behind and east of the Administration Building, especially around the Lily Pond, is one of the best spots to find large numbers of migrant passerines. Almost all warblers, vireos, flycatchers, thrushes, and sparrows that pass through Western Pennsylvania have been recorded there. White-throated Sparrows, Ruby-crowned and Golden-crowned Kinglets, and Swainson's Thrushes are abundant in spring and fall. Watch for Red-headed Woodpeckers. Rarities seen there include White-eyed Vireo, Worm-eating and Kentucky Warblers, and Clay-colored Sparrow. Philadelphia Vireo, Connecticut, Orange-crowned, and Mourning Warblers, Yellow-bellied Flycatchers, Lincoln's and Grasshopper Sparrows are frequent migrants of interest. East along the bay-side road are tall trees from the Marina to the Cement Walk, which attract all the common woodland species. Myrtle Warblers and Yellow-shafted Flickers often winter over, possibly to feed on the waxy fruit of the

Map / Melinda Welton

Presque Isle STATE PARK

LAKE ERIE

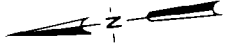
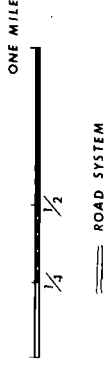
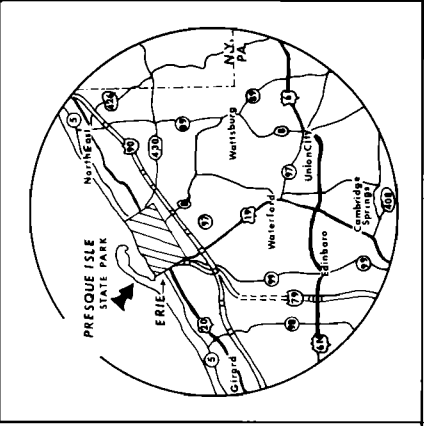
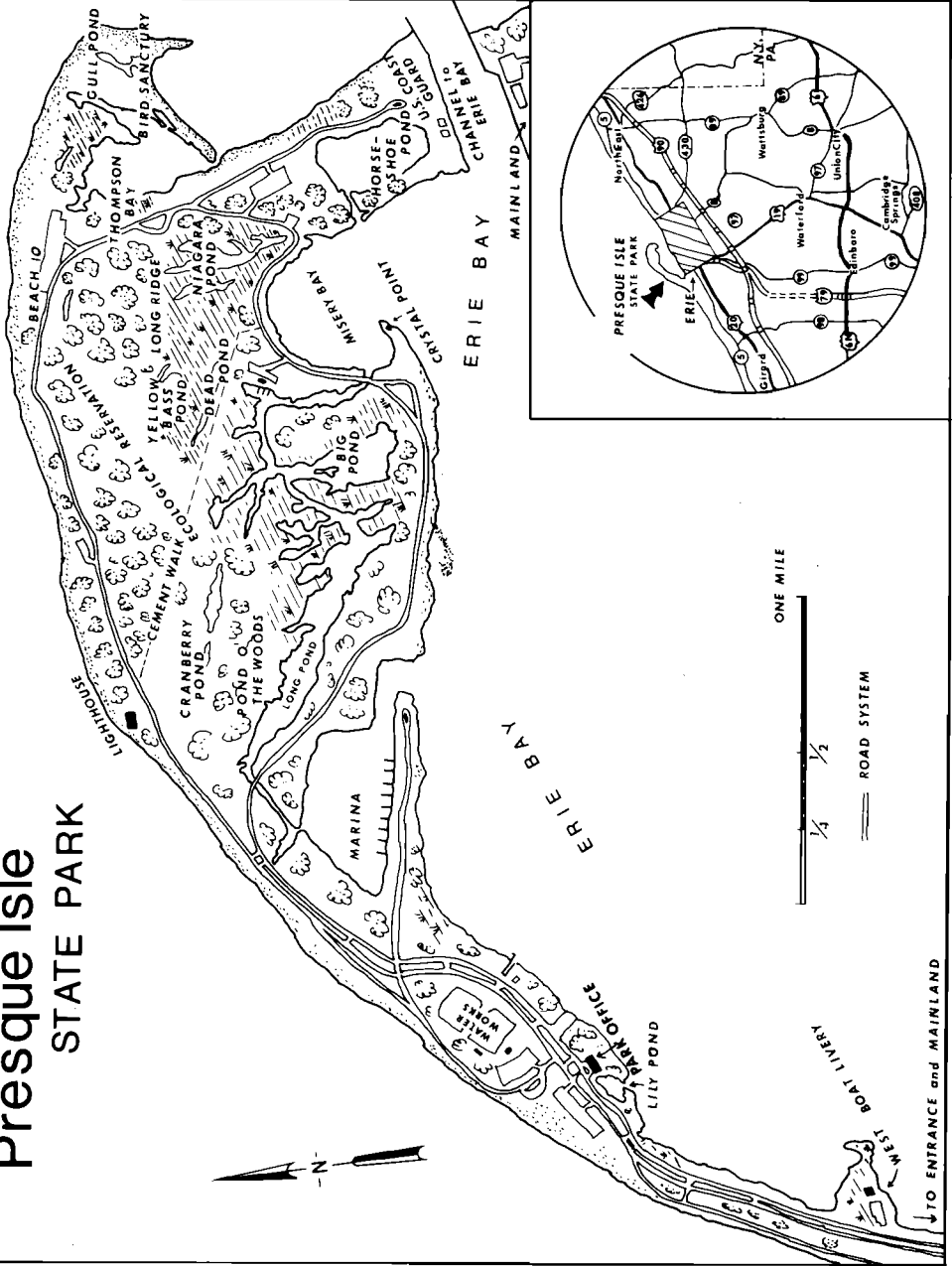




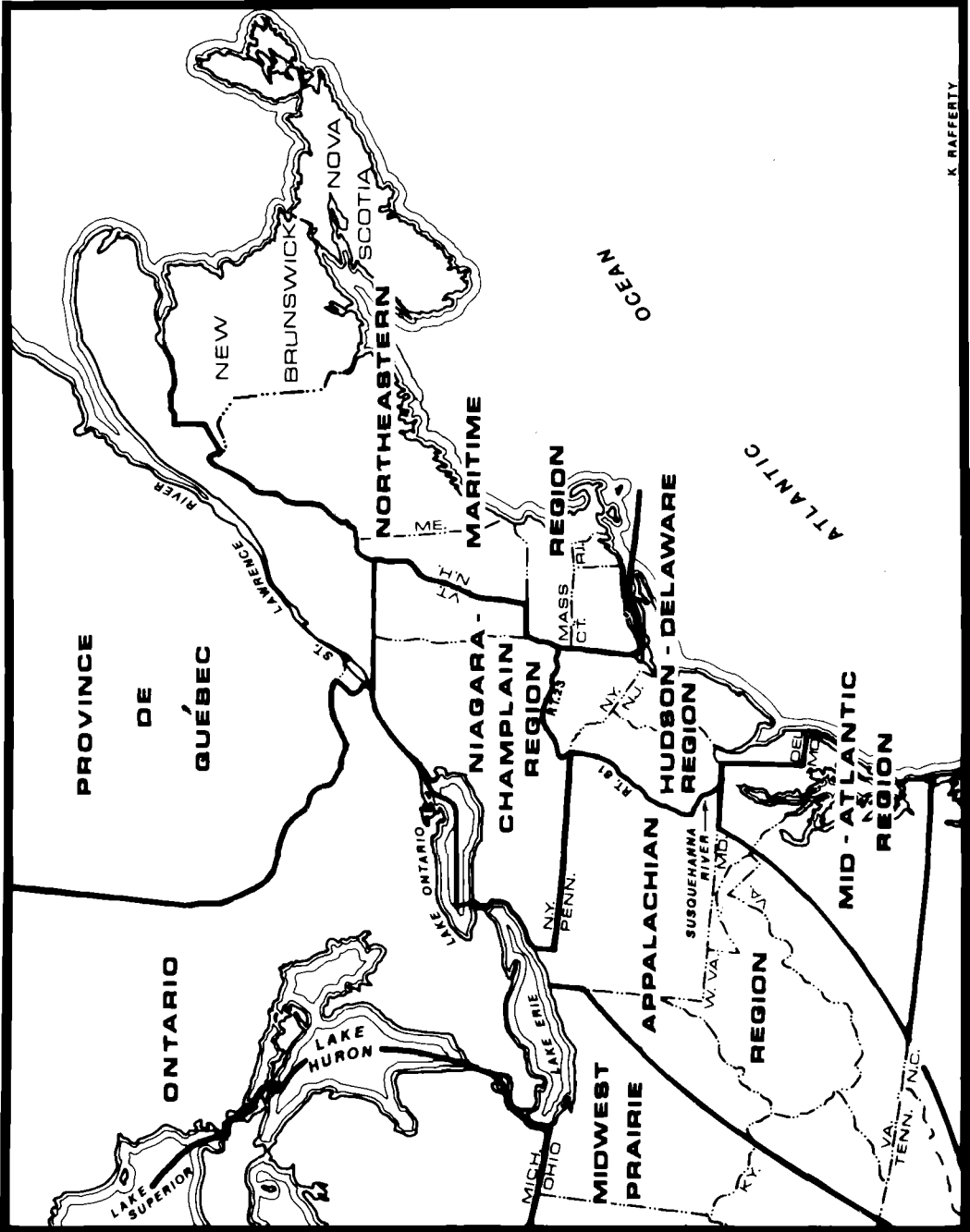
Photo / Bus Scott

abundant northern bayberry. Numerous dead trees in the park provide nesting opportunities for hole-nesting species, and perches for an occasional Bald Eagle. The inland lagoons surrounded largely by marshed provide suitable nesting sites for many species including Sora and Virginia Rails, American and Least Bitterns, Short-billed Marsh Wrens, and other species. Great Blue Herons are regular visitors. The lagoons attract seasonal dabbling ducks; Big Pond and Niagara Pond are often most productive. The Cement Walk and other foot trails in the vicinity should be tried for a variety of migrants. Parking is permitted at the turnaround circle west of Thompson Bay. The trail west along Long Ridge courses between an extensive pine stand to the north, and Niagara and Yellow Bass Ponds to the south. This is a likely spot to see Eastern Bluebirds, Loggerhead or Northern Shrikes, Sharpshinned, Red-tailed, Broad-winged, and Sparrow Hawks. Raptors can be well observed particularly in spring migration when southerly winds crowd the flights along the Lake shore. Behind the east parking lot at Beach 10, the Lake and southeast along the beach to Gull Point Bird Sanctuary, is the best area in the Park to see a variety of shore and water birds. Many unusual species have been recorded in this area, including Buff-breasted Sandpiper; Cattle, Snowy, and Reddish Egrets; Sandhill Crane; Parasitic and Pomarine Jaegers; White Pelican; American Avocet; Marbled and Hudsonian Godwits; Little, Iceland, Glaucous, and

Franklin's Gulls; Louisiana, Little Blue and Yellow-crowned Night Herons; Wilson's Plover, and all of the phalaropes. The Piping Plover, now scarce in the Great Lakes, is recorded in small numbers in spring and late summer. Favorable south and south-west winds in April and May may also bring excellent hawk flights over this area. Common and Caspian Terns, Killdeer, and Spotted Sandpipers appear in warmer seasons. Gull Point is also a likely spot for an occasional Peregrine Falcon especially in fall. The open grassy areas east of Beach 10 attract migrating Marsh Hawks, Water Pipits and Short-eared Owls. Lark Sparrow, Dickcissel, Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, and Harris' Sparrow are rarities recorded in this area. In winter, Horned Larks and Snow Buntings are often seen. Lapland Longspurs and a Snowy Owl or two are quite possible. The months of May and September are by far the most productive, and a single party can often record well over 100 species on a good day; highest total for several parties in a single day is 151, recorded in May, 1972. Nearly 300 species are on the park checklist, and about 225 of these are recorded in an average year. It is also worth noting that fall migrations of Monarch Butterflies at Presque Isle have been, in many years, quite impressive.

Ratings Spring ★★★★★, Summer ★★, Fall ★★★★★, Winter ★★★½.

— Richard Bollinger, Jean Stull



K. RAFFERTY