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Scoping Out the Shorebirds of Summer

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Brant

Scoping Out the Shorebirds of Summer

by Milan Bull



Fancy feet: a Snowy Egret hamming for the camera

51.3 million Americans report that they watch birds. Will you join in the fun?



Above: shorebirds include Black-bellied Plover (left and top) and Short-billed Dowitcher (lower right).

All photos courtesy of Connecticut Audubon Society/M. Bull

It was Saturday, April 14, 1984 and standing room only on the small beach in West Haven where the Oyster River dumps into Long Island Sound. It looked like the paparazzi had gathered for a glimpse of some alien invasion. A hundred or more spotting scopes, tripods, and camera lenses the size of howitzers rimmed the shoreline. Just offshore, a sandbar was slowly becoming exposed as the tide ebbed. The crowd murmured as a large flock of small gulls came in off the Sound, whirled and settled on the bar. They had been returning to this sandbar for the past few days. Scopes focused and a silence fell across the crowd.

Finally, the tall guy with the pork-pie hat and green Wellies shouted “Got it!” as he peered down his long-range cannon. A wave of emotion swept through the crowd while they ranged their scopes to pinpoint a small gull barely discernable from the several hundred other small gulls now hunkered down on the bar. For a few moments the birders buzzed quietly then a rising cheer drowned out the traffic noise on the beach road. Cameras clicked like Morse code up and down the beach, hands clapped shoulders, and hugs and high-fives were everywhere. A small group of

birders who had flown in that morning from Ohio just to see this bird ran across the street to the liquor store and cracked a bottle of bubbly.

Shortly, the big crowd became exponentially bigger as the word spread and more birders packed in. Traffic was nearly at a standstill as onlookers couldn’t figure out what all the commotion was about. “It’s a Ross’s Gull!” birders shouted to questions by passing motorists who shook their heads and kept going.

It’s not everyday, of course, that a bird from Siberia checks out

Why do so many people enjoy birding? Probably because birds draw us into nature like no other organism can.

—Milan Bull

a beach in Long Island Sound, but birds have wings and you never know what may show up. Rarities are just the icing on a cake that is enjoyed by thousands of people across the state. Every season brings its own flavors, as migration ebbs and flows as surely as tidal rhythms, one reason why birding is the fastest-growing outdoor activity in America. According to a survey by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 51.3 million Americans report that they watch birds and more are taking it up all the time.

Why do so many people enjoy birding? Probably because birds draw us into nature as no other



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A Ring-billed Gull.

organism can. They are not only beautiful and wild, but they are visible, diverse, and abundant. They animate our lives, providing us with music and color. Birding is an activity that is easily shared with friends and family virtually anywhere you live or travel. Really all you need is a simple pair of binoculars and a field guide to get started. You can ramp up later as you become addicted. Go on your own or join one of the many groups out there virtually every weekend. Most of us are simply nature lovers who like to get out and see different birds. In fact, amateur birders have contributed most of what we know about birds.

No other science utilizes “citizen-scientists” as much as ornithology. From Mabel Osgood Wright, the author of *Citizen Bird* and the founder of the Connecticut Audubon Society, to Rachel Carson and her pesticide alarm cry, *Silent Spring*, everyday birders have amassed a wealth of knowledge about our birds and their habitats just by being out there and recording what they see.

One of the things we have discovered is that birds are key indicators of environmental health.

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Red-breasted Mergansers

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A trio of Lesser Scaup

Like the canary in the coal mine, when our environment degrades, the abundance and diversity of birds quickly decline.

There is no better place to bird in Connecticut than along the coast. With over 125 miles of shoreline from Stonington to Greenwich, the beaches, bluffs, marshes and estuaries offer an endless supply of spectacular offerings in all shapes and sizes. Shoreline bird diversity alone can boggle your mind. From a variety of colorful ducks and the tall, stately herons and egrets to the seemingly consistent gulls, we've got it all bird-wise.

The best part is that the closer you look, the more you see. Mute Swans at twenty feet are hard to miss, but have you ever seen a clapper rail skulking through marsh grasses at sunrise? A shadow among shadows. Most people haven't, but timing and patience has its rewards, and don't let anyone tell you that luck has nothing to do with it. Indeed, our shoreline is a great place to pique your birding interest which will, undoubtedly, soon become an obsession.

Coastal birds, for the most part, are big, distinctive, and hard to hide. Concentrate on the close ones at first. Don't worry about the impulse to identify every last thing that swims, walks and flies; there are many more that will jump right off the page in your field guide.

Keep in mind that although August is mid-summer for us, it is the heart of the fall migration for the many species of shorebirds that breed in the Arctic and pass through Connecticut on their way south. Tens of thousands of sandpipers, plovers

and other water birds are streaming down our shoreline and piling up on our sandbars and mudflats from mid-July through September. It is a spectacular sight and a great time to get out to witness the rhythm of nature.

Although there are hundreds of great birding locations along our diverse shoreline (and enthusiasts are finding new ones every day), several are outstanding "hot spots". Just look at the number of people carrying binoculars and spotting scopes.

Here are some of the best coastal birding sites, east to west, across the state to get you started. You will decide which ones are your favorites and discover new ones as you poke around.

Bluff Point Coastal Reserve, Groton

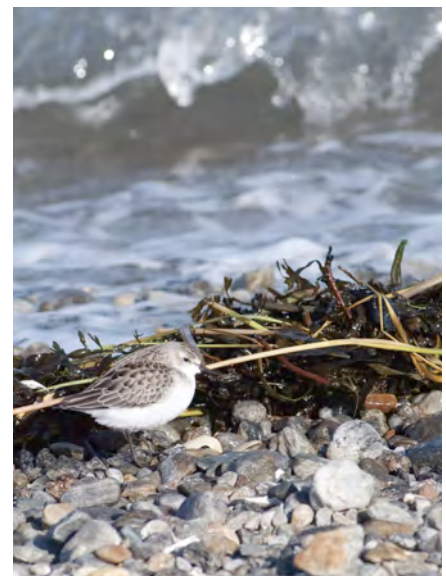
By far the best coastal birding location in eastern Connecticut, Bluff Point is easily accessible off Exit 88 on I-95. There are over 800 acres here representing one of the largest remaining open spaces along our coastline. The East Loop Trail will take you out to Mumford Cove, Bushy Point Beach and back along the banks of the Pequonnock River. What a great spot for an amazing variety of coastal birds. You should get great views of egrets, herons, ducks, cormorants and plenty of other shorebirds in the

late summer/early fall. Much more information about this reserve is available at:

<http://www.ct.gov/dep/cwp/view.asp?A=2716&Q=325178>

Hammonasset Beach State Park, Madison

Right off of Exit 63 on I-95, this park is not only the State's largest shoreline park, but also the most popular with campsites, concessions, boardwalk, restrooms and showers. It draws over a million visitors each year, and a lot of them arrive on summer weekends (good to keep in mind). Birders head directly to the East Beach section, stopping at the small pond at the circle where close views of ducks, herons and other water birds are often available. Summer visitors should find Great Egret, Snowy Egret and a host of ducks and Double-crested Cormorants in residence here. Then continue to the Meig's Point area and check at the Nature Center for recent bird reports. "Hammo" is probably best known for its dazzling display of herons



Semipalmated Sandpiper

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and egrets. Glossy Ibis are commonly seen in the marshes at Meig's Point. Check out the viewing platform on the Point itself for gulls, terns and sometimes loons. More information is available at this web site:

<http://www.ct.gov/dep/cwp/view.asp?a=2716&q=325210>

Sandy Point, West Haven

This mile-long sandy peninsula extends into the mouth of New Haven Harbor from West Haven. A well-known and protected bird sanctuary, this site historically has been the major breeding ground for beach-nesting birds such as the federally threatened piping plover and the state-listed Least Tern. One of the most productive and popular birding sites in the state, it is listed by the Long Island Sound Study as a Long Island Sound Stewardship Area. Visitors may find much of the area closed during the nesting season from mid-April until mid-August; however, the shoreline below the high tide line is always accessible and is frequented by fishermen and beach walkers. A great spot for sandpipers and other shorebirds, Sandy Point is also a magnet for other water birds such as gulls, terns, herons, egrets and



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American Oystercatcher

waterfowl. An on-site parking lot charge for non-residents is in effect during the summer season. Contact the City of West Haven Beaches and Shoreline for more information: <http://www.cityofwesthaven.com/foundations/store/storepage.asp?page=tourism&category=35>

Connecticut Audubon Society Coastal Center at Milford Point, Milford

The Coastal Center is located on an 8.4-acre barrier beach and is situated next to the 840-acre Charles E. Wheeler Salt Marsh and Wildlife management Area at the mouth of the Housatonic River. This Center is one of the best spots on the East Coast for birding: over 315 species, including many rarities, have been seen here. Virtually all of Connecticut's coastal waterbirds have been seen here and the Center provides easy access to Long Island Sound and its many habitats: salt marshes, barrier beaches, tide pools and coastal dunes. An observation tower at the Center provides a bird's-eye view of the entire ecosystem, and elevated platforms on the marsh and beach offer great views

of these habits. Inside the Center, large viewing windows with spotting scopes look right out on the salt marsh. A monitor and camera provide an up close and personal view of the Ospreys rearing their young on the nesting platform in the marsh. Expect almost anything here at anytime, but wading birds, waterfowl, shorebirds, gulls and terns are everyday staples in season. Parking is free and the Center is open free of charge.

Check here for more information: <http://www.ctaudubon.org/visit/milford.htm>

Stewart B. McKinney National Wildlife Refuge, Great Meadows Unit, Stratford

This large National Wildlife Refuge abounds with coastal marshes and wetlands. It is located on Long Beach Boulevard which is off Lordship Boulevard, Exit 30 on I-95. This site, along with Milford Point, is listed as an Important Bird Area by the National Audubon Society. Walk the trail along the abandoned railroad tracks through the marsh restoration projects. Interpretive signs will highlight areas to look for waterfowl and marsh birds. This is also the right spot to see migrant shorebirds such as Semi-palmated Plovers, Black-bellied Plovers, Greater Yellowlegs and a host of other water birds. This is a great place to see Saltmarsh and Seaside Sparrows. The state-Endangered Northern Harrier is often seen here, cruising low over the grasses in search of rodents and other prey. Expect to see lots of land birds here as well. The state's only colony of Boat-tailed Grackles nests here every year. A short drive



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Sanderlings

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Least Tern



Yellow-crowned Night Heron



Piping Plover

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to the east will take you past the airport to Oak Bluff Rd. and Stratford's Long Beach West, a mile-long barrier beach that abounds with gulls, terns and shorebirds. Federally-Threatened Piping Plovers nest above the tide line, sometimes among state listed Least Terns. Visitors should take care to walk below the high tide line during the summer nesting season here. More information on the Refuge can be found at: <http://www.fws.gov/refuges/profiles/index.cfm?id=53546>

Sherwood Island State Park, Westport

A few miles farther west along the coast is Sherwood Island, a coastal park with a lot to offer bird-wise. Off of Exit 18 on I-95, this 234-acre shoreline park is a very popular birding location. Not only are there beaches, marshes and tidal creeks, but there are also woodlands and meadows. A large tidal pond is a great place to look for ducks, herons and shorebirds. A great spot to see some of Connecticut's most threatened birds, over 45 birds listed by Connecticut's DEP as Endangered, Threatened or Special Concern occur here. This is an excellent place to look for American Oystercatchers,

Ospreys, and foraging Great Egrets, Snowy Egrets and Black-crowned Night-Herons which nest on nearby Cockenoe Island. The main pavilion has a promenade roof that offers spectacular views of Long Island Sound, a good place to scan for loons, grebes and gulls. A new Nature Center welcomes visitors with a wide range of exhibits featuring many of the birds which can be seen here. Check here for more information: http://www.ct.gov/dep/cwp/view.asp?a=2716&q=325260&dep-Nav_GID=1650#directions

Cove Island Park, Stamford

Farther west at Exit 9 off I-95 birders find Cove Island Park in Stamford one of the best coastal birding sites in the Western Sound. There are two beaches, a salt marsh and extensive intertidal mud flats. The Holly Pond and Cove River embayments here offer great opportunities to observe water birds such as Double-crested Cormorants, Common Terns, and Ospreys. A variety of ducks, sandpipers and gulls are commonly seen from a paved, 1-mile loop recreation trail. This is an easy place to bird and boasts lots of species. Cove Island Park is also

listed by the National Audubon Society as an Important Bird area. A fee is charged for parking at this Town-owned site. There is a Nature Center here as well as seasonal bathroom facilities. More information and directions can be found at this site: <http://www.lisrc.uconn.edu/coastalaccess/site.asp?siteid=571>

There is a full summer's worth of coastal birding locations in Connecticut to set your sights on, and the summer months are just a primer for the fall and winter. All these sites are easy to find and highlight some of the best scenic locations along our coastline. Many offer maintained trails, boardwalks, and interpretive signs to help guide visitors. We live in a beautiful state so get out there and enjoy it.

By the way, if you happen to spot a Ross's Gull, be sure to call!

About the Author

Milan Bull is senior director of science and conservation for the Connecticut Audubon Society. He has been an avid birder for many years.