

A Birder's Guide to the Parker River NWR and Sandy Point SR on Plum Island

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Introduction

Plum Island is located in Essex County, Mass., near the northeastern corner of the state. The island is nine miles long, oriented north to south and divided fairly equally among Newburyport, Newbury, Rowley, and Ipswich. The northern three miles are residential, and the southern six miles are national wildlife refuge and state reservation land. The east side of the island is a barrier beach facing the ocean, and the west side borders an extensive salt marsh known as the Great Marsh. The island is wide enough to hold a variety of habitats that include sandy beach, dune, low scrub, maritime forest, grassy fields, salt marsh, fresh water swamps and fresh water impoundments.

Plum Island is a popular birding destination. It is an excellent location to visit for waterfowl, loons, grebes, bitterns, herons, raptors, rails, shorebirds, gulls, terns, owls, cuckoos and passerines. Every season brings its own set of specialties, including neotropical migrants in spring; waterfowl, raptors and shorebirds in fall; and an exciting set of goodies in winter. If you are interested in only one specific group of birds you may be able to find a better spot in Massachusetts to see them, but if you are interested in finding the widest variety of birds from the widest variety of groups and on any day of the year there is no better spot to visit in the state than Plum Island.

The destination for most birders coming to the island is the southern portion. Most of this area is part of the Parker River National Wildlife Refuge (PRNWR); the southern tip of the island is the Sandy Point State Reservation (SPSR). The important distinction affecting birders between the federal and state areas is that the federal beaches are closed during the beach nesting season (April through July or August) while the state beaches are not. This guide covers the PRNWR and SPSR; it does not cover the northern portion of the island, nor does it cover the parts of the PRNWR that are not on Plum Island.

Getting There

To reach the PRNWR and SPSR take the Plum Island Turnpike east from Newburyport. The turnpike passes a small airport and crosses the Wilkinson Bridge over the Plum Island River, a tidal estuary, to the island. Take the first right on the island, Sunset Drive, and drive a half mile south to the refuge entrance gatehouse. The PRNWR is a fee area. Most local birders buy an annual pass for the refuge, either the federal duck stamp for \$15.00 or the PRNWR entrance pass for \$20.00. The duck stamp covers a year from July 1st to the following June 30th and provides access to other national fee areas; the PRNWR pass is good for one year from the date of purchase and provides access only to the PRNWR. The one-time drive-on fee is \$5.00. While at the gatehouse ask for a copy of the refuge bird list; it gives the status of each species by season and includes a map of the refuge.

To avoid disappointment plan to be on the refuge before the fair weather beach goers arrive. This advice is especially important on summer days, and on any warm, sunny

weekends in spring or fall. The refuge parking lots fill rapidly on these days. On some days if you do not arrive by 11:00 am or even earlier you may find the refuge closed to autos or the only parking left on the island may be at lot one.

This guide is written as if you will bird from the refuge entrance to Sandy Point, north to south, stopping along the way. This is a natural way to cover the island. Depending on time of day, location of the sun or state of the tides or winds, you may want to modify your itinerary. Birding along the road can be easier from the south to north because of lighting conditions. The problem for most birders, however, is that no matter how intent we are on getting to the south end, we will likely be waylaid for at least an hour or three along the way as things come up!

Lot One Area

After entering the refuge and passing the gatehouse pull into parking lot one immediately on your east. There is a visitor center here with the only flush toilets and drinkable water on the refuge. The center is only open during the busy summer season however. There are rustic outhouses open year round at a number of parking areas down the island.

There is an active martin colony at lot one maintained by refuge volunteers. Lot one is an excellent location to watch the spring raptor and songbird migrations. When the weather fronts cooperate there can be a steady flow of birds passing by sometimes directly overhead. This is a popular spring hawk watching site well known for the numbers of American kestrels that pass by.

From the lot walk the boardwalk to the beach and ocean overlook. The beach is closed south of this point during the breeding season. Scan the beach for piping plovers and least terns, the two endangered species that nest on the barrier beaches. Check the ocean for seabirds and the beach for other shorebirds and gulls. The birds present vary during the year, and by tide and weather, but it is rare you won't find something interesting. Depending on season you will find scoters, loons, grebes, shorebirds, gulls, terns, larks, savannah sparrows (including Ipswich sparrows), snow buntings and Lapland longspurs. Specially sought after birds include Wilson's storm-petrels, gannets, black-legged kittiwakes and razorbills.

As you walk back to the lot, just after leaving the overlook, you have a good view of the salt marsh west of the island. This is a great spot to scan the marsh and sky. There are pans visible to the west that are otherwise hidden. These pans often hold numbers of waterfowl, herons and shorebirds.

Return to the lot, cross the road and walk the dirt track to the boat ramp on the Plum Island River. Check the marsh grasses on both sides of the estuary. Clapper rails, willets, marsh wrens, saltmarsh sharp-tailed and seaside sparrows all breed in this area. At low tide mudflats are exposed along the sides and in the middle of the estuary. Check them for shorebirds, herons, bitterns, rails or whatever else may be there.

Return to the main road and walk south a ways. You pass small dunes on the west side of

the road, and the road makes a close approach to the Plum Island River. The small dunes and scrubby habitat on the east side of the road are passerine migrant traps. A little pishing might pop up almost anything in the way of flycatchers, vireos, warblers, sparrows and other songbirds. Check the estuary for the same birds found at the boat ramp. This is a good spot to hear saltmarsh sharp-tailed and seaside sparrows singing close by.

Lot Two, the Pans and Lot Three

Driving south from lot one you soon reach parking lot two, a small lot on the east side of the road with a boardwalk that crosses scrub and dune habitat to the beach and ocean. The boardwalk and lot are closed during the nesting season. The first section of boardwalk climbs steeply to cross a vegetated dune. From the high point there is an expansive view back over the Great Marsh. You can see into distant pans and estuaries, and you can often find raptors perched on the many staddles and other high points on the marsh. In winter this is a good spot to look for rough-legged hawks and snowy and short-eared owls and other raptors. During spring and fall this boardwalk is a good spot to watch the phenomenon of migration; during the right conditions a steady stream of small flocks of passerines may pass by almost within touching distance. The island is narrow at this spot and you have an almost uninterrupted view of the birds passing by.

Continue your drive south. The scrubby habitat on the east may hold a variety of passerines and the marshes on the west may hold waterfowl, raptors, shorebirds, or others. Be prepared to pull over (advice that can be taken at any point along the refuge road) if something interesting comes up. One species to be aware of through here is Wilson's phalarope. The Great Marsh is the eastern breeding outpost for this species, and one to a few individuals are often seen in the puddles and pans in this area.

You soon reach the first and largest of the salt pans (the spelling is *pan* not *panne*) that border the refuge road. There is almost always good reasons to stop and check the pans and surrounding marsh. The pans can hold large flocks of waterfowl or shorebirds, herons and egrets, gulls and terns, and scanning the marshes around the pans may reveal raptors sitting on staddles or soaring in the air or busy sharp-tailed sparrows flitting back and forth. The scrubby habitat on the opposite side of the pans is sometimes alive with passerines.

South of the large pan are a series of smaller pans, one just opposite the lot three parking area. Park here to scan more of the pans and the salt marsh. There is a boardwalk at lot three that passes a kettle hole just to its north and then crosses rolling dunes to the beach. The beach provides another excellent vantage point to scan for seabirds.

S-Curves, Sub-Headquarters, and North Field

South of lot three you enter an area locally known as the S-curves where the road winds back and forth through scrubby dunes, dense thickets and maritime forest. This stretch of road is an excellent spot for migrant passerines; you may be rewarded by wandering the road on foot. The S-curves can be filled with woodpeckers, flycatchers, vireos, kinglets, thrushes, mimids, warblers and sparrows. Late fall warblers such as orange-crowned warblers and yellow-breasted chats show up along the S-curves with some regularity.

At the south end of the S-curves is the sub-headquarters area, known locally as the Warden's (in pre-refuge times the wardens for the Annie H. Brown sanctuary lived in a cabin here). Park in the sub-headquarters lot and check the thickets around the lot and the field and pond south of the buildings. The field hosts a number of birds over the course of a year, including glossy ibises, American golden-plovers, whimbrels, Wilson's snipes and eastern meadowlarks. The small pond and melt-water pools in the field often hold waterfowl and shorebirds. You can wander north through the S-curves from this spot.

Explore the sub-headquarters area itself by walking between the buildings to the grove of trees that borders the salt marsh. The bare ground around the buildings attracts open field birds such as larks, pipits, Savannah sparrows, Lapland longspurs and snow buntings. The grove is known for the migrants that occur here. In fall the area is one of the better spots on the refuge to check for vesper and clay-colored sparrows. The body of water to the west is Plum Island Sound, and this is a good spot to scan the sound. In winter you will find common goldeneye and bufflehead in the sound in good numbers as well as other water birds that often include loons, cormorants and noisy flocks of long-tailed ducks. At low tide extensive mudflats are exposed and during shorebird migration the flats can hold large numbers of shorebirds including black-bellied plover, yellowlegs, dunlin and peeps.

Starting at the sub-headquarters a man-made dike extends two miles south down the island, separating the salt marsh to the west, from fields, forests and fresh-water impoundments to the east. You encounter the dikes a number of times as you travel down the island.

Continue south from the sub-headquarters, passing the small field on the west and more of the maritime forest on the east. After a short distance you pass a gated dirt road on the east. This leads to a bird banding station run by Mass Audubon's Joppa Flats Center. The area is closed to the public, but you can sign up for programs run by the center that visit the station while banding is in progress.

You shortly come to a small parking lot on the west. This is the North Pool overlook, and the lot is on part of the impoundment dike system; this spot is always worth a look. The body of water to the south is North Pool, the first of three fresh water impoundments on the refuge. The overlook is the best spot to check the north end of the pool and the wide expanse of North Field to the south. The granite markers in the middle of North Field and on the dike mark the boundary between Newbury and Rowley, so you will hear this field referred to by locals as the boundary field or the town marker field. Check the open water of North Pool and its edges for waterfowl, herons, rails and shorebirds. Ring-necked duck, pied-billed grebe, least and American bittern, Virginia rail, sora, moorhen, coot, whimbrel, solitary and pectoral sandpiper, snipe and meadowlark are among the more unusual and sought after species that appear here enough times to make overlook visits anticipated events. North Field is a winter roosting site for northern harriers, and in recent years this field has been the only breeding location for harriers in Essex County. If North Field has any one special bird that bird is the bobolink. During breeding season the field abounds with these busy, vocal birds.

Continue your trip down the island; for the next little while you will be passing North Field on your west and forested areas to the east. North Field often has flooded and meadow-like areas during spring and early summer; these may contain nice surprises. Look especially for wood duck, blue- and green-winged teal, northern shoveler, pied-billed grebe, glossy ibis and snipe, and listen for sora and Virginia rail. Take careful looks at the “tree islands” scattered down the field. These are migrant traps and often used as perching areas for falcons, other raptors, and northern shrikes. Don't ignore the areas along the east side of the road. The habitat here has groves of evergreens, nice thickets and open areas. It can be productive to walk the road through here; during migration you may encounter active pockets of warblers and other passerines.

Hellcat Nature Area

Continue south and turn into the large parking lot at the Hellcat Nature Area. This is one of the most heavily birded areas on the island and for good reason. Hellcat provides access to two of the island's fresh water impoundments and to the dense maritime forest that grows here at the widest part of the island. Trails leading from the parking lot traverse a variety of habitats that can be alive with birds at times. There are many birding possibilities at Hellcat, so let's start down the list.

The parking lot itself and area around the outhouses is the first spot to check. The birding can be excellent here; the Hellcat outhouses have been described as the most ornithologically active johns in Massachusetts. Sometimes you may return to the lot after exploring the rest of the area and wonder why you ever left!

Walk past the outhouses and up onto the dike that separates North Pool to the north and Bill Forward Pool to the south. Carefully scan the two pools. Forward Pool can be especially good for waterfowl, shorebirds, and herons. The common puddle ducks show up regularly on this pool, and many diving ducks (e.g., scaup, ring-necked duck, hooded merganser, ruddy duck) put in appearances. This pool is one of the better spots for finding tricolored heron. The refuge lowers the water level of Forward Pool in late summer to provide foraging and roosting areas for migrating shorebirds. During high tides many hundreds of shorebirds can be found roosting at the pool as they await the low tides that expose the mudflats where they like to feed. The regular shorebird species include black-bellied and semipalmated plover, spotted sandpiper, yellowlegs, willet, the commoner peeps (least, white-rumped and semipalmated), dunlin, red knot, ruddy turnstone, both dowitchers, stilt sandpiper, and the occasional American golden-plover, Baird's sandpiper and Hudsonian godwit.

North Pool is a combination of open water and reed and cattail marsh that serves as a puddle duck factory during the breeding season, and when the water levels are left high during spring and summer, also serves as a breeding area for elusive marsh birds. Significant numbers of gadwall and mallard nest in North Pool, as do small numbers of black duck. Wood duck, both species of teal and northern shoveler are seen frequently enough in the pool during summer to suspect these species sometimes breed. In recent years North Pool has supported healthy populations of sora and Virginia rail, and one or more pairs of pied-billed grebe, least and American bitterns, king rail, common moorhen

and possibly coot. These marsh birds are notoriously hard to see, but they call on occasion and patient scanning of the reed edges will sometimes reveal any of these species. North Pool as viewed from the Hellcat dikes is one of the best spots in Massachusetts to hear and sometimes glimpse these elusive birds.

There is an observation tower on the Hellcat dike; it provides a great view of both pools and the salt marsh and Plum Island Sound to the west.

A network of boardwalk trails begins at the Hellcat lot. The trails traverse maritime forest with other habitats here and there. The trails are renowned for neotropical migrants between late April through early June, peaking in the second half of May. During this period you are likely to encounter exciting pockets of migrants. You may encounter mixed flocks of flycatchers (least, willow, alder, yellow-bellied, great crested, phoebes, olive-sided, pewees), vireos (blue-headed, warbling, red-eyed, Philadelphia), thrushes (hermit, veery, Swainson's, gray-cheeked/Bicknell's, wood), wood warblers (far too many to list), scarlet tanagers, orioles (Baltimore, orchard), finches (purple, gold, rose-breasted grosbeaks), woodpeckers (downy, flicker, sapsucker) and cuckoos (black- and yellow-billed). You may also stumble across American woodcocks feeding beside the boardwalks, and you may hear Virginia rails and soras calling from North Pool. Fall migration is more drawn out and less frenetic and lasts from August through October.

The network is divided into the Marsh and Dune Loops. After you leave the Hellcat lot following the boardwalk you soon come to an intersection with a boardwalk heading to the left down some steps. A sign identifies this as the Marsh Loop. Let's go that way first. The main Marsh Loop boardwalk follows fairly closely to the eastern edge of North Pool and ends at an open area with a wide view of the North Pool marshes (you may hear this spot called the "old blind" because there used to be an observation blind here). As you walk the main boardwalk you pass two intersections to a separate loop that travels out through a part of the marsh itself. We'll cover that below. This part of the trail is especially good for flycatchers and warblers. The open area at the end is an excellent spot to listen for the elusive marsh birds in the North Pool marshes. All these birds, including bitterns and rails, are heard and sometimes seen here. From this spot in fall you can witness incredible fall flocks of tree swallows, easily numbering in the hundreds of thousands, that roost for the night within the relative safety of the North Pool reeds. Black-crowned night-herons roost in some of the trees out near the open area.

As you return along the main marsh trail, turn onto the marsh boardwalk when you reach the intersection near the bottom of some steps; the marsh boardwalk later rejoins the main boardwalk. This boardwalk is the loop part of the Marsh Loop as it wanders well out into the North Pool marshes, passing through dense marsh vegetation. This boardwalk is the best place on the island to come face-to-face with marsh wrens, swamp sparrows, red-winged blackbirds and if you're lucky, a bittern or rail. Depending on the changing water levels, there can be spots along this boardwalk where you can sit quietly and sometimes have the exquisite pleasure of watching a sora walk past your dangling feet, or seeing a northern waterthrush foraging around the bases of reed stalks. The common bird of this loop is the marsh wren and you may become enchanted by their constant gurgling and the

activities that they take so seriously. When you come to the end of the loop turn right and continue back toward the parking lot.

When you get back to the top of the steps where you first turned onto the Marsh Loop, turn left onto the Dune Loop trail. This boardwalk passes through thickets and a low, wet swale and then comes to the Goodno Woods just before it crosses the refuge road. This section of the trail can be excellent during spring migration for thrushes, warblers and other migrants. During fall migration this is an excellent place to search for Connecticut warblers. The Goodno Woods often ring with the songs of northern waterthrushes. The tall mature trees at the Goodno Woods often hold a wide assortment vireos and warblers. Look for Blackburnian, bay-breasted, Cape May and Tennessee warblers high in the canopy and up to twenty or so other warbler species lower down. Once you come to the road, and before you continue on to the Dune Loop on the other side, it can be profitable to linger near the intersection or wander north a hundred yards or so. Flycatchers, vireos, many warblers, scarlet tanagers, finches and rose-breasted grosbeaks are often found along the road. After crossing the refuge road the boardwalk forks into a loop you can follow in either direction. If you take the left fork, the boardwalk first crosses a low swampy thicket and eventually ascends the coastal dunes until it reaches its highest elevation where there is an expansive and panoramic view in all directions. This is a beautiful spot to pause for a while and let the birds come to you. When you return to the road return to Hellcat by road rather than trail. There can be another whole set of birds along the road. Be sure to check the very tops of the tall trees around the Goodno road crossing, as this is one of the best spots to find olive-sided and great crested flycatchers on the island.

Forward Pool Blind, Pines Area and Lot Five

From the Hellcat lot resume your drive south. The road is dirt and gravel from this point on. You soon come to a small parking area on the west with a short trail to an observation blind overlooking Forward Pool. The trail passes through some of the best field sparrow habitat on the refuge, and the blind is located in a stand of mature pines that often holds interesting passerines. The blind is an excellent spot for scanning Forward Pool, especially in the morning when the sun is behind you. The blind is one of the best spots on the island for watching shorebirds. The best times are high tides during August to October.

Continue your drive down the island. You pass the entrance to the former Camp Seahaven on the east (no public access) and the scrubby field known as South Field on the west. As you pass by you move from Rowley into Ipswich. A little further south is the access road to the Pines Trail. Turn in here and park in the Pines Trail lot. You are now at the south end of the dike that started two miles north at the sub-headquarters. Before walking the trail scan the south end of Forward Pool and the southern, open portion of South Field, sometimes called the pines field. The south end of the pool is visited by many species of waterfowl during migration and is especially attractive to diving ducks. The field is a nesting area for savannah sparrows and bobolinks. During migration this field is a great spot to check for grassland shorebirds. An upland sandpiper or two is seen on the field during spring migration most years. Other shorebirds that show up during fall

are American golden-plovers, whimbrels, and Baird's and buff-breasted sandpipers.

The Pines Trail itself is a short loop that winds through salt-marsh edge habitat, a mature grove of pines, and nice thickets. The pine grove is the most refreshing and best-smelling spot on the island. The loop has a platform that overlooks a few pans and the salt marshes and Plum Island Sound to the south and west. The pans are good spots to look for roosting shorebirds in fall; black-bellied plovers are often found in the pans and nearby marshes. There is an active osprey nesting platform here. Depending on season, the pine grove and thickets along the loop host a wide assortment of birds. During migration the pines and thickets can be alive with vireos, thrushes, warblers, sparrows and others. The trail is a favored birding spot for local birders. When the Hellcat trails are crowded with birders and noisy families, the Pines Trail can be devoid of other humans but filled with birds. The secret is out.

As you continue south from the Pines Trail the refuge road passes through the same pine grove the trail passed through. You quickly come to parking lot five on the west. This lot has been closed for the past few years, but if you find it open you can park here for a beautiful walk to the ocean. The boardwalk first passes through more of the pine grove before opening out on dune habitat to the ocean.

South Marsh and Cross Farm Hill

Continue south. Beyond lot five you enter a long, straight stretch dominated by scrubby dune and thicket habitat to the east and salt marsh to the west. A scan of the salt marsh can turn up birds at any time of year. Check the staddles for raptors. Depending on season you may find northern harriers, rough-legged hawks, peregrine falcons and snowy and short-eared owls. The thickets on the east are worth attention. During breeding season brown thrashers can seem to be everywhere. The taller trees are used as perches by merlins and northern shrikes. As you continue south Pine Creek widens out to the west. At low tide this creek is a tidal mudflat; the small parking pulloffs are for local clambers. Pine Creek empties into Plum Island Sound. A scan of the creek and sound can turn up interesting ducks, herons, and raptors. During winter Pine Creek is a favored site for black ducks, buffleheads and gulls.

After the straight stretch along the salt marsh you come to a grassy hill on the west named Cross Farm Hill. Just north of the hill are pans that can hold large numbers of waterfowl, egrets and shorebirds. These pans and those on the south side of the hill are good spots to look for little blue herons in fall. The hill has breeding savannah sparrows and bobolinks and is a roosting and feeding area for Canada geese. Late in fall some snow geese may mix in. The hill is a hunting area for raptors such as harriers, rough-legged hawks and short-eared owls. With the dense thickets to the east this is good habitat for long-eared owls and they are sometimes seen here. The trees far out on the hill are used by raptors as sunning sites in winter. Check the tripod platform west of the hill, used by breeding ospreys in summer, and often by snowy owls and other raptors in winter. On the side of the road opposite the hill the thickets are dense from here to the end of the island. These thickets may hold migrant songbirds, and can support robins, mockingbirds, yellow-rumped warblers and tree sparrows in winter. These thickets are

hunting habitat for wintering northern shrikes.

Stage Island Pool

After crossing Cross Farm Hill the road twists and turns a short distance til it reaches parking lot six on the east side. The lot provides beach access by a boardwalk and access to Stage Island Pool, the third fresh water impoundment on the refuge. When the beach is closed most of the lot is closed, though a few spaces are kept open for pool visitors. The whole area is good for birding. To begin your exploration cross the road and walk the dike that separates the impoundment from the salt marshes. Check in all directions as you go along. The dike is a fine location for savannah sparrows. In fall the savannahs may be joined by a vesper sparrow or two and horned larks, Lapland longspurs and snow buntings. Saltmarsh sharp-tailed sparrows breed in the marshes to the north and west of the dike. American bitterns and large numbers of egrets are often found in this marsh. If you didn't do so from the road check the pans between the dike and Cross Farm Hill. These pans are good locations for ducks, herons and shorebirds when in season. The dike also provides a view of Plum Island Sound where you may find a number of waterfowl species including bufflehead, common goldeneye, common eider and long-tailed duck.

Stage Island Pool is the main attraction here. As you walk the dike be sure to scan the pool and its edges. The trail soon climbs a small rise where it ends at an open area that gives a view of the southern parts of the pool. Waterfowl use the pool throughout the year. Even when frozen in the depths of winter you may find a forlorn goose or black duck roosting on its surface. Puddle ducks can abound in the pool, and Stage Island Pool is a good spot to check for diving ducks during migration. Wood ducks are sometimes found along the edges of the pool half hidden among the reeds.

Stage Island Pool is best known for shorebirds during fall migration from mid July through October. The refuge lowers the water level in the pool to expose flats that appear out in the pool and around its edges. During high tides especially the flats and shallows can fill with hundreds or thousands of many species of plovers and sandpipers. Black-bellied, American golden and semipalmated plovers, both yellowlegs, five species of peep, dunlin, both dowitchers, stilt Sandpiper, spotted sandpiper, red knot, ruddy turnstone and buff-breasted sandpiper are among the species that regularly occur here. And there is always a chance of something more unusual such as an avocet, oystercatcher, little gull or Caspian tern. The grassy and scraggly margin to the south and west of the pool, visible from the overlook, is an area closely watched by birders during the second half of fall shorebird migration. This is where golden-plovers, Baird's sandpipers and buff-breasted sandpipers, three of the refuge's most sought after specialty birds, often put in first appearances. This margin often abounds with open country passerines such as larks, pipits, snow buntings and Lapland longspurs during late fall and early winter.

After you return to the road but before you continue down the island you may want to walk the boardwalk to the beach. The thickets along the boardwalk can be productive, and the beach and ocean are always worth a check. It is also a good idea to walk south along the road for a hundred yards or so, where you will get more and often close up

views of the birds using Stage Island Pool.

Lot Seven Area

Continuing down the island you soon reach parking lot seven, the last lot on the federal refuge. There is access here to an observation tower and a boardwalk that ends at an ocean overlook platform. They are always worth a visit. Though the beach and platform are closed during plover season, the tower is always open, and the refuge reserves a couple parking places for visitors. The tower ostensibly gives an overview of the southern part of Stage Island Pool, but it provides excellent views in all directions including out to sea. The tower is a great spot to loiter and wait for birds to appear. The more time spent here the more likely you will see or hear the specialty birds that make this area home. Willow flycatchers, marsh wrens and swamp sparrows are among the common breeders, and least bitterns, Virginia rails and soras use the reeds around the tower. These marsh species are difficult to see, but by lingering on the tower you increase your chances of hearing their calls or catching momentary glimpses as they move furtively from spot to spot. During spring migration the thickets at the base of the tower can be filled with cuckoos, flycatchers, warblers, and sparrows.

The beach overlook at lot seven is a favorite birding spot. Except at high tide more or less of Emerson Rocks are exposed to the northeast, and more or less of the Bar Head rocks are exposed to the southeast. This stop can yield good birds year round, with overwintering ducks, loons and grebes from fall to spring, migrant shorebirds and terns in the fall, and gulls year round. When the rocks are exposed a number of shorebird species roost and feed there, including black-bellied plover, dunlin, purple sandpiper, sanderling, red knot and ruddy turnstone. The beach often hosts scurrying piping and semipalmated plovers and peep. The waters around Emerson Rocks usually hold a number of sea birds such as brant, common eiders, scoters, long-tailed ducks, loons and grebes. Some of the most difficult birds to find on the island occasionally turn up here. Examples include harlequin duck, Barrow's goldeneye, red and red-necked phalaropes, little gull, roseate tern, arctic tern, black guillemot, murres, dovekie, and even Atlantic puffin. These are hard birds to find on the island, but the waters off lot seven, year after year, are where more of these unusual birds are sighted than any other. The more time you spend here the more likely it is that some new or unusual sighting will come your way. You might see a peregrine falcon make landfall after migrating offshore, a flock of scoters fly by far offshore that contains green-winged teal, or a small flock of brant fly by low to the water giving their gentle gronking calls. You may see northern gannets plunge diving far offshore or even catch sight of a Manx shearwater or parasitic jaeger in the distance.

Sandy Point

Resume your drive south and you shortly reach the first parking lot on Sandy Point State Reservation. You have left the federal refuge. There is a path from this lot to the ocean near the southern tip of the island at the Bar Head rocks. If you have already scanned the ocean and beaches from lot seven you won't see much new from here. If the federal beaches are closed, however, this path provides the best access point to scan Emerson and Bar Head Rocks and the southern most beaches exposed to the ocean. This is a great spot to begin a longer walk around Sandy Point, the southern tip of the island, and then up the

inner side.

Instead of stopping at the first SPSR lot you can continue through the gated track that heads southwest out of the first lot until you reach the second SPSR lot, the last parking lot on the island. The gate to the second lot is sometimes closed, but you can continue on by foot. The distance between the two lots is short and the walk can be quite birdy. The shrubs, thickets, trees and beach grasses around the second lot often hold interesting species during migration, including flycatchers, thrushes, warblers and sparrows. Island oddities show up regularly enough (e.g., lark sparrow, blue grosbeak, dickcissel) here to always warrant a careful look. From this lot there is a trail that goes part way up Bar Head (the high bluffs at the south end of the island), and a trail that goes north along the western edge of Stage Island Pool until it ends at a rocky beach bordering a closed section of the PRNWR. Though most birders eschew these two trails (wanting to get to the beach as quickly as possible), the trail along Stage Island Pool can be rewarding at any time and ends at a beautiful spot. The shrubs and thickets are open and low making birds easy to observe; and you get close up looks at Stage Island Pool.

The destination for most birders coming to Sandy Point is the inner beach, and the birds of most interest are shorebirds and open field passerines. There are two trails to the beach from the second lot and it matters little which you take. The best times to visit the beach are after storms in the spring, and almost anytime, especially around high tide, during fall. Because the beach is protected from the ocean it is called the Mothers' Beach by locals. And because it is protected it is a favorite roosting site for many of the shorebirds, gulls and terns that visit the island. During high tides in fall, you may find hundreds and even thousands of shorebirds roosting on the beaches. Watching hundreds of semipalmated plovers, peeps and other shorebirds arrive and assemble into large roosting flocks as the tides rise is one of the special Plum Island birding experiences.

The inner beach is used by piping plovers as a nesting area, and because the state does not close the beaches, you can often get excellent looks at the birds. The state puts exclusion cages over the nests and ropes off areas around them, so it is easy to get looks at the incubating parents, and it is a fun challenge to find the off duty parents. Later in the summer when the young have hatched, a visit to the beach may result in an intense cuteness attack as you watch tiny cottony fluff balls with legs dart around the beaches.

During and just after strong northeasterly storms and winds birds usually found only far offshore may be pushed into the sound or may be struggling just outside. Birding for storm-tossed seabirds and ocean migrants may be a somewhat advanced birding practice, but it can be lots of fun. Examples of wind-blown birds that have been seen recently at Sandy Point include red and red-necked phalaropes, Franklin's gull, arctic and royal terns, black skimmer and pomarine jaeger.