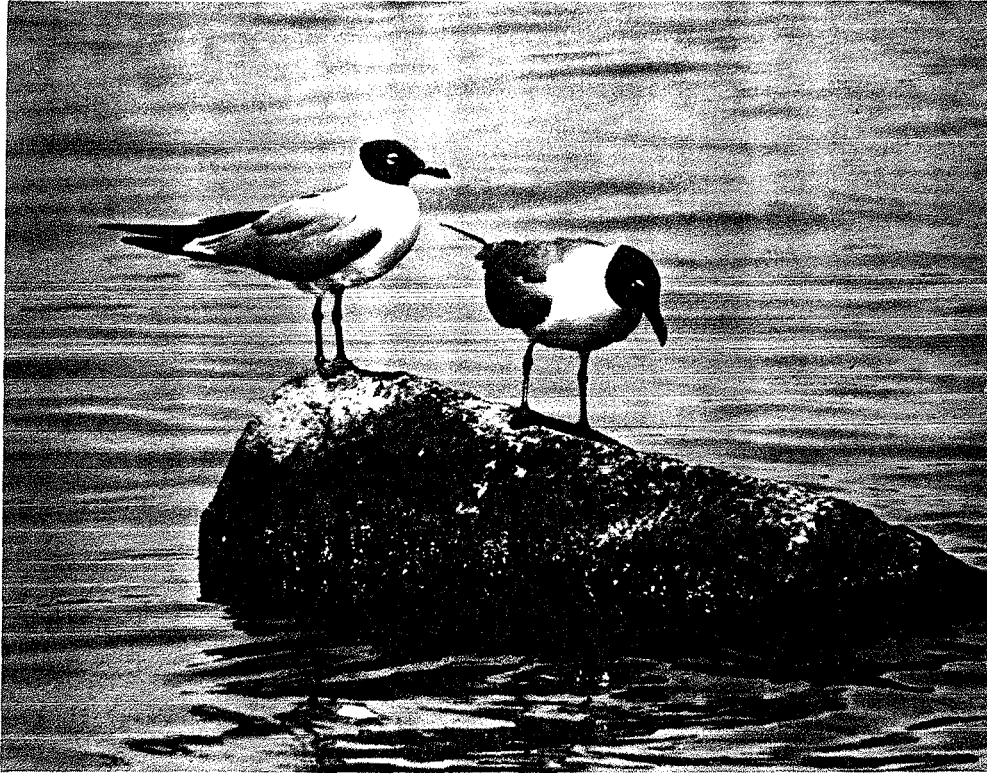


BIRD NOTES

Birding Mount Desert Island

Few other places in Maine can offer the birdfinder so many interesting possibilities.

ACADIA NATIONAL PARK
RESOURCE MANAGEMENT DIVISION



Photograph by Christopher Ayres

Laughing gulls are often seen in the vicinity of Bar Island Bar during the summer months.

— by Elizabeth C. Pierson —

For anyone interested in finding a wide variety of different bird species in Maine — let alone enjoying some spectacular scenery in the process — Mount Desert Island is hard to top. Of the nearly 400 species of birds ever recorded in the state, at least 320 have been seen on Mount Desert, and a number of these — including the lesser black-backed gull, chuck-will's-widow, Bewick's wren, lazuli bunting and LeConte's sparrow — were first Maine records. Other wanderers, like Swainson's hawk, golden eagle, purple gallinule, royal tern, ash-throated flycatcher, lark bunting and Harris' sparrow, have further embellished an already noteworthy list.

While catching a glimpse of a rare vagrant on Mount Desert is always

a possibility, the real attraction is provided by the regular migrants and the more than 144 nesting species. Birding is good the year-round, but particularly so from late May through September when the woods are alive with brightly colored warblers (21 species nest here) and the coastline teems with shorebirds.

Mount Desert's richly varied birdlife is due in no small part to the island's diverse topography and the different habitats it supports. A string of seventeen glacially scoured peaks ranging in size from 200 to 1530 feet stretch across the island. Somes Sound — a true fjord — bisects the island from north to south, with Blue Hill Bay lying to the west and Frenchman Bay to the east. Within this 16x13 mile area are a variety of habitat types representative of many different parts of the

entire state. In addition to the rocky shoreline, habitats include: sand beach, saltwater and freshwater marsh, heath, bog, swamp, lake and pond, meadow and field, and both mixed deciduous and spruce-fir woods. Botanically, the island is a contact zone for many northern and southern species, and this phenomenon is further reflected in the avifauna. In general, you will find birds with a northern affinity on the southwest side of Mount Desert and birds with a southern affinity on the northeast side. The abundance of southern species on the island has increased notably since a forest fire in 1947 burned about 17,000 acres and opened up a large new habitat.

There are so many good birding spots on Mount Desert that it's impossible to list them all here. What follows is just the *creme de la*

creme. Precise directions are not included for every stop, as most areas are clearly marked on park maps and roads. Directions are included if necessary. You can get a map of the island and bird lists at park headquarters.

Bar Island Bar

The Bar Island Bar is a good place to see shorebirds and gulls in late summer and fall. (It's also a good place to see lots of people, dogs, and motorbikes, but fortunately the birds don't seem too perturbed by the ruckus.) Follow Rt. 3 into Bar Harbor and pass the CN Marine ferry terminal. At the Western Street Extension turn left, following signs for the business district. In 0.3 miles turn left onto Bridge Street, and at low tide you'll see the bar directly ahead of you.

Bird the bar at low to mid-tide when it's exposed. The cobble-like substrate attracts primarily black-bellied plovers, ruddy turnstones (as many as 1,000 once), and semipalmated sandpipers. This is also a reliable place to see a few red knots. In summer look for Bonaparte's and laughing gulls and common terns and in winter for the rare little gull.

Sieur de Monts Spring

Sieur de Monts Spring is one of the best places on Mount Desert to see a wide variety of species, particularly on migration but also during the nesting season. Bird the clearing around the spring in early morning, and then walk to Great Meadow north of the spring. The predominantly deciduous woods here attract primarily birds of a southern affinity. Species you might see include American woodcock, black-billed cuckoo, great-crested flycatcher, eastern wood-pewee, eastern phoebe, alder and least flycatchers, wood thrush, veery, red-eyed vireo, black-and-white and black-throated green warblers, American redstart, ovenbird, scarlet tanager, rose-breasted grosbeak, and swamp sparrow.

Cadillac Mountain

At 1530 feet, windswept Cadillac Mountain offers the most commanding view on Mount Desert Island, and because of that, is of greatest interest to birders during the hawk migration. Visibility

extends in all directions for several miles, allowing you to see a good deal of the surrounding coast. As elsewhere along the Maine coast, accipiters and falcons are usually more common than buteos here.

Seawall Bog

Seawall Bog, or the Big Heath, is a large sphagnum bog on the north side of Rt. 102A. The highlights of the area are nesting yellow-bellied flycatchers, palm warblers (may be feeding young by mid-June), and Lincoln's sparrows. Along the edges of the bog look for nesting boreal chickadees, winter wrens, ruby-crowned kinglets, and Tennessee and Canada warblers.

Enter the bog across from the Wonderland parking lot, looking carefully for several small trails that lead into the brush. *Please* — bird the bog from the edge, and stay on the paths. *The plant life here is very fragile!*

Wonderland

Wonderland lies just across the road from the Big Heath, but it offers an entirely different habitat. A wide, open trail leads 0.6 miles through mixed deciduous and coniferous woods, across a dry and open area of lichen-covered ledges and pitch pine, and then enters a tall grove of spruces along the shore. Birding can be good — and quite varied — all along the trail. Like Ship Harbor just beyond it, Wonderland is one of the best places on the island to look for migrant and nesting warblers, including blackpolls.

Ship Harbor

Ship Harbor is one of the loveliest spots on Mount Desert and one of the best birding areas. At least eighteen species of warblers and several of the uncommon northern landbirds nest here. At the head of the harbor is a sunny and open clearing and beyond it a trail that leads 1.6 miles through the woods to the shore and back.

Look for migrant and nesting warblers (in 1936 a pair of Cape May warblers provided a first U.S. breeding record) at Ship Harbor and for northern specialties such as black-backed woodpecker, yellow-bellied and olive-sided flycatchers, gray jay, boreal chickadee, Swainson's thrush, ruby and golden-crowned kinglets, and red and white-winged crossbills.

Bass Harbor Head and Marsh

Bass Harbor Head, with its lovely spruce-fir woods, is another good place to look for migrant and nesting warblers (particularly bay-breasted) and north woods specialties. It's also a good spot to scan for waterfowl and seabirds. King eider and harlequin ducks are seen here occasionally in the winter. Scan from the lighthouse at any time of year, and during migration and in summer walk the half mile of road back to Rt. 102A to look for landbirds. Bass Harbor Marsh, north of the lighthouse and also on Rt. 102A, is a good place to see wading birds and nesting sharp-tailed sparrows. You can scan the marsh from the roadside.

Boat Trips

Several productive boat trips can be taken from Mount Desert Island. The most famous is the M.V. BLUE-NOSE, the Canadian ferry that plies the 200-mile round-trip between Bar Harbor and Yarmouth, Nova Scotia. This is one of the most famous pelagic trips on the East Coast and certainly is by far the best in Maine. Commonly seen species include northern fulmar, greater and sooty shearwaters, Leach's and Wilson's storm-petrels, northern gannet, common eider, northern and red phalaropes, great black-backed and herring gulls, common and Arctic terns, and black guillemots. Skuas, jaegers, and other alcids are good possibilities. The best time to go is usually mid-June through August. For information call the CN Marine reservation bureau's toll-free number: 1-800-432-7344.

Acadia National Park and private individuals offer a variety of short trips to offshore islands and information is available at park headquarters. Any of these trips provides a good opportunity to see common island nesters, and a few, such as trips to Mount Desert Rock (23 miles offshore), offer a good chance to see pelagic species.

This article is adapted from a chapter in *A Birder's Guide to the Coast of Maine* by Liz and Jan Pierson. (Down East Books, 1981)