



CAPE COD CERTIFIED

WILD CAPE COD

Birding Monomoy by the Tide: When to Hit the North Flats vs. the South Roost

A free field guide from the people who actually live here.



capecodcertified.com/guides/birding-monomoy-tide-north-flats-vs-south-roost

Most birders who botch a Monomoy trip didn't pick the wrong day — they picked the wrong tide. The standard Cape Cod guidebook tells you to “go early” and “bring a scope,” which is fine advice for a state park. Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge is not a state park. It is a moving target, and if you arrive at North Monomoy's flats during a flooding high tide, you will stare at half a mile of empty water and wonder where all the shorebirds went. They went south. Specifically, to the roost on South Monomoy, where they are now packed shoulder-to-shoulder waiting for the water to drop.

This guide tells you how to read the Chatham tide chart like a local, where to be at low tide versus high tide, and what it costs in 2026 to actually get out there.

Why Tide Trumps Time of Day at Monomoy

Monomoy is a barrier island system off Chatham — technically two islands now (North and South), though the breaks shift with every nor'easter. The refuge protects roughly 7,600 acres of saltwater, eelgrass, and shifting sand bars. None of it is bridged. You take a boat from Stage Harbor, Outermost Harbor, or Morris Island, and once you're out there, the birds are doing one of two things based on the tide:

1. **Feeding on exposed flats** at and around low tide
2. **Roosting in dense flocks** on high ground at and around high tide

The cycle runs roughly every six hours and shifts about 50 minutes later each day. A trip planned around a 7 a.m. departure means nothing if low tide is at 11:30 a.m. — you'll waste the first three hours staring at water-covered mud.

The shorebird migration peak runs late July through early September. Roseate terns — federally endangered — stage in Monomoy by the thousands in August before pushing south. Red knots, whimbrels, and semipalmated sandpipers all use the same windows. Get the tide right and you will see numbers that don't exist anywhere else in Massachusetts.

The North Flats: Low-Tide Feeding Theater

North Monomoy is the smaller, easier-to-reach island. At low tide, a vast network of mudflats and tidal pools opens up on its western and northern edges. This is where shorebirds eat — probing for marine worms, amphipods, and tiny clams in the exposed substrate.

What you'll actually see

In a strong year, an August low tide on the North Flats produces:

- **Semipalmated sandpipers** by the thousands (peak counts: 8,000–15,000)
- **Black-bellied plovers** in scattered groups of 50–200
- **Red knots** (federally threatened rufa subspecies) — small flocks of 20–80 birds
- **Whimbrels** — singles to small groups picking fiddler crabs
- **American oystercatchers** — resident breeders, easy to find
- **Roseate and common terns** working the channels
- **Marbled and Hudsonian godwits** — rare but nearly annual

Timing window

Be on the flats from **two hours before low tide to one hour after**. That’s your three-hour window. Earlier than that, the water hasn’t dropped enough to expose the prime feeding zones. Later than that, the tide is racing back in and the birds are already departing for the roost.

Look up Chatham (Aunt Lydia’s Cove) tides specifically — not Boston, not the Outer Cape. Chatham runs roughly 35–45 minutes behind Boston.

The South Roost: High-Tide Concentration

When the flats drown, the shorebirds have nowhere to feed. They concentrate on the highest dry sand on South Monomoy — typically the spit south of the old lighthouse complex, though exact locations move yearly with storm cuts. This is the roost.

A roost looks different from a feeding ground. The birds are not active. They are huddled, often sleeping on one leg, in tight monospecific clusters or mixed flocks of several thousand. You can sometimes approach within 80–100 yards on the open sand without flushing them — a discipline most visiting birders blow by walking too fast.

What you’ll see

- **Mixed shorebird roosts** of 5,000+ individuals in peak August
- **Roseate terns** staging — counts of 1,500–4,000 birds on a good evening
- **Common eider** rafts offshore (year-round)
- **Gray and harbor seals** hauled out (large numbers; see warning below)
- **Migrating raptors** — peregrines and merlins hunting the roost edges

Timing window

The roost forms approximately **two hours before high tide and disperses one hour after**. The best photography light coincides with afternoon high tides — check the chart for days when high tide falls between 4 p.m. and 7 p.m.

A Tide-Synced Game Plan

This is the matrix. Find your tide, then your spot.

Tide Phase	Time Relative to Low/High	Where to Be	What’s Happening
Falling (mid-tide)	–3 to –2 hrs before low	Boat over to North Monomoy	Flats just starting to expose
Low tide window	–2 hrs to +1 hr around low	North Flats, west and north edges	Peak shorebird feeding
Rising (mid-tide)	+1 to +3 hrs after low	Boat south toward Powder Hole / South Monomoy	Birds departing flats
High tide window	–2 hrs to +1 hr around high	South Monomoy roost spit	Densest concentrations, sleeping flocks
Falling (mid-tide)	+1 to +3 hrs after high	Return run or North Monomoy edges	Roost breaks up, birds redistribute

A full day’s birding is timed to hit one low and one high. That’s why serious guided trips run six to eight hours.

Getting There: Boat Operators and 2026 Pricing

You cannot walk to Monomoy. Even the “land bridge” to South Beach that occasionally opens up is unreliable and dangerous on a flood tide. Use one of these operators, all running out of Chatham or nearby:

Operator	Service Type	2026 Price (per person)	Departure Point
Rip Ryder (508-945-5450)	Shuttle to North Monomoy / South Beach	\$20–25 each way	Outermost Harbor Marine, Chatham
Monomoy Island Excursions	Naturalist-guided seal & bird tour (90 min)	\$55–65	Sea Street, Harwich Port
Outermost Harbor Marine	Self-charter or shuttle	\$25 each way	83 Seagull Rd, Chatham
Mass Audubon Wellfleet Bay	Full-day guided Monomoy birding	\$125–145	South Wellfleet sanctuary
Beachcomber (Chatham)	Seal-focused tour with birding	\$50 (90 min)	Stage Harbor

The **Mass Audubon all-day trip** is the only option that explicitly times your departure to the tide and lands you on South Monomoy with a guide. It books out in May for August dates — do not show up in late July expecting a seat.

If you’re DIY-ing it, take Rip Ryder over to North Monomoy at the right tide, walk the flats with a scope, and shuttle back. Confirm the return schedule before you land — the last boat is the last boat, and there is no overnighting on the refuge.

Gear and Field Conditions

Monomoy is a barrier island. Conditions are not forgiving.

- **Scope is mandatory.** Birds are often 200+ yards out on the flats. A 65mm minimum, 80mm preferred.
- **Knee-high rubber boots.** The flats are wet mud; sneakers will be ruined.
- **No shade, no shelter, no bathrooms** on either island. Pack accordingly.
- **Greenhead flies** peak mid-July to early August. Bring permethrin-treated clothing or you will lose your mind by hour two.
- **Sun exposure** — UV reflects off the sand and water. SPF 50, hat, long sleeves.
- **Tick check** when you get home. Lone star ticks are well established now.

Don’t-Miss Tips and Warnings

Tip — chase the late-afternoon high tide. If you can swing it, target a day in mid-August when high tide falls between 5 p.m. and 7 p.m. The South Roost in golden hour, with terns swirling and 5,000 sandpipers packed shoulder-to-shoulder, is one of the great wildlife spectacles in the Northeast. The photography light is best then and the greenheads have largely settled.

Warning — the sharks are not a meme. White sharks now patrol the seal haul-outs at Monomoy from June through October. The seals attract them, and the seals are everywhere. **Do not swim. Do not wade waist-deep. Stay back at least 50 yards from any hauled-out seal,** both for federal Marine Mammal Protection Act compliance and because a panicking seal entering the water draws predators. The refuge is closed to swimming. Chatham’s “no swimming in seal-occupied waters” advisory exists because people ignored it.

Warning — beach closures are dynamic. Piping plover and least tern nesting areas on both islands are roped off from April through August. Boundaries shift weekly. Honor the symbolic fencing — refuge staff and volunteer monitors do issue federal citations, and a \$250 fine is the floor, not the ceiling. Check the bulletin board at refuge headquarters (30 Wikis Way, Morris Island, Chatham) the morning of your trip.

Get the tide right, get the boat right, and Monomoy will produce a birding day you'll talk about for years. Get either one wrong and you'll wonder what the fuss was about.

◆ THINGS TO DO

Make a day of it

Bookable experiences that pair perfectly with this guide. Scan any code to reserve.

BOOK · FROM \$135

Porgy / Seabass / Blackfish Private 6 Pass Charter

Bounty Hunter Fisheries LLC · Yarmouth

A hand-picked Cape Cod experience to pair with this guide — book direct.



Scan to book

BOOK · FROM \$500/PERSON

Atlantic White Shark Conservancy — Shark Research Cruise

Atlantic White Shark Conservancy · Chatham

A hand-picked Cape Cod experience to pair with this guide — book direct.



Scan to book

BOOK · FROM \$135

Nantucket Shoals Fluke

Bounty Hunter Fisheries LLC · Yarmouth

A hand-picked Cape Cod experience to pair with this guide — book direct.



Scan to book



Headed to the Cape with friends? Share this guide.

Every share helps a real local business get found — and keeps Cape Cod guides free. Scan to send it along.

[Book a Nature Experience →](#)



Cape Cod Certified · capecodcertified.com/guides/birding-monomoy-tide-north-flats-vs-south-roost · Real guides, real local knowledge. Verify seasonal details before you go.



FOR CAPE COD BUSINESSES

This is what being Cape Cod Certified looks like.

You just read a guide that travelers and locals download, keep, and share. The businesses inside it were chosen on merit — real vetting, real local knowledge, never pay-to-play.

Own a Cape Cod business? Get Certified and earn your place in guides like this one — in front of the exact people planning their trip and their spend.



Get Certified → capecodcertified.com/join