

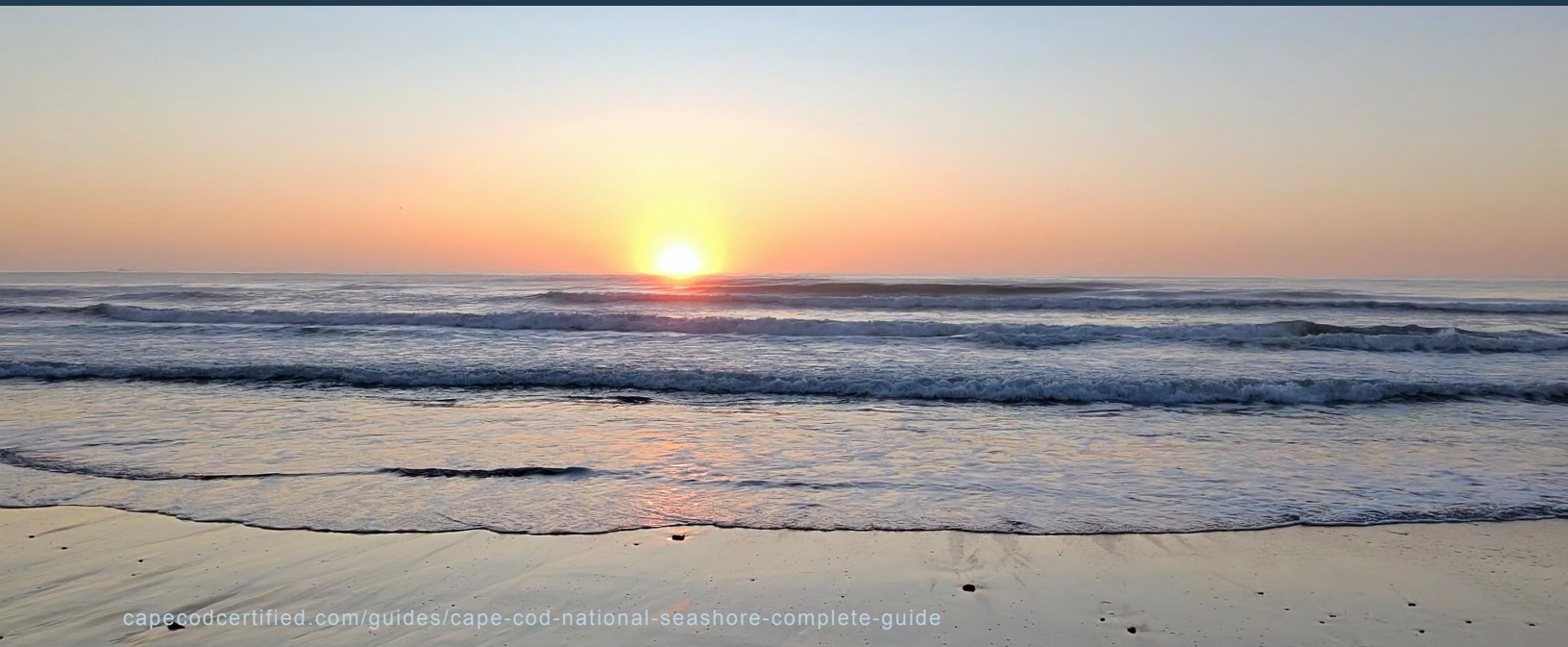


CAPE COD CERTIFIED

WILD CAPE COD

Cape Cod National Seashore: The Complete Visitor's Guide to 43,000 Acres of Protected Beach

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



capecodcertified.com/guides/cape-cod-national-seashore-complete-guide

Cape Cod National Seashore was established in 1961 under President John F. Kennedy — a son of the Cape himself — making it one of the earliest national seashores in the United States. The protected area covers 43,000+ acres of Atlantic beach, freshwater ponds, salt marsh, sand dune, and pitch pine forest stretching from Chatham north to the tip of Provincetown. Without that federal act, the Outer Cape would look like the Jersey Shore. With it, the most spectacular unbroken stretch of beach in New England is permanently beyond the reach of condominium developers.

Most visitors know the Seashore exists in the abstract. Far fewer know which beaches are Seashore beaches, how the pass system works, where to hike, or what the ranger protocols are when a Great White Shark is spotted from the drone offshore. This guide makes Cape Cod National Seashore legible.

The Six Lifeguarded Beaches: Your Main Swimming Options

Cape Cod National Seashore operates six lifeguarded beaches from approximately mid-June through Labor Day. [VERIFY lifeguard season dates for 2026.] Each has a distinct character worth understanding before you choose one.

Coast Guard Beach (Eastham) — East-facing Atlantic beach, widely considered the finest swimming beach on the Cape. Strong summer surf, wide sand, backed by bluffs. There is no beach parking lot here: all visitors must take the shuttle from the Doane Area or Salt Pond Visitor Center. [VERIFY 2026 shuttle schedule and frequency.] This is a feature, not a bug — it keeps crowds manageable. Shark monitoring is in effect July through November.

Nauset Light Beach (Eastham) — A short drive north of Coast Guard, also east-facing. The candy-striped Nauset Light stands at the bluff edge. A modest parking lot fills early on summer weekends. Similar surf character to Coast Guard Beach. The bluff above the beach is actively eroding — do not approach the edge.

Marconi Beach (Wellfleet) — Named for Guglielmo Marconi, who transmitted the first transatlantic wireless signal from this bluff in 1903. East-facing, with imposing clay bluffs and excellent surf. Often the best bet for mid-morning arrivals when Eastham lots are already full. The Atlantic White Cedar Swamp Trail begins a short walk from the parking area.

Head of the Meadow Beach (Truro) — The quietest of the Seashore's Atlantic beaches by feel, set in the transition between the Lower Cape and the Outer Cape. Two parking lots: one for bike trail access, one for the beach itself. Narrower strand than Marconi or Nauset, but meaningfully less crowded on the same August weekend.

Race Point Beach (Provincetown) — The northernmost Seashore beach, where the Cape hooks west and the dunes roll inland for miles. East-facing but with views north toward Stellwagen Bank, making this one of the best land-based whale-watching vantage points on the Cape in season. Also the primary over-sand vehicle (OSV) beach on the Outer Cape — permits available from the Race Point Ranger Station. Shark monitoring in effect on the Atlantic side.

Herring Cove Beach (Provincetown) — The only west-facing Seashore beach. Bay-side water, calm surface, no surf to speak of. Families with young children and anyone who wants a genuine Cape Cod Bay sunset should come here. [VERIFY current amenities and parking at Herring Cove for 2026.] Shark activity here is significantly lower than at the Atlantic-facing beaches. [VERIFY current NPS guidance on shark risk at Herring Cove.]

How Entry and Passes Work

Cape Cod National Seashore does not use the town sticker system. Anyone can enter any Seashore beach by paying the fee at the entrance booth — no residency required, no town sticker needed.

The standard fee is **\$25 per vehicle** for a seven-day pass. [VERIFY 2026 fee at [nps.gov/caco.](https://nps.gov/caco/)] Cyclists and pedestrians enter all Seashore beaches for free. Motorcycles have a separate rate. [VERIFY.]

The most important thing to know about the pass system: the **America the Beautiful Interagency Annual Pass** covers entry to all Cape Cod National Seashore beaches — plus every other federal land in the United States — for \$80 per year. [VERIFY 2026 price.] If you plan to visit two or more times in a season, or if you also visit any National Park or National Forest, the annual pass pays for itself. The **Senior Pass** (\$80 lifetime for qualifying seniors) [VERIFY] and **Access Pass** (free for permanently disabled visitors) are both available at the Salt Pond Visitor Center.

One off-season detail worth knowing: vehicle entrance fees are typically suspended from late fall through early spring. [VERIFY exact dates for 2026-2027.] This makes November through April a remarkable value — free parking, no crowds, and extraordinary winter light on the dunes.

The Trails: The Most Overlooked Part of the Seashore

Most visitors never leave the beach. The Seashore's trail network is one of the most underused assets on the entire Cape.

Fort Hill Trail (Eastham) — A roughly 1.4-mile loop [VERIFY] through open grassland and red maple swamp with sweeping views over Nauset Marsh toward the Atlantic. The Captain Penniman House — a French Second Empire mansion built by a 19th-century whaling captain — stands at the trailhead. Free parking, no entrance fee required. Best at dawn when marsh light turns gold.

Nauset Marsh Trail (Eastham) — Connects from the Salt Pond Visitor Center through salt marsh and Atlantic white cedar, approximately 1.6 miles. [VERIFY distance.] The trail passes Salt Pond itself — a kettle pond formed by a melting glacier block, not by a stream — before opening onto the marsh.

Atlantic White Cedar Swamp Trail (Wellfleet) — A 1.2-mile boardwalk loop [VERIFY distance] through one of the largest remaining Atlantic white cedar swamps in New England. The trees here are ancient and the light is cathedral-dim even on bright days. Located near the Marconi Station Site. No entrance fee required.

Great Island Trail (Wellfleet) — The most demanding and most rewarding hike on the Seashore. Great Island is a tidal peninsula on the Bay side, connected to Wellfleet Harbor. The full out-and-back to Jeremy Point is approximately 8 miles. [VERIFY distance.] A shorter 4-mile option ends at the Great Island site itself. Bring water, bring a tide chart — the final section to Jeremy Point is only passable at low tide. The combination of Bay views, total isolation, and historic fishing-camp archaeology makes this unlike any other trail on the Outer Cape.

Province Lands Bike Trail (Provincetown) — 5.5 miles of paved path [VERIFY] looping through the Province Lands dunes near Race Point. Rentable bikes are available throughout Provincetown. The dunes here — some over 100 feet tall — are the largest on the Cape and feel genuinely remote even in peak season.

The Visitor Centers

Salt Pond Visitor Center (Eastham) is the Seashore's flagship facility and the right starting point for any first visit. An orientation film covers the geology and ecology of the Cape and is worth the twenty minutes. The adjacent natural history museum has well-designed exhibits on the Seashore's glacial formation, wildlife, and human history. Ranger-led programs run throughout the summer from Salt Pond. Open year-round, though hours shrink significantly in winter. [VERIFY 2026 winter hours before visiting between November and April.]

Province Lands Visitor Center (Provincetown) is the secondary facility near Race Point Beach. Smaller than Salt Pond, with a focus on the Province Lands dune ecosystem and maritime history of the Outer Cape. Open seasonally. [VERIFY 2026 open dates.] The observation deck on top of the building delivers a panoramic view of the Province Lands dunes — worth the stairs even if you skip the exhibits.

Shark Awareness on Seashore Beaches

Cape Cod National Seashore operates the most sophisticated beach shark monitoring program in the United States. The gray seal population at Monomoy and along the Outer Cape has grown substantially since the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972, and Great White Sharks follow the seals.

From July through November, the NPS staffs drone operators at all Atlantic-facing beaches. When a drone operator spots a confirmed shark, a radio call clears the water and a PA announcement is made. The beach reopens after 60 minutes without another confirmed sighting. [VERIFY current NPS protocol for 2026.] Aerial flags and lifeguard whistles supplement the public address system.

The **SharkSmart app** (free, iOS and Android) shows current and recent confirmed sightings at each beach in real time. Download it before your first Atlantic beach visit.

Practical guidance: swim at lifeguarded beaches only; stay out of the water at dawn and dusk when sharks are most likely to be near shore; avoid swimming in proximity to seals; do not enter the surf if baitfish or feeding birds are working the wave zone. If swimming with young children and you want calm water without any shark calculus, Herring Cove on the Bay side is the correct choice.

The Off-Season Seashore

The Cape Cod National Seashore in winter is one of the genuine secrets of this region. Entrance fees are typically waived. The beaches are empty. The light in November and February hits the dunes at angles summer visitors never see. Gray seals haul out on the outer beaches in numbers — sometimes hundreds — that peak-season crowds obscure entirely. Piping plovers are gone; the dunes feel primordial.

Fort Hill is a reliable year-round trail with no logistical complexity. Great Island is better in fall and spring when summer heat is not a factor and the tidal walks are more comfortable. The Salt Pond Visitor Center remains open with reduced hours.

If you can visit the Outer Cape in October or early November, the Seashore is operating in its clearest form: no crowds, no fees, no competition for a parking spot, and the distinct feeling that the landscape is doing exactly what the 1961 Congress intended when they protected it.

Quick Facts

Detail	Info
Total acreage	43,000+ acres
Established	1961
Lifeguarded beaches	6
Lifeguard season	Mid-June through Labor Day [VERIFY 2026]
Vehicle fee (weekly)	\$25 [VERIFY 2026 at nps.gov/caco]
America the Beautiful Annual Pass	\$80 [VERIFY 2026]

Detail	Info
Off-season vehicle fees	Typically waived November through April [VERIFY]
Visitor Centers	Salt Pond (Eastham), Province Lands (Provincetown)
Shark monitoring season	July through November at Atlantic-facing beaches
OSV access	Race Point Beach (permit from Race Point Ranger Station)

Frequently Asked Questions

Is Cape Cod National Seashore worth visiting? Yes, without qualification. The Seashore protects the finest beaches in New England and gives the public permanent access to a coastline that — without the 1961 act — would be lined with private development. The beaches, trails, visitor centers, and wildlife are exceptional across every season. If you are visiting the Outer Cape for any reason, the Seashore is not a side trip: it is the primary destination.

What is the difference between a town beach and a National Seashore beach? Town beaches — like Nauset Beach in Orleans or First Encounter Beach in Eastham — are owned and managed by their respective towns. They typically require a resident or seasonal town sticker for parking, or charge a non-resident daily fee set by the town. National Seashore beaches are federally managed by the National Park Service and open to any visitor who pays the \$25 vehicle fee or holds a valid Interagency Pass. No sticker system, no residency requirement. For out-of-town visitors, Seashore beaches are often easier to access than town beaches precisely because of this.

Do I need a pass to visit Cape Cod National Seashore? Not always. Cyclists and pedestrians enter free. Vehicles pay the \$25 weekly fee unless you hold an America the Beautiful Annual Pass (\$80), Senior Pass, or Access Pass. During the off-season — roughly November through April — the entrance fee is typically waived for all vehicles, though the exact dates vary by year. [VERIFY current dates with NPS before travel.]

What is the best trail in Cape Cod National Seashore? For views and accessibility: Fort Hill in Eastham — short, rewarding, and free of any entrance fee. For a full wilderness experience: the Great Island Trail in Wellfleet, a Bay-side tidal hike that feels genuinely remote and requires tide planning. For unusual ecology: the Atlantic White Cedar Swamp Trail near Marconi Station in Wellfleet, which puts you inside a forest type that barely exists anywhere else in the Northeast.

Find lodging, restaurants, and Certified local businesses near the Seashore towns at capecodcertified.com/directory — the region’s most carefully curated local guide to Eastham, Wellfleet, Truro, and Provincetown.

◆ THINGS TO DO

Make a day of it

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

BOOK · FROM \$689

Cape Cod Catamaran — Sailing & Billingsgate Island

Cape Cod Catamaran · Wellfleet

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



Scan to book

BOOK · ~\$8-\$10

Early Bird Guided Birding Walk

Mass Audubon Wellfleet Bay · Wellfleet

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



Scan to book

BOOK · 78 PER PERSON

Provincetown: Whale Watching Cruise

Captain Johns Tours · Provincetown

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.

[Explore the Cape Cod Directory →](#)



Cape Cod Certified · capecodcertified.com/guides/cape-cod-national-seashore-complete-guide · 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