

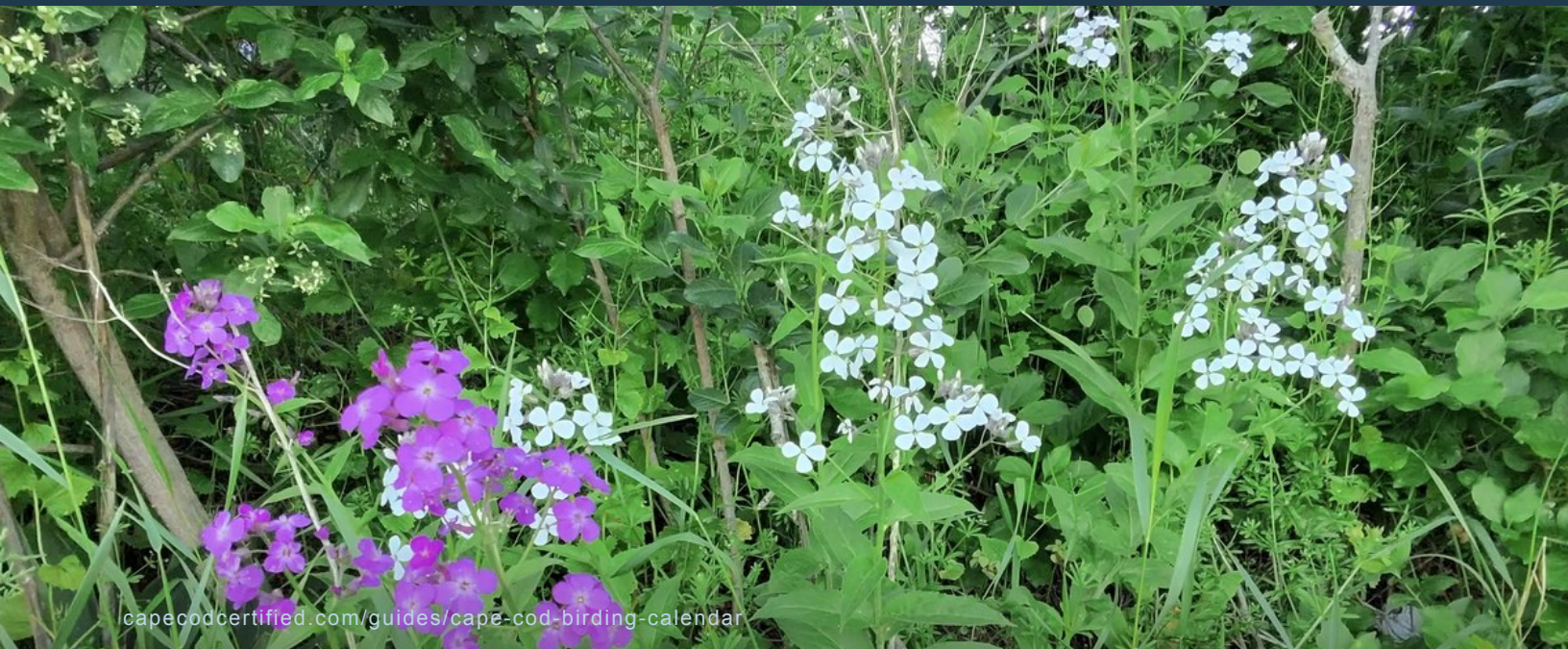


CAPE COD CERTIFIED

WILD CAPE COD

The Cape Cod Birding Calendar: What to Look For Every Month (and Exactly Where)

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



capecodcertified.com/guides/cape-cod-birding-calendar

Cape Cod is one of the best places to bird on the East Coast, and the reason is geography. The peninsula hooks 30 miles into the Atlantic, funneling migrants down its length and concentrating them at the tip. Add salt marsh, kettle ponds, pine-oak woods, and barrier beach within a short drive of each other, and you get a place where the species list turns over completely four times a year.

This is a calendar, not a checklist. The point is to tell you what's moving *now*, where to stand to see it, and how to time the tide so the birds are close. Bookmark it; the rhythm repeats every year.

A note before you go: the single best planning tool is **eBird** (ebird.org). Every hotspot below has a live “Bar Charts” and “Recent Visits” page showing what's actually being seen this week. Use it the night before you head out.

Spring (March–May): The Songbird Surge

Spring builds slowly and then explodes. Through March and April, the first **piping plovers** return to the beaches and **ospreys** reclaim their platforms. But the marquee event is **warbler migration, which peaks in May**.

Where to go: Beech Forest, Provincetown. This pocket of beech, oak, and pond at the very tip of the Cape is the Cape's most famous migrant trap. When conditions align in early-to-mid May, most of the roughly **40 warbler species** that pass through the eastern U.S. can turn up here in a single season—a dozen or more possible in one good morning—alongside tanagers, orioles, grosbeaks, and thrushes. Walk the loop trail slowly at first light. Migrants drop in overnight and feed low and close in the early hours before dispersing.

Hawk watch. From April into early June, raptors stack up at the tip before crossing open water. **Pilgrim Heights in Truro** is the spot—an elevated platform overlooking the dunes and bay. (Pilgrim Heights produces in both spring and fall; spring numbers are lighter than the fall flight, so treat April–May here as a bonus rather than the main show.)

Target species, spring: warblers (Blackpoll, Black-throated Green, American Redstart, Northern Parula, and many more), Baltimore Oriole, Scarlet Tanager, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, returning Osprey and Piping Plover.

Summer (June–August): Terns, Chicks, and Seabirds Offshore

Summer is breeding season, and the Cape hosts some genuinely globally significant colonies.

Terns. Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge, the barrier-island complex off Chatham, holds **the largest common tern colony on the Atlantic seaboard—exceeding 17,000 pairs in recent counts**—along with federally endangered **roseate terns** mixed in. You can't land on the closed nesting islands, but boat trips out of Chatham bring you alongside the spectacle.

Plover chicks. On the open beaches, piping plover and least tern chicks are running by midsummer. This is why long stretches of beach are roped off—see the responsible-viewing section below.

Seabirds. This is the season for pelagic birds visible from land. **Race Point in Provincetown** is the premier seawatch on the East Coast. With a scope on a productive morning you can pick up **Great, Cory's, Sooty, and Manx shearwaters** feeding offshore, plus **jaegers** harassing the terns. Northeast winds after a summer blow push birds closer to the beach.

Target species, summer: Common and Roseate Tern, Piping Plover, Least Tern, the four regular shearwaters, jaegers, and Wilson's Storm-Petrel offshore.

Fall (Late July–October): The Big One

If you bird the Cape only once a year, come in fall. It's the longest, richest, and rarest season—and it starts earlier than people expect.

Shorebird migration begins in late July, when southbound adults arrive ahead of the juveniles, and runs hard through September. The mudflats and marshes fill with **red knots, whimbrels, short-billed dowitchers, Hudsonian and marbled godwits, and both yellowlegs**. This is peak Cape Cod shorebirding.

Where to go: First Encounter Beach (Eastham) and the flats around **Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary** are reliable, accessible staging areas. Monomoy is the gold standard if you can get on a guided trip.

Hawk migration follows in September–October. **Fort Hill in Eastham**—open meadows sloping to the marsh—is the classic fall hawk and falcon spot, with Pilgrim Heights again productive on northwest winds.

Fall is also **the best rarity season**. Strong onshore winds and post-tropical systems regularly drop vagrants on the outer beaches. Check eBird rare-bird alerts daily from August through October.

Target species, fall: Red Knot, Whimbrel, godwits, dowitchers, Sharp-shinned and Cooper's Hawks, Merlin, Peregrine Falcon, plus whatever the weather blows in.

Winter (December–Early March): Sea Ducks and Snowy Owls

Don't pack the scope away. Winter on the Cape is about quality, not quantity.

Sea ducks raft up offshore and in the protected bays: enormous numbers of **common eider**, with **king eider** and **harlequin duck** as the prized scarcities, all **three scoters** (Black, Surf, White-winged), and **long-tailed duck**. Scan from any outer-beach parking lot or from the Provincetown breakwater.

Snowy owls. In flight years, snowies hunt the open dunes and beach grass. **Sandy Neck (Barnstable)** is a traditional spot, along with the outer beaches in Eastham and Provincetown. Look for a white lump on the dune line; give any owl a very wide berth—a flushed owl burns calories it can't spare in winter.

Christmas Bird Counts run in the last weeks of December. Joining a local CBC is the best way to learn the winter circuit from people who bird it every week.

Target species, winter: Common/King/(rarely) Harlequin ducks, three scoters, Long-tailed Duck, Snowy Owl, Snow Bunting, Horned Lark, Lapland Longspur, and lingering rarities.

A Word on Tides (It Matters More Than You Think)

For shorebirds and ducks, **time the tide, not just the clock**. Work an **incoming tide**: as the flats flood, birds are pushed off the far mud and concentrated closer to shore, often at remarkably close range right before high tide. A dead-low tide scatters them onto distant flats where they're little more than heat-shimmer specks. Pair an incoming tide with **early morning or late afternoon light** for the best viewing and photography. Tide tables for Wellfleet, Chatham, and Provincetown are all slightly different—check the one nearest your hotspot.

Responsible Viewing: Plover Ethics

From late March through summer, you'll find stretches of Cape beach roped off with **symbolic fencing** and posted signs. These protect the nests of **piping plovers** (federally threatened) and **least terns**, both of which nest in shallow scrapes directly on the open sand, where eggs and chicks are nearly invisible and easily crushed.

The rules are simple and non-negotiable:

- **Stay outside the fencing**, and keep dogs leashed and well away (many beaches ban dogs entirely in nesting season).
- **Don't linger near a nest or chick**. A parent kept off the nest means exposed eggs and vulnerable young.
- **View from a distance with binoculars or a scope**. You'll actually see *more* behavior this way—and you won't be the reason a brood fails.

The closures work: Cape Cod has been part of one of the great shorebird recovery stories on the Atlantic coast. Birding here is a privilege that comes with the responsibility to leave the beach exactly as the birds need it.

◆ THINGS TO DO

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