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WILD CAPE COD

Bird Watching on Cape Cod: Monomoy, Wellfleet Bay & the Great Fall Shorebird Migration

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



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Cape Cod is one of the most important bird watching destinations on the East Coast — and most visitors never find out. The peninsula’s position jutting into the Atlantic, combined with barrier beaches, salt marshes, freshwater ponds, and scrub-pine forest, makes it a critical stopover on the Atlantic Flyway. From late July through November, tens of thousands of shorebirds, warblers, raptors, and seabirds funnel through during fall migration, with Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge in Chatham ranking among the finest shorebird staging areas in the Western Hemisphere.

Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge: The Crown Jewel of Bird Watching on Cape Cod

Monomoy is a pair of barrier islands — North Monomoy and South Monomoy — off the elbow of Chatham, managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Access is by boat only, which keeps it genuinely wild. From late July through October, shorebird numbers here can be staggering: Short-billed and Long-billed Dowitchers, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Semipalmated and Western Sandpipers, Dunlin, Least Sandpipers, Black-bellied and American Golden-Plovers, and Hudsonian and Marbled Godwits. Rarer species — Curlew Sandpiper, Ruff, Buff-breasted Sandpiper — show up among the flocks in good years. Peak single-day counts at Monomoy have exceeded 50,000 individual shorebirds. The birds are using the tidal flats as a staging area, fattening on invertebrates before long overwater flights south. Peak numbers typically fall in August and early September.

Getting there: Monomoy Island Excursions [VERIFY current operator and 2026 schedule] runs naturalist-guided boat tours to the islands from the Chatham area. Other permitted operators work seasonally out of Stage Harbor and Chatham Fish Pier [VERIFY]. Trips run roughly \$40–60 per person [VERIFY 2026 pricing]. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (monomoy.fws.gov) maintains the current list of permitted guides. Book well in advance — fall migration season fills quickly and weather cancellations are common.

North Monomoy sees regular tour traffic and is the easier landing. South Monomoy is more remote and holds the largest shorebird concentrations; some guided trips cover both islands in a single outing [VERIFY current trip structure]. Bring rubber-soled waterproof footwear — landings involve stepping off a skiff onto wet sand — plus binoculars, a scope if you have one, and sunscreen.

Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary: Best for Independent Bird Watching on Cape Cod

Run by Mass Audubon on 1,100 acres of salt marsh, barrier beach, pine-oak upland, and freshwater pond in South Wellfleet, Wellfleet Bay is probably the most accessible birding destination on the Cape. Trails are well-maintained and signed; the sanctuary runs guided birding walks throughout migration season [VERIFY 2026 schedule and pricing].

The salt marsh sections hold Great Blue Herons, Snowy and Great Egrets, Glossy Ibis, and shorebirds at the mudflat edges from late summer through fall. Ospreys nest on the property and are usually present through September. In October and November, scan the Bay-facing areas for ducks — scoters, eiders, buffleheads, and occasional Long-tailed Ducks. The visitor center carries a regional bird checklist and staff can tell you what’s been seen recently.

Admission for non-members is approximately \$8–12 [VERIFY 2026 rates]; Mass Audubon members enter free. The sanctuary is located at 291 State Highway (Route 6), South Wellfleet. Trails open daily; the parking lot is directly off Route 6.

Provincetown: How Bird Watching Cape Cod Reaches Its Fall Peak

The tip of Cape Cod acts as a geographic funnel for migrating birds. From mid-September through early November, two spots in Provincetown are essential.

Beech Forest (Province Lands): A stand of American Beech and mixed woodland tucked behind the dunes near Race Point, reached from the Beech Forest parking area off Race Point Road. On good fall migration mornings — especially the day after a northwest cold front — this small woodland concentrates warblers, thrushes, vireos, and flycatchers to a remarkable degree. Yellow-rumped Warblers by the hundreds are routine; rarer species (Connecticut Warbler, Orange-crowned Warbler, Yellow-breasted Chat) have been recorded here. The loop trail through the beech grove and around the pond takes 30–45 minutes at a birding pace.

Herring Cove and Race Point: Scan these Atlantic-facing beaches for pelagic seabirds moving offshore. In September and October, Northern Gannets plunge-dive for fish in numbers; Red and Red-necked Phalaropes, Pomarine and Parasitic Jaegers, and Sooty Shearwaters are possible during a good sea-watch. Red-throated and Common Loons are regular in November. Province Lands beaches charge \$25/vehicle or accept the America the Beautiful pass (National Seashore fee structure). Parking fills on fair-weather September weekends.

Sandy Neck and Barnstable Harbor

Sandy Neck Beach in Barnstable is a 6-mile barrier spit sheltering Barnstable Harbor and extensive marsh behind it. Piping Plovers and Least Terns nest on the outer beach in late May through July; disturbance closures are in effect during that period [VERIFY current closure areas and dates]. By August the nesting pressure lifts, and marsh edges and harbor flats begin attracting migrant shorebirds and wading birds. Scan Barnstable Harbor from the town dock on Mill Way for terns, shorebirds, and diving ducks in fall. Over-sand vehicle access to Sandy Neck’s outer beach requires an ORV permit from the Town of Barnstable [VERIFY current fee and process]. On-foot access is free at the main gate; the hike to the lighthouse and back is approximately 7 miles round-trip.

Eastham and the National Seashore: Underrated Bird Watching Cape Cod

Fort Hill (Eastham): Off Route 6 in Eastham, Fort Hill overlooks Nauset Marsh and is a classic fall migration spot for hawks, shorebirds, and songbirds. The Red Maple Swamp trail can hold flycatchers and warblers during September. Parking and access are free; it is a National Seashore site.

First Encounter Beach (Eastham): On the Bay side, the shallow tidal flats at low tide hold feeding sandpipers and yellowlegs in late summer. The parking lot requires a town sticker or non-resident day pass during the in-season [VERIFY 2026 non-resident fee], but the shoulder season access is often free. Arriving around two hours before low tide maximizes shorebird activity on the exposed flats.

Quick Reference: Peak Season by Bird Group

Target Group	Peak Period	Best Sites
Shorebirds	Late July – October	Monomoy, Wellfleet Bay, First Encounter
Warblers and songbirds	May and September–October	Beech Forest (Provincetown), Fort Hill (Eastham)
Raptors	October–November	Fort Hill, Sandy Neck, Province Lands
Owls	November–March	Airport grasslands, dunes (Snowy Owls in irruption years)

Target Group	Peak Period	Best Sites
Waterbirds and sea ducks	October–March	Barnstable Harbor, Herring Cove, Race Point
Breeding birds	May–July	Sandy Neck, Wellfleet Bay, Monomoy (terns, skimmers)

Practical Gear and Planning for Bird Watching Cape Cod

eBird (free, Cornell Lab): Download before you arrive. Search hotspots “Monomoy NWR,” “Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary,” and “Beech Forest” to see what local observers have reported in the past 7 days. This is the fastest way to find out what rare species are currently present.

Cape Cod Bird Club: The oldest birding club on the Cape maintains a rare bird alert listserv and notification system [VERIFY current format at ccbirdclub.org]. Active local observers post sightings in real time; subscribing before your trip gives you intelligence on rarities that won’t show up anywhere else.

Field guides: The Sibley Guide to Birds (Eastern edition) and Peterson Field Guide to Eastern Birds are the standard references among serious birders here. Both hold up well in coastal wind.

Gear for Cape conditions: Binoculars are mandatory. A spotting scope (15–60x) earns its weight at Monomoy’s open flats and Barnstable Harbor. Dress for wind — coastal Cape Cod in September and October runs 15–25 mph offshore routinely. Rubber boots or waterproof trail runners are worth packing for Monomoy landings and Wellfleet Bay’s marsh trails.

Fees at a glance: - Monomoy guided tours: approximately \$40–60/person [VERIFY 2026] - Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary (non-member): approximately \$8–12 [VERIFY 2026] - Province Lands beaches (Beech Forest, Race Point, Herring Cove): \$25/vehicle or America the Beautiful pass - Fort Hill and First Encounter Beach: free or low-cost non-resident day pass [VERIFY] - Sandy Neck ORV permit: contact Town of Barnstable [VERIFY current fee]

FAQ

Q: When is the best time for bird watching on Cape Cod? Fall migration — August through October — is the peak for shorebird numbers, with August and September producing the highest concentrations at Monomoy and Wellfleet Bay. Warbler migration peaks in September and early October at Provincetown’s Beech Forest. May is the best month for northbound warbler migration and breeding-season birds.

Q: Do I need a guide to visit Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge? In practical terms, yes. Monomoy is accessible only by boat, and South Monomoy — where the largest shorebird concentrations are — is strongly recommended to visit with a permitted guide. Monomoy Island Excursions [VERIFY current permitted operators at monomoy.fws.gov] runs naturalist-led tours. Without a guide, you would need to arrange your own vessel and have solid navigational experience; the shoals and currents around Monomoy are serious.

Q: What shorebird species can I expect at Monomoy in September? A September visit typically produces Semipalmated, Western, Least, and White-rumped Sandpipers; Short-billed and Long-billed Dowitchers; Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs; Black-bellied and American Golden-Plovers; Dunlin; Hudsonian Godwit; and often Stilt Sandpiper. Rarities such as Buff-breasted Sandpiper, Baird’s Sandpiper, or Ruff are possible in high-count years.

Q: Is bird watching on Cape Cod accessible for beginners? Yes. Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary is the ideal starting point: well-signed trails, guided walks, and knowledgeable staff make it approachable with any level of experience. The Beech Forest in Provincetown and Fort Hill in Eastham are also easy walks with high fall diversity. Download eBird before you arrive and check the recent sightings lists to know what species are currently present.

Cape Cod's bird life is one of its most spectacular — and most overlooked — natural assets. Whether you're chasing a life-list target or picking up binoculars for the first time, the peninsula in fall delivers experiences that rival any destination on the East Coast. Book your Monomoy tour early, check eBird for real-time sightings, and build your route around the tides.

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