

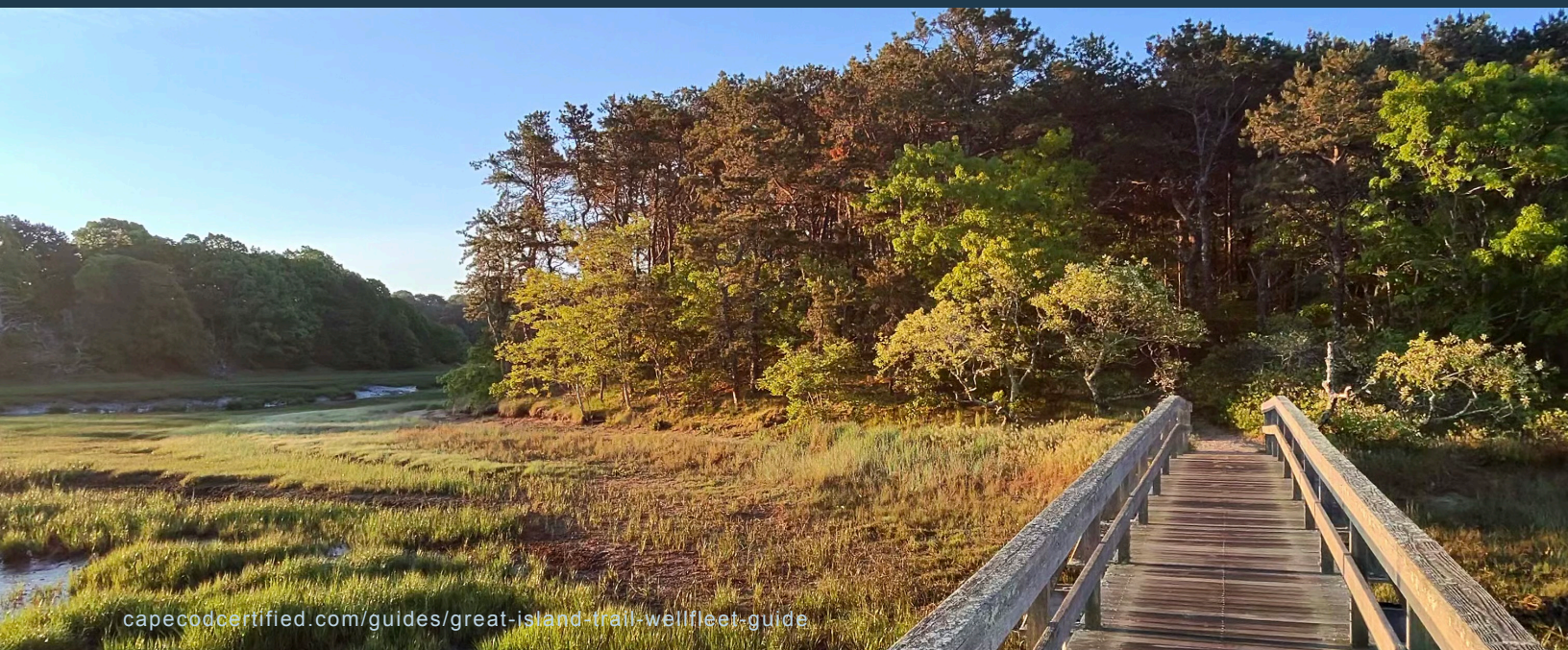


CAPE COD CERTIFIED

VISITING CAPE COD

Great Island Trail Wellfleet: A 4-Mile Out-and-Back Through Salt Marsh, Dunes & Tidal Flats

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



capecodcertified.com/guides/great-island-trail-wellfleet-guide

The One Fact That Settles Everything

There is no public parking at Coast Guard Beach. Not seasonally — ever. The small lot at the beach itself is reserved for Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) permit holders only. Every other visitor parks at the Little Creek Parking Area off Doane Road, about 1.5 miles away, and rides the free National Seashore shuttle to the beach. Get that wrong and you will arrive, circle for 20 minutes, and leave frustrated. Get it right and you will understand why Dr. Beach (coastal scientist Stephen Leatherman) has ranked Coast Guard Beach the number one beach in the United States multiple times — including back-to-back years in the early 1990s that cemented its reputation worldwide.

This guide covers the full logistics: where to park, when the shuttle runs, what swimming conditions are actually like, and what separates this beach from every other stretch of sand on Cape Cod.

Where Coast Guard Beach Is

Coast Guard Beach sits on the Atlantic-facing outer shore of Eastham, Massachusetts, within Cape Cod National Seashore. It is managed by the National Park Service, not the town of Eastham. The beach address is off Ocean View Drive, but the practical access point for most visitors starts at the Salt Pond Visitor Center (50 Nauset Road, Eastham) or the Little Creek lot on Doane Road — both off Route 6.

The beach runs roughly 1.5 miles south before connecting with Nauset Light Beach at the northern reach of the Nauset spit. Behind the beach is Nauset Marsh, one of the most productive salt marsh ecosystems in the Northeast. The dunes rise sharply on the landward side; the Atlantic drops off quickly on the seaward side. Waves here are real ocean waves, not the tame bay-side chop most Cape visitors are used to.

Parking — The Full Picture

Little Creek Parking Area (Main Lot)

This is your lot. It is located off Doane Road in Eastham, well-signed from Route 6. Capacity is limited. In July and August, arrive before 8:00 a.m. on weekends or the lot fills completely. When it fills, the National Park Service closes the entrance. There is no overflow lot. People who arrive after the gate closes must leave.

Parking at Little Creek is included in the National Seashore entrance fee. As of 2025–2026, that fee is \$25 per vehicle for a 7-day pass, or free with an America the Beautiful annual pass (Interagency Annual Pass). Seniors with a lifetime Senior Pass enter free. If you visit National Seashore beaches more than once per summer, the annual pass at \$80 pays for itself quickly.

Salt Pond Visitor Center Lot

A smaller overflow lot exists at the Salt Pond Visitor Center, roughly 0.7 miles from the Little Creek area. The shuttle picks up here as well. This lot also fills fast. It is more useful for visitors who want to stop inside the visitor center first — the exhibits on Nauset Marsh ecology and the outer beach geology are worth 20 minutes of your time.

ADA Parking at the Beach

A small number of ADA spaces exist at the beach itself. A valid ADA placard or plate is required. These spaces are not staffed for verification but are monitored by rangers. Do not attempt to use them without a placard — rangers do cite.

Cycling In

This is the single best strategy on a summer weekend. The Nauset Bike Trail runs from the Salt Pond Visitor Center to Coast Guard Beach — a roughly 1.6-mile ride through pitch pine forest and open moorland. Bike racks are available at the beach. You skip the shuttle entirely, avoid the parking scramble, and arrive feeling like a local. The [Cape Cod Rail Trail](#) connects into the Nauset Trail system, so it is possible to ride from as far as Dennis or Orleans without touching a car.

The Shuttle System

The National Seashore operates a free shuttle between the Little Creek lot (and Salt Pond) and Coast Guard Beach. The shuttle runs seasonally — generally late June through Labor Day, though exact start and end dates shift by year. Check the current schedule at the Cape Cod National Seashore website or call the Salt Pond Visitor Center (508-255-3421) before your visit.

Shuttles run continuously during beach hours. Wait times are typically 10–20 minutes in peak season. The ride is about 5 minutes. Shuttles are accessible and accommodate beach wheelchairs (the Seashore rents adaptive beach equipment — check availability in advance).

Dogs are not permitted on Coast Guard Beach from April 15 through September 15. Check current rules; the Seashore occasionally updates seasonal pet policies.

Swimming at Coast Guard Beach

Conditions

This is open Atlantic Ocean swimming. The surf is genuine — wave heights of 2 to 4 feet are common on a normal summer afternoon, and sets can run larger after offshore storms. The bottom drops off more steeply than bay beaches. Rip currents form along the beach, particularly near any breaks in the sandbar. If you are not a confident swimmer or are bringing young children, assign an adult specifically to water supervision. Do not multitask.

Water temperature peaks in late July and August, typically reaching the low-to-mid 60s Fahrenheit. That is cold by mid-Atlantic standards but workable for most swimmers. Wetsuits are not required but are used by surfers year-round.

Lifeguards

Lifeguards are on duty during peak season, generally late June through Labor Day, during the main beach hours. Specific hours vary by staffing. Swim only in the designated swimming areas marked by flags. The Seashore uses the standard flag system: green (calm/safe), yellow (moderate conditions, use caution), red (dangerous conditions, no swimming), purple (marine life hazard — typically jellyfish). On red-flag days, experienced surfers often still go out. Swimmers should not.

Surfing

Coast Guard Beach is one of the better surf breaks on the lower Cape. When the Atlantic sends north or northeast swells, the outer bars at Coast Guard can produce clean, rideable waves. The break is most consistent in fall, when summer crowds thin and hurricane swells reach the coast. Surf conditions are publicly tracked on apps like Surfline and Magic Seaweed if you want to time it right.

Sharks

Great white sharks are present in Cape Cod waters, concentrated around grey seal colonies. The outer beach — including the area near Coast Guard Beach — is within the documented shark activity zone. The Atlantic White Shark Conservancy operates a real-time shark sighting app (Sharktivity) that is genuinely useful. The National Seashore takes this seriously: posted signs, ranger briefings, and occasional beach closures occur when sharks are sighted close to shore. Stay out of the water if a closure is posted. This is not theater — great white encounters near Cape Cod beaches have resulted in fatalities in recent years. Swim in groups, stay away from seal haul-outs, and exit the water immediately if you see seals in the surf.

What Makes This Beach Different

The Outer Beach Geography

Coast Guard Beach sits at the elbow of the Cape Cod National Seashore outer beach — the 40-mile Atlantic-facing barrier that stretches from Provincetown south to Chatham. This geography is unlike anything else on the East Coast. The beach is wide, the dunes behind it are dramatic (some exceed 50 feet), and there is no development visible from the shoreline. You are standing on a moving barrier beach — erosion takes several feet per year in places — with open ocean extending 3,000 miles to Europe.

The Nauset Marsh directly behind the beach is one of the most intact salt marsh ecosystems remaining in the Northeast. From the dune crest, the view back across the marsh toward Eastham is one of the genuinely rare landscapes left on the Atlantic seaboard.

The Old Coast Guard Station

The building at the top of the beach access path is the original Nauset Coast Guard Station, built in 1937 and now listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It houses the Seashore's headquarters staff and is not open for public tours, but it is worth a look. The building and the surrounding landscape appear in Henry Beston's 1928 nature writing classic "The Outermost House" — Beston's outermost house sat on this beach (it was destroyed by the 1978 blizzard, but a marker remains).

Henry Beston Connection

"The Outermost House" is required reading for anyone serious about Cape Cod. Beston spent a year alone in a small house on this beach and produced what many consider the finest American nature writing of the 20th century. The Atlantic at Coast Guard Beach is the same Atlantic he described. Reading a few pages on the beach itself is not a cliché — it is the best orientation you will get.

Best Time to Go

Early morning, weekdays, late June or September. If you want the experience without the logistics fight, arrive at Little Creek by 7:30 a.m. on a weekday in late June or early September. The beach is never empty — it is too well known for that — but it is manageable. Water temperature is still reasonable in September, and the angle of morning light on the dunes from the Atlantic side is exceptional.

Avoid: Fourth of July week and the last two weeks of July. The parking situation becomes genuinely painful. Shuttle lines build. The beach reaches capacity. None of this makes it a bad beach — it is still one of the world's best — but you will spend more time managing logistics than swimming.

Fall: After Labor Day, the shuttle stops running. You can park at Little Creek and walk or bike in. The beach does not close. Lifeguards leave. Surfers arrive. The seals return in larger numbers. The shark activity can remain elevated through October. It is a completely different experience — quieter, wilder, and arguably more representative of what the outer beach actually is.

Shoulder season: The outer beach in April and May, before the crowds arrive, is accessible and worth the trip for birding, walking, or simply standing at the edge of the continent before summer turns it into a logistics project.

Practical Details

- **Restrooms:** Available at the beach and at the Little Creek lot. Outdoor rinse stations are at the beach.
 - **Food:** Nothing is sold at the beach. Pack what you need. The Doane Picnic Area near the Little Creek lot has tables. For food before or after, Orleans center (about 5 miles south on Route 6) has multiple solid options.
 - **Beach wheelchairs:** The Seashore lends beach wheelchairs at no cost, subject to availability. Call the visitor center in advance to reserve.
 - **Alcohol:** Not permitted on National Seashore beaches.
 - **Fires:** Not permitted on National Seashore beaches.
 - **Cell service:** Spotty to nonexistent at the beach itself. Download offline maps before you go.
 - **Entrance fee:** National Seashore fee covers all Seashore beaches including Coast Guard Beach and [Nauset Light Beach](#). One payment gets you access all week.
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Nearby Seashore Beaches Worth Combining

If you have multiple days on the lower Cape, the outer beach access points each have a distinct character:

- **Nauset Light Beach** — 1 mile north of Coast Guard Beach, accessible by car with its own small parking area. The three Nauset Lights (only one remains) are visible here. Strong surf, similar conditions.
- **Coast Guard Beach** → **Nauset Light Beach walk** — At low tide, the 1-mile walk along the outer beach between these two access points is one of the finest easy beach walks on Cape Cod. Wide hard sand, no development visible, dramatic dune face on one side and open ocean on the other.
- **Salt Pond Visitor Center** — Not a beach, but the NPS exhibits on Nauset ecosystem are worth 30 minutes and contextualize what you are looking at from the beach. The bookstore carries Henry Beston, Roger Tory Peterson, and good field guides.

For a full day trip connecting cycling, the outer beach, and the marsh ecosystem, pair Coast Guard Beach with a ride on the [Cape Cod Rail Trail](#) from Orleans or Wellfleet.

FAQ

Q: Can I drive to Coast Guard Beach? No. ADA permit holders can use the small lot at the beach. All other visitors must park at Little Creek on Doane Road or at the Salt Pond Visitor Center and take the free shuttle, or arrive by bicycle via the Nauset Bike Trail.

Q: What time does the parking lot fill up? On summer weekends in July and August, the Little Creek lot routinely fills by 8:30–9:00 a.m. Arriving before 8:00 a.m. gives you a reasonable chance of getting a space. After the lot fills, the NPS closes the entrance.

Q: Is the water safe for swimming? The water is ocean water — Atlantic surf with real waves, rip currents, and periodic shark activity near the outer beach. Lifeguards are on duty in season during posted hours. Swim in the designated areas, pay attention to flag conditions, and use the Sharktivity app. Children should be closely supervised.

Q: Is Coast Guard Beach really one of the world's best beaches? The ranking comes from Dr. Stephen Leatherman (Dr. Beach), a coastal scientist who has evaluated beaches internationally since the 1990s using a 50-criteria checklist covering water quality, sand quality, wave action, aesthetics, and facilities. Coast Guard Beach has ranked first nationally multiple times. The criteria are objective; the result reflects the combination of clear water, wide clean sand, intact dune and marsh system, and absence of commercial development in the viewshed.

Q: Can I bring my dog? Dogs are not permitted on Coast Guard Beach from April 15 through September 15. Outside those dates, dogs on leash are allowed. This rule applies to the beach and the immediate shoreline area.

Explore More on Cape Cod Certified

Coast Guard Beach is the outer edge of a larger ecosystem worth understanding before you visit. The [Cape Cod National Seashore](#) covers all six Seashore beaches and the inland trails, ponds, and marshes that make Eastham one of the most layered towns on the Cape. Browse the Cape Cod Certified directory for Eastham-based guides, outfitters, and local businesses — including kayak tours onto Nauset Marsh that give you the marsh-to-barrier-beach view from the water side.



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