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VISITING CAPE COD

Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge: Chatham's Remote Barrier Islands & How to Get There

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



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Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge shelters one of the most important shorebird staging areas on the entire Atlantic flyway — and most people driving through Chatham have no idea it exists, let alone how to reach it. These two barrier islands, sitting just south of Chatham's Fish Pier, host over 300 bird species across the year, a year-round gray seal population that swells into the thousands in winter, and a federally designated Wilderness Area that sees a fraction of the visitors that crowd the National Seashore beaches to the north.

Getting there requires a boat. That's the whole point.

What Monomoy Actually Is

Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge is a 7,604-acre complex of two barrier islands — North Monomoy and South Monomoy — plus Morris Island, tidal flats, salt marsh, and open water at the southern elbow of Cape Cod. The US Fish & Wildlife Service has managed the refuge since 1944; Congress designated the islands a Wilderness Area in 1970, making it one of the few Wilderness designations in the entire Northeast.

The islands' geography is not stable. Before a major storm in 1958, Monomoy was a single landmass connected to Chatham by a sandy neck — fishermen and hunters reached it on foot. The Blizzard of 1978 and subsequent storms have continued reshaping both islands, pushing sandbars, moving the inlet, and depositing new habitat. The topography you walk today is not the one your field guide's older maps show. That dynamism is exactly what makes the refuge so productive: freshly exposed tidal flats, shifting wrack lines, and minimal human disturbance create ideal conditions for tens of thousands of shorebirds on their southbound migration in late summer.

How to Get There

Morris Island: Accessible by Land

Morris Island is the one piece of the refuge complex you can reach without a boat. From Chatham center, follow Stage Harbor Road south to Morris Island Road and cross the short causeway. This puts you at the Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge Visitor Center, which carries trail maps, checklist sheets, and seasonal information. The short Morris Island Trail — roughly a quarter mile — loops out to an overlook of South Monomoy, the tidal flats, and (in season) hauled-out seals visible with binoculars. This access point is free and open year-round.

Morris Island is worth a stop even if you're not continuing by boat: on a falling tide, the exposed flats on the south side of the island can hold excellent shorebird numbers from late July through September without leaving the mainland.

North and South Monomoy: Boat Only

Reaching either island requires crossing Nantucket Sound from the Chatham/Stage Harbor area. The crossing to North Monomoy takes roughly 10 to 15 minutes in calm conditions. Several licensed outfitters run seasonal tours from Stage Harbor — guided birding trips, seal watches, and general island excursions. Check ahead for current schedules and pricing, as operations vary by season and demand.

Private boaters with the right local knowledge can land on both islands; no permit is required for day visits. What you do need to know: there are no marked channels near the islands at low tide, the sand flats shift constantly, and the tidal current running through the inlet between North and South Monomoy is serious. If you're chartering a private boat, hire someone who runs these waters regularly.

Stage Harbor and Parking

Stage Harbor on Morris Island Road is the practical hub for refuge access. Street parking is limited; arrive early on summer weekends. There is no parking fee for Morris Island access.

North Monomoy vs. South Monomoy

The two islands have different characters and different typical uses.

North Monomoy

North Monomoy is roughly 2.7 miles long and offers the more accessible wilderness experience. The northern end — closest to the Chatham inlet — tends to attract the most day visitors. Piping plover and least tern nest here in significant numbers, and portions of the island are seasonally closed during nesting (typically late April through late July, sometimes longer depending on nesting progress). Posted signs mark the closed areas; respect them. The federal protection status of piping plovers is not a formality — harassment or nest disturbance carries real penalties.

Shorebird diversity on North Monomoy in the July–September window is exceptional: semipalmated sandpiper, white-rumped sandpiper, dunlin, red knot, ruddy turnstone, sanderling, and American golden-plover are all realistic on a single good-tide visit.

South Monomoy

South Monomoy is the wilder and longer island — about 4.5 miles — and sees fewer visitors simply because the boat trip is longer and the island has no facilities whatsoever. The southeastern end of South Monomoy, where the tidal flats extend broadly into Nantucket Sound, is where the gray seal haul-out concentrates in fall and winter. During peak season (November through March), a few hundred to several thousand gray seals rest on the outer beach; you may also see harbor seals mixed in.

South Monomoy also contains the old Monomoy Lighthouse, built in 1849. The cast-iron structure is not currently open for interior tours, but it stands as a visible landmark from the beach and a reminder that this coastline was a shipping hazard that claimed dozens of vessels before modern navigation.

Best Time to Go

Monomoy rewards visitors across the full calendar, but what you'll see shifts dramatically by season.

Shorebird Migration: Late July Through September

This is the peak season for serious birders and the primary reason the refuge carries the reputation it does. Southbound shorebirds — including species that nested in the Arctic — begin staging here in earnest by mid-July. The highest diversity and numbers typically occur from late July through early September. Incoming tides concentrate birds on upper beaches; falling tides push them onto the flats. Plan your visit around tidal cycles, not the clock: low tide minus two hours through low tide plus one hour is prime.

Nesting Season: May Through July

Spring on the refuge is about nesting activity — piping plovers, least terns, common terns, roseate terns, and American oystercatchers all nest on or near the islands. Access to parts of both islands may be restricted. This is a good time to visit Morris Island for songbird migration (warblers, vireos, and flycatchers move through in May) and to take a guided tour that keeps you out of restricted zones.

Seal Season: October Through April

Gray seals are present year-round but numbers climb dramatically once the weather turns. By November, haul-outs on the outer beach of South Monomoy can hold hundreds of animals. The refuge's seal colony is one of the largest in Massachusetts waters. Licensed seal watch tours operate seasonally from Stage Harbor and offer the closest

legitimate look. Attempting to approach seals on your own — walking toward a haul-out — disrupts the colony and is prohibited within the refuge.

Winter

Monomoy in January is cold, exposed, and outstanding for certain species that are difficult to find elsewhere: snowy owls irrupt here in good years, rough-legged hawks hunt the uplands, and the offshore water can hold eiders, scoters, long-tailed ducks, and red-throated loons in numbers.

What to Bring

There are no facilities on either North or South Monomoy. No restrooms, no water, no food vendors, no shade. Treat this like a backcountry visit:

- **Water:** bring more than you think you need, especially in summer heat
- **Sun protection:** the islands are flat and exposed; a wide-brim hat and reef-safe sunscreen are not optional in July and August
- **Footwear:** rubber-soled shoes or waterproof boots; the tidal flat crossings get muddy and the shrubby upland interior is rough on bare feet or sandals
- **Binoculars:** necessary for birding and for watching seals from a respectful distance
- **Tide table:** check the tide for Stage Harbor before departure — Chatham-area tides lag behind Boston tide tables by roughly 20–30 minutes
- **Trash bag:** carry-in, carry-out is not posted — it's just what you do

A spotting scope significantly improves shorebird ID at distance and is worth the weight if you're serious about the birding.

Rules and Restrictions

The Wilderness Area designation shapes what is and isn't allowed on the islands:

- **No vehicles** of any kind, including ATVs
- **No pets** at any time on the islands
- **No camping** — day use only
- **No fires**
- **Seasonal closures:** portions of both islands are closed for piping plover and tern nesting, roughly April through late July or August; boundaries are signed on the ground and posted at the visitor center
- **Seal buffer:** do not approach hauled-out seals; federal Marine Mammal Protection Act rules apply with teeth
- Stay out of posted restricted areas and follow guidance from refuge staff if present

Morris Island has a slightly different access framework as it's not part of the Wilderness designation — dogs on leash are permitted on Morris Island.

The Morris Island Trail and Overlook

If you're visiting Chatham for a day and can't arrange a boat trip, the Morris Island Trail gives you a genuine refuge experience without leaving the mainland. The trail is short — expect 20–30 minutes at a relaxed pace — and ends at an overlook above the tidal flats and the gap between Morris Island and North Monomoy. On a good day in August

you can watch shorebird flocks wheel in off the water without a spotting scope, and harbor or gray seals are sometimes visible from the overlook in the colder months.

The visitor center, when staffed, is worth stopping into: the staff know the current status of nesting areas, recent bird sightings, and which outfitters are operating that week.

Pairing Monomoy With a Chatham Day

Monomoy trips tend to be morning affairs — tours typically depart early to use the best light and the falling tide. An afternoon in Chatham pairs naturally: the Fish Pier, Chatham Light, and [the Chatham town guide](#) cover the rest of the day's logistics. Birders working the fall shorebird window often also walk Nauset Beach — accessible from Orleans — for comparison habitat; see the [Orleans and Nauset Beach guide](#) for that route. [Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary](#), operated by Mass Audubon on the bay side, makes a complementary stop for birders covering the Outer Cape in a single trip.

Frequently Asked Questions

Do I need a permit to visit Monomoy?

No permit is required for day visits to North or South Monomoy. The islands are open to the public as part of the National Wildlife Refuge system. You do need a way to get there by boat, and you must respect posted seasonal closures for nesting shorebirds and terns. Morris Island is accessible by car and foot with no permit and no fee.

Can I bring my dog to Monomoy?

Dogs are not permitted on North or South Monomoy at any time. On Morris Island (the mainland portion of the refuge accessible by road), dogs on leash are allowed on the trail and overlook area. The island restriction protects nesting piping plovers and terns, whose ground nests are nearly invisible and easily disturbed.

What birds can I realistically expect to see in August?

In August, a visit to North Monomoy timed with a falling tide should produce: semipalmated sandpiper, least sandpiper, short-billed dowitcher, ruddy turnstone, sanderling, American oystercatcher, and with luck, red knot and white-rumped sandpiper. Piping plovers and least terns are typically still present early in the month. Common and roseate terns fish the channels. The variety on a good August visit rivals anywhere in New England.

Can I see seals at Monomoy?

Yes, but access to the primary haul-out on South Monomoy requires a boat. The best time is October through March, when gray seal numbers peak on the outer beach. Licensed seal watch tours operate seasonally from Stage Harbor and are the most reliable (and legally appropriate) way to get close. From the Morris Island overlook, seals can sometimes be spotted in the channel with binoculars, particularly November through February.

Is there a fee to visit the refuge?

There is no entrance fee for Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge. Morris Island access by road and foot is free. Boat tours run by licensed commercial operators charge their own rates — check ahead for current pricing, as rates vary by operator and trip type. If you're chartering a private boat, that's your own cost to arrange.

Plan Your Visit

The CCC directory lists Chatham-area outfitters, guides, and experiences that cover the refuge access options and the broader wildlife cluster on the Outer Cape. Browse the [Chatham directory](#) for tour operators, watercraft rentals, and lodging close to Stage Harbor — particularly useful if you're planning an early-morning bird tide and want to be five minutes from the dock.

◆ THINGS TO DO

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