

Padre Island Birding Tour

This self-guided tour is a great way to drive around the National Seashore and explore the birding sites that were highlighted by the park's seasonal birding guides, George and Mary Eggenberger. They conduct bird tours only from January through April, and this self-guided tour is based on their observations during that season. If you visit the National Seashore during different months, we would appreciate hearing about your birding experience. Please stop by the visitor center with your observations.

Your safety is very important to us. There are big trucks, boat trailers, motor homes and travel trailers that use the park roads. Please use caution and pull off the road with your hazard lights on when you stop to observe birds and wildlife.

Start your trip at Malaquite Visitor Center and set your odometer to 0.0.

Stop 1: Malaquite Visitor Center

During migration (March and April), birds may rest around and under the visitor center. Also at that time, gulls and terns may be out on the parking lot by the hundreds, strutting around in search of a mate. This is a very good opportunity to sort out these birds. Besides the usual gulls and terns, you may also get to observe migrants such as Franklin gulls, Black terns, and Least terns. In January and February, Northern gannets may sometimes be seen from the visitor center deck, especially when there is a strong wind off the Gulf.

Stop 2: Park Road 22 Ponds (West)

Leave the Visitor's Center and turn right. If there is water in the ponds on the left, look for ducks and shorebirds there. During migration they may be loaded with herons and egrets. As you drive north, the sparrows will be mostly Savannahs. There are also many Eastern meadowlarks singing and flitting.

Stop 3: Park Road 22 Pond (East)

Just before Park Headquarters, the pond on the right (1.2 miles) periodically has ducks and grebes. A Least grebe was here in 2009.

Stop 4: Park Headquarters

At Headquarters (HQ), a Peregrine falcon usually hangs out on the communication tower. The two small oak trees next to HQ are a magnet for migrants, and even in winter are likely to have birds. We have had Barn Owls nesting in HQ buildings 07, 08, and 09, but they are nocturnal, so they can only be seen at night. For birding at HQ, please park in the visitor parking spaces and don't go past the gate.

Stop 5: Grasslands

As you continue north, watch in the grasses and ponds for Snow geese and Sandhill cranes (January and February). The cranes blend into the grasses and may be hard to see. They are often in family groups of two adults and one or two of last year's chicks.

Stop 6: Novillo Line Camp and Bird Island Basin Road

Just before Bird Island Basin Road, pull into the parking area on the right at Novillo Line Camp, and scan the old line camp building. An Aplomado falcon was seen there in 2007.

Now, turn left on Bird Island Basin Road. At 2.8 miles is a wetland on the left. If it is wet, pull off the road and get out. Many birds come and go in this area. Ducks, grebes, egrets, herons, shorebirds and ibis have all been observed here. It is also a good spot for spotting American bitterns. Watch for White-tailed hawks, caracaras and falcons overhead. Many Northern harriers are present and may be observed here.

In the Oak Motte on the right, you can usually see a Loggerhead shrike perching in the branches.

During a wet year, there are many ducks in the pond on the left t mile 4.1. On the right side the wetland is a haven for shorebirds and other bird species. A pair of Gull-billed terns is often here, and Reddish egrets may be seen if the water is deep enough.

Stop 7: Bird Island Basin Campground

Across from the bathroom is a tree with a bench beside it. It is good for viewing warblers and other birds during migration.

Drive into the parking space next to the concession building and scan the beach and water for shorebirds, egrets, and herons. A Long-billed curlew is often here, as well as both white and dark morph Reddish egrets. The platform attached to the building is a good place to scan the mudflats. Horned larks and pippets can an occasionally be seen here.

Continue on down the road watching the shore and water. Shorebirds, ducks, and wading birds are usually here, including Snowy plovers. If the flats on the right are wet, they may be filled with shorebirds.

Continue to the turn-around and park your vehicle. Then walk to the bathroom-beach area. Scan the tiny island and pit in front of you. Caspian terns, Black skimmers, and other birds like to sit there. Scan the brushy islands on the right without houses. These are the protected "bird islands" and are used as a rookery by wading birds and others in the spring.

Stop 8: Bird Island Basin Boat Ramp

Retrace your route and go back to the road leading to the boat launch (5.8 miles). The tree next to the bathroom is a wonderful spot to see birds during spring migration. This tree and the small

willows scattered around the area are magnets for warblers, orioles, flycatchers and vireos. We have also seen Painted buntings on the beach here, and the spit beyond the beach also often has birds.

Cross to the opposite side of the boat launch by the dock and fish-cleaning station. White pelicans are usually here and often other birds, as well.

Stop 9: South Beach

Drive back past Malaquite Visitor Center, but continue on to South Beach (you don't need four-wheel drive for the first five miles). Park next to the posts, near the water. There are usually lots of gulls and terns sitting on the beach, along with shorebirds running around on the water's edge. Piping plovers are quite common in the winter.

You can also see Black-bellied plovers, Sanderlings, Ruddy turnstones, and Willets. Drive down the beach if you like, but the birds you see will most likely be the same.

Stop 10: North Beach

On your way out of the park, you can drive on North Beach by passing through the Entrance Station and taking the first right that you come to. North Beach has many of these same birds, but fewer people.

Thank you for visiting and happy birding!