

Commonly-Observed Birds at Cape Cod National Seashore

by Robert P. Cook, PhD., Wildlife Biologist

BIRDS ARE PERHAPS THE MOST CONSPICUOUS AND easily observed of the Cape Cod National Seashore's wildlife. At least some species are. The seashore's over 40,000 acres provide a wide diversity of freshwater, marine and upland habitats for the roughly 370 species of birds that occur here. About 80 of these nest here during the spring and summer months, with the remainder using the park for migratory stopovers or to overwinter. While some birds are nocturnal, secretive, or well camouflaged, many species are active and out in the open during daylight hours, providing even the most casual observer an opportunity to watch them. As you go about your activities within the park, keep an eye out for these species. They are the "tip of the iceberg" of the many bird species that depend on the seashore for food and shelter. They illustrate many aspects of bird behavior and ecology, as well as many of the issues affecting bird conservation.



GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL.

The great black-backed gull occurs in

eastern North America and western Europe and is the world's largest gull. Along with Herring and Ring-billed gulls they are often referred to as "seagulls," which is not quite accurate, since gulls are found on and along the coast, rather than out at sea. Much of the gull's success comes from its opportunistic feeding habits. The great black-backed is both an effective predator of smaller water birds, as well as a scavenger. It can be found year round along the beaches and mudflats.



COMMON TERN

The common tern is one of four species of terns that nest at the seashore. The others are the diminutive Least tern, the endangered Roseate tern, and the Arctic tern. Terns are commonly observed patrolling the shallow waters along the beach, hovering and diving down into the water after small fish such as the sand lance. Terns spend their summers here on Cape Cod, nesting in colonies on sandy beaches. Their colonies afford them protection against many predators, which they drive off by collectively dive-bombing. Their use of the beach in summertime makes them vulnerable to disturbance by dogs and humans, and seashore staff protect tern colonies with "symbolic fencing." Please stay out of these areas. Along with our many summer visitors, terns leave Cape Cod in September and migrate down to Central and South America.



PIPING PLOVER

The piping plover is another beach-nesting species,

but is not colonial. Its nest, a shallow scrape or depression in bare sand, is found on beaches throughout the seashore. Piping plovers are light-colored and difficult to see against the sand. While their camouflage strategy had worked for many thousands of years, piping plovers are sensitive to human presence, and their numbers declined to the point they are

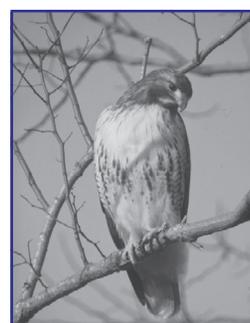
listed as a "Threatened" species by the U. S. Government. With intense management and the cooperation of visitors, piping plovers are starting to recover. But they still face challenges from predator species that are unnaturally abundant as a result of access to human-provided food sources. This "subsidized" predator group includes gulls, crows, racoons and skunks. As you walk the seashore's beaches, listen for the plaintive, whistled "peep lo" of the piping plover. Enjoy a quick look, but keep on moving. Prolonged disturbance may disrupt the feeding habits of these birds.



COMMON CROW

The common crow is an extremely adaptive bird. It is

found throughout the seashore in woodlands, fields, salt marshes, beaches, and parking areas. Its success is partly due to its ability to function as both a predator and a scavenger, opportunistically taking advantage of road kills. Common crows on Cape Cod are joined by the smaller, related Fish Crow, and occasionally the larger Raven.



RED-TAILED HAWK

The red-tailed hawk is a year round resident and the most common of the five species of hawks that nest in the seashore.

It is a large, broad-winged, fan-tailed hawk, often seen perched in trees along Route 6 or soaring overhead. It hunts for small mammals, such as squirrels and rabbits, and its relative tolerance for humans has allowed it to maintain its numbers in a landscape increasingly dominated by human activity.



TREE AND BARN SWALLOWS

Tree swallows and barn swallows are two

common species whose mode of feeding helps to make them conspicuous. Both feed on flying insects taken on the wing. They are often seen in open habitats such as grassy fields, wetlands, and beaches where insects are plentiful. They play an important role in helping to moderate insect populations. Unlike other swallows, tree swallows also eat bayberries. This diversified diet allows them to prepare for the migration south by gathering in large numbers along the coast in early autumn to fatten up on waxy, energy-rich bayberries.



GREAT BLUE HERON

While it can be seen on Cape Cod year round, the great

blue heron does not nest here, and is most abundant in late summer and early fall. Great blue herons nest inland in colonial "rookeries" in wooded swamps. After the nesting season, many move to the coast, where they take advantage of the summertime abundance of fish and frogs in our many ponds and marshes. They feed during the day, especially when the tide is out, and spend the night perched together in tree top "roosts."

While these may be some of the more conspicuous of the Seashore's birds, there are many more species awaiting the interested visitor. Checklists and field guides can be obtained at the bookstores at Salt Pond and Province Lands Visitor Centers

photos courtesy of Roger S. Everett