



Birding at Governors Island with Annie Barry– June, 2008



Two Barn Owls sighted at Fort Jay in December, 2007
NPS Photo Credit—Edward Lorenzini



Sunrise at Fort Jay
NPS Photo Credit—Michael B. Shaver

Governors Island Bird Census

On June 14, 2008 I began a bird count on Governors Island. In counting birds I am more interested in determining what species are on the island than in raw numbers, but numbers can tell a story. Spotting 75 common terns on the Yankee pier (behind the YMCA) tells us that there are many of that species on and around Governors Island. Hearing just one blue jay in several hours of birding indicates that not many of that species make the island their home. The numbers are an estimate, however bird counting is an accepted method for collecting information on bird abundance, distribution and population trends.* I intend to conduct bird counts on a regular basis this summer to determine what species make Governors Island their home in June, July, August and September.

For the beginning of this project my access will be limited to the Historic District portion of the island. On this first day I planned to cover Ft. Jay and all of Nolan Park, as well as the area around the South Battery, saving Colonel's Row, Castle Williams and the promenade for another day. I counted all the birds I saw, whether on the ground, in a tree or in flight, with one exception. I did not count gulls in flight, simply as a matter of practicality. There are an awful lot of gulls around Governors Island, and identifying and counting every one that flew over would have been too time consuming. I did, however, count the gulls that were on the ground or perched on structures. I began counting birds at 9:30 am at Ft. Jay, planning to finish up in Nolan Park at 12:30 pm. However, I was unable to complete my count in Nolan Park as an unexpected interruption shortened my birding time. I will make note of this later.



Commanding Officer's House—Nolan Park

There were few surprises in terms of the kinds of birds on the island. In all three areas I visited, I spotted many starlings, robins and house sparrows, as well as several male cardinals. Their mates were probably nearby. Also not surprising were the many mockingbirds, which favor high spots above areas with lots of insects. The loudspeaker towers at each corner of Ft. Jay are a great spot to see a mockingbird. Mourning doves, crows and grackles are other year-round residents spotted in these areas. Oddly, I heard just one blue jay and saw none. Perhaps few happened to be in the Historic District on this particular day, but the lack of blue jays, which are loud and sociable birds, was quite noticeable. I didn't see any Canada geese today, but that was just a fluke. They must have been somewhere else on the island. There was plenty of evidence to suggest their recent presence. I also made note of a great black-backed gull on the Yankee pier (not strictly in the Historic District, but close enough!), three herring gulls, and a killdeer on the Parade Grounds, which is not surprising as this bird favors large open areas and nests in very shallow holes scraped into the ground.

Sadly one of the herring gulls I spotted on the Parade Ground was unable to fly because of a broken wing. Its injury was probably recent, since the bird otherwise looked quite healthy. But this brings me back to the interruption I experienced, which came as a result of another injured bird, this time a juvenile starling. As I was just beginning to work my way through Nolan Park, a Seasonal Park Ranger, Lisa Martens came to me to report that a visitor to Governors Island was distressed about the bird, which she found across the path from Building 107. The visitor insisted that she should bring the starling with her to Manhattan and to the Humane Society for treatment. The Ranger advised against that and the visitor expressed concern and left. The Ranger came to me to see what to do with the bird. By the time I got to it, the bird was dead. It had probably been injured by flying into a tree or a building or in a confrontation with another bird. I tell about this in detail simply because I was struck by the intense concern of the visitor, as reported to me by the Ranger, that she be allowed to come to the aid of the injured bird rather than allowing

it to die a natural death. As more people visit the island, and as the bird population increases with the development of the park on the southern end of the island, such encounters between well meaning individuals and the reality of avian mortality are likely to increase. These are delicate situations and need to be dealt with tactfully. The Ranger handled the situation well. She was wise to tell the visitor not to take the bird with her.



The glacis, the grassy expanse surrounding Fort Jay and once served as a defensive feature, is a perfect feeding spot for many migratory birds.

Over the summer Governors Island plays host to migratory visitors. The *glacis* is a perfect feeding spots for chimney swifts and barn swallows, which soar over both areas chasing insects almost constantly in the summer months. Both probably nest in various structures on the island. A colony of common terns is making the Yankee Pier its home. And today, a double crested cormorant briefly flew over the island, probably as it looked for a fresh spot to fish, or perhaps a place to perch and dry its wings. An excursion on the promenade will likely show that many more cormorants fish around the perimeter of the island.

Finally, eyewitness evidence from a number of Park Rangers indicates that a red-tailed hawk makes regular visits to the island. Several Rangers told me the story of a red-tail that swooped down and grabbed a squirrel right in front of them as they toured the island during pre-season training. I have personally seen a peregrine falcon visit, perhaps from lower Manhattan or from its perch on the Brooklyn Bridge, on an earlier visit. Another interesting resident are the barn owls. Owl pellets in Ft. Jay remain from two barn owls that made the island their home this past winter.

I was also very excited to see a male American kestrel today. The kestrel is our smallest falcon. This bird was perched on a loudspeaker over the *glacis* for much of the morning, watching the grass below for movement from small rodents, perhaps moles or field mice, and being harassed by robins, mockingbirds and barn swallows. Kestrels are uncommon and their exact population in New York City is unknown. But a group of birders, led by Robert DeCandido, is now conducting a kestrel census, and I reported the presence of this bird via email to Mr. DeCandido. He tells me that it is likely that the kestrel lives somewhere on the island itself rather than flying in to hunt from Manhattan or Brooklyn. If that is the case, there is a fair chance that there is also a female somewhere on the island, perhaps even young kestrels.

I end with a disclaimer of sorts. I am not an expert birder, with my abilities running decidedly on the average side. I know enough about birds to conduct regular surveys, and to keep a general eye on the bird population of Governors Island during the summer months. I plan another census taking trip in July. But for peak migration periods assistance from more expert birders would be necessary. I hope that in the future I will be able to partner with the NYC Audubon to conduct such surveys.

*See the Cornell Lab of Ornithology web site at <http://www.birds.cornell.edu/LabPrograms/CitSci/CitSciData.html>.

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