



Winging It

NEWSLETTER OF THE AMERICAN BIRDING ASSOCIATION, INC.



American Birding
ASSOCIATION

Vol. 16, No. 10

October 2004

CONTENTS

- 5 RBA Updates
- 6 ABA-Endorsed Tours
- 8 We Need Your Help!
Steve Runnels
- 9 News From
ABA Sales
Beginners
- 10 Sightings
(Aug. - Sept. 2004)
- 11 Classifieds
- 15 Milestones
- 16 Birding
With Brunton:
MacroScope!

Downeast Maine

Birding on Department of Defense Lands

BY NORM FAMOUS AND CHRIS EBERLEY

Sparingly populated and seldom considered as a birding destination, the northern portions of Maine's long, intricate coastline deserve a closer look. *Down* the prevailing winds and *down*-longitude from Maine's population centers to the southwest, "Downeast" features unique habitats that figure crucially in the lifecycles of huge numbers of breeding and transient birds. At a corner of the United States, this region has also hosted monitoring and communications facilities related to national defense. As is the case in many other regions, the presence of large military installations has serendipitously preserved large tracts of vital habitat for birds. Stewardship of this environmental legacy is now integrated into the mission of the Department of Defense (DOD), in part through the department's participation in the Partners in Flight bird conservation initiative.

Downeast Maine supports one active and two closed DOD facilities of particular important to birds (and birders). The U.S. Navy facility in Cutler, featured in this first half of a two-part article, attracts significant numbers of migratory shorebirds and waterfowl. To be described in next month's *Winging It*, the inactive but still commissioned Columbia Falls Air Force Station protects extensive blueberry barrens used by breeding Upland Sandpipers and Vesper Sparrows, among other declining grassland species. And the decommissioned Winter Harbor Navy Base

hosts populations of many Boreal-nesting Neotropical migrants, important coastal habitat for migrant landbirds, several state endangered plant species, and a number of rare or exemplary natural wetland communities.

Cutler Naval Station (CNS, known officially as Naval Computer and Telecommunications Master Station Atlantic, or NCTAMS LANT DET Cutler) is one of the premier birding spots in coastal Maine. The 3,000-acre facility comprises approximately 2,200 acres of grassland and 800 acres of spruce/fir forests, bogs, and shrublands. CNS abuts thousands of acres of productive tidal flats and subtidal ledges. Access for birders is restricted to the 800-acre parcel that includes Sprague Neck, a peninsula of Boreal forest with a long sand and gravel spit. In 1990, the Sprague Neck area was designated as DOD's first Watchable Wildlife site, and the area has been identified as a U.S. Navy Ecological Reserve. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) ranked Sprague Neck as the second most important area in Maine for wintering American Black Ducks. Although the state of Maine has not yet completed its own Important Bird Area program, Cutler is part of the Northeastern Coastal Maine Important Bird Area (IBA) for migratory shorebirds under the American Bird Conservancy's IBA program.

About 263 species have been observed on CNS and surrounding tidal flats. Regionally rare or unusual taxa found here have included "Black" Brant, Eurasian Wigeon, Prairie Falcon, Wilson's and Common Ringed Plovers,

(continued on next page)

BRUNTON

Partners In Birding

BRUNTON IS THE SOLE OPTICS SPONSOR OF WINGING IT

Curlew Sandpiper, Ruff, Franklin's Gull, and Great Skua. In all, 34 species of shorebirds, 14 species of gulls, and all of the eastern alcids have been found at Cutler. Between 1,000 and 3,000 dabbling ducks stage in the Sprague Neck area from mid-September through November.

CNS is also an important bird-study area. Monitoring efforts here have included Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship (MAPS) banding (eight years), breeding-season point counts (eight years), International Shorebird Surveys (intermittent since 1976), fall migration area-search counts (five years), and fall and winter waterbird surveys. The Department of Defense's Legacy Program funded many of these studies during the mid-1990s. Other contributors have included the Eastern Maine Conservation Initiative and the USFWS. For a checklist of the birds of Cutler Naval Station, see <www.dodpif.org/checklist.htm>.

History and Environment

Commissioned in 1961, during the peak of the Cold War, CNS straddles two peninsulas flanking the mouth of Machias Bay. The largest peninsula, separating Machias Bay from Little Machias Bay, features a 2,000,000-watt radio transmitter, the world's most powerful radio. Designed for long-distance communications, two antenna arrays include 26 towers ranging in height up to 1,000 feet. Mowed regularly, the antenna field is maintained as a large grassland system, providing habitat rare in the overwhelmingly forested state of Maine. In winter, the grassland attracts raptors, Northern Shrikes, and Snow Buntings. As many as 26 Rough-legs, 30 Short-eared Owls, and five Snowy Owls have been noted here during the winter. Near the antenna field, hundreds of acres of alders often attract large numbers of winter finches, especially redpolls, even during non-invasion years.

Primarily forested, the smaller Sprague Neck peninsula extends into Machias Bay and is the portion of CNS open to the public. Geographically, Cutler falls within a narrow fog-shrouded zone that extends about a mile in from the coast, profoundly affecting the ecology of the base. Despite an elevation barely above sea level, the maritime forests within this zone are

essentially Boreal in character. Forested coastal headlands support nesting populations of Blackpoll Warbler and Bicknell's Thrush, both normally restricted to sub-alpine coniferous forests in interior northern New England and the Canadian Maritimes. Boreal Chickadee, Black-backed Woodpecker, Spruce Grouse, Gray Jay, Lincoln's Sparrow, Palm Warbler, and Yellow-bellied Flycatcher also breed within this coastal fog zone. Some other species reach exceptionally high nesting densities here, such as Swainson's Thrush, Black-throated Green Warbler, and American Redstart.

Other aspects of Cutler's geography also contribute to this site's importance to birds. A large tidal range combined with a gently sloping topography accounts for extensive tidal flats in the bays adjacent to CNS, in turn explaining the area's wealth of shorebirds, dabbling ducks, and gulls. Strong tidal flow interacting with shallow ledges produces areas of upwelling, which bring nutrients and debris to the surface and attract sea ducks, alcids, and pelagic seabirds. Subtidal beds of algae provide food for sea ducks and marine waterbirds.



A sampler of shorebirds on Sprague Neck Bar. Photo: Norm Famous

Editor:
Matthew L. Pelikan

Design:
Ed Rother and Matthew L. Pelikan

Production:
Bryan Patrick

Editorial address:
PO Box 2272
Oak Bluffs, MA 02557
winging@aba.org
Phone/fax: (508) 696-9359

You can join the ABA, learn more about us and our programs, or access a wide range of birding links on our website:
<www.americanbirding.org>

Copyright © 2004 by the American Birding Association, Inc. All rights reserved. The opinions expressed by authors do not necessarily represent the views of this publication or of the ABA.

Winging It (ISSN #1042-511X) (USPS 003-289) is published monthly by the American Birding Association, Inc., 720 W. Monument St., Colorado Springs, CO 80904-3624. Periodicals postage paid at Colorado Springs, CO, and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Winging It*, PO Box 6599, Colorado Springs, CO 80934. (Individual membership: \$45 per year; includes \$12 for *Winging It* and \$33 for *Birding* magazine.)

Winging It is printed on 100% post-consumer, chlorine-free recycled paper.



- The American Birding Association aims to inspire all people to enjoy and protect wild birds.
- The American Birding Association represents the North American birding community and supports birders through publications, conferences, workshops, tours, partnerships, and networks.
- The ABA's education programs promote birding skills, ornithological knowledge, and the development of a conservation ethic.
- The ABA encourages birders to apply their skills to help conserve birds and their habitats, and we represent the interests of birders in planning and legislative arenas.
- ABA Sales, the ABA's for-profit subsidiary, supplies birders with tools, equipment, and accessories to make their birding more enjoyable.

We welcome all birders as members.

Birding Cutler Naval Station

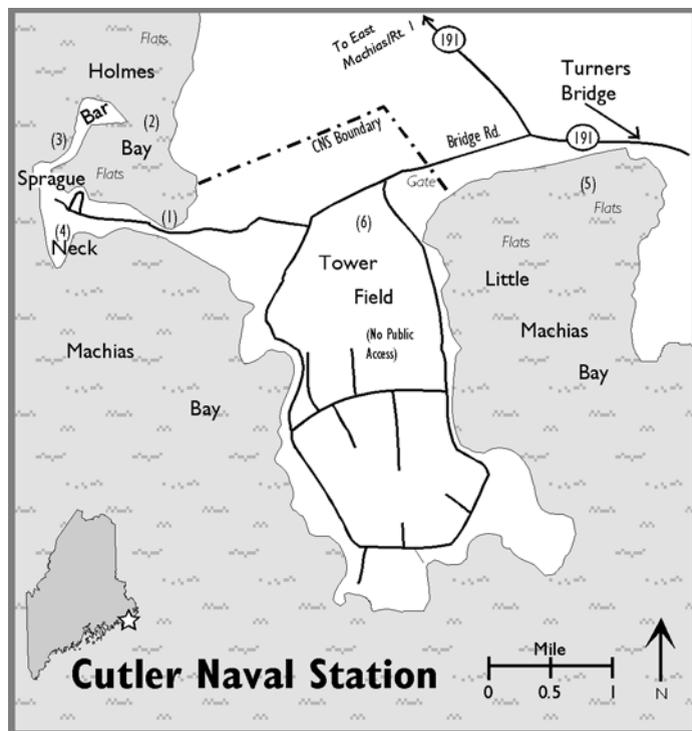
Birding at Cutler is excellent from mid-May through October, even during the “dog days” of summer. Small compared to the southbound shorebird migration, the northbound movement peaks in late May and early June, and it is soon followed by the first southbound transients (Whimbrels in particular) at the end of June and during the first week of July. The shorebird migration peaks in August and early September, but transients, mainly juveniles, may be found through October. The fall landbird migration extends from mid-August through mid-October, after which it quickly tapers off. Waterfowl viewing reaches its peak between late September and early November.

Winter and early spring feature smaller numbers and less variety, but even the coldest months bring good birds to CNS. The season for wintering seabirds and other marine birds extends from mid-October through April. Gull-watching has two peaks: late summer/fall for small gulls (paralleling the shorebird migration) and late fall through early spring (coinciding with peak winter waterfowl abundance) for large gulls such as Iceland and Glaucous. Wintering raptors and landbirds are present from November through early April.

Six distinct sections of Cutler Naval Station, indicated on the accompanying map, are open to the public for birding: (1) Sprague Neck Narrows, (2) Holmes Bay, (3) Sprague Neck Bar, (4) Sprague Neck Woods, (5) Little Machias Bay, and (6) the north end of the tower field. These areas are accessible from sunrise to sunset seven days a week. A temporary pass, requested in writing, is required for access. Because shorebirds, gulls, and waterfowl are among the main attractions for birders, attention to the tide will maximize the success of your birding visit. Low tide exposes mudflats; high tide may bring shorebirds, ducks, and other waterbirds in close to shore; and turbulent water flow associated with rising or falling tides may produce concentrations of gulls.

Sprague Neck Narrows: Stop along the road after passing the “neck” connecting the forested portion of Sprague Neck to the mainland. On your left (south) is Davis Beach, and on your right is Holmes Bay. This area consists of edge habitats containing small bogs and open woodland. Among the breeding birds here are Alder Flycatcher, Palm, Wilson’s, Chestnut-sided, and Magnolia Warblers, and Lincoln’s and White-throated Sparrows. Listen for the *chick—a-dee, chick—a-dee-dee* call of Boreal Chickadees, slower and more nasal than the corresponding call of the familiar Black-capped Chickadee. Looking south from Davis Beach, scan at any season for Common Eider, Bald Eagle, Black Guillemot, and other alcids. From late September through early May, look for Red-necked (sometimes summering) and Horned Grebes, Long-tailed Duck, Red-breasted Merganser, Purple Sandpiper, Common and Barrow’s (occasional) Goldeneye, and Harlequin Duck (occasional).

Holmes Bay: North of the “Watchable Wildlife” site on Sprague Neck is Holmes Bay, an extensive mudflat system. A spotting scope is called for here, especially when the tide is out; the best time to bird Holmes Bay is when the birds are concentrated on narrowed mudflats, roughly two to three hours before



and after high tide. The rewards for careful scanning can be high: more than 30 species of shorebirds have been observed here, and dabbling ducks and small gulls can be plentiful in season. A good plan is to bird the nearshore Holmes Bay flats on the incoming tide, walk out to the Sprague Neck Bar (see below) at high tide, and bird the flats again on the outgoing tide. Consult a local newspaper for a tide schedule.

Sprague Neck Bar: During the fall, the north end of the Sprague Neck Bar is a high-tide roost for large numbers of shorebirds, gulls, and waterfowl. In addition, the bar’s stunted, salt-tolerant vegetation provides habitat for mixed flocks of Snow Buntings, Horned Larks, Lapland Longspurs, and American Pipits from October through November. Rarities seen here have included Curlew, Baird’s, and Buff-breasted Sandpipers, Common Ringed Plover, Marbled Godwit, and Franklin’s, Mew, Little, and Black-headed Gulls. As many as 250 White-rumped Sandpipers have been counted among the migrant Semipalmated Sandpipers, which may number in the thousands. Purple Sandpipers usually linger into winter along the bar for as long as it stays ice-free.

On outgoing autumn tides, large flocks of Blue-winged and Green-winged Teal and American Black Ducks join the shorebirds. A Harbor and Gray Seal haul-out is located on intertidal ledges on the west side of the spit (Harp Seals have also been found in Machias Bay during the recent winters). Sprague Neck Bar provides a memorable auditory experience, with a chorus of howling seals, the ethereal calls of Black-bellied Plovers, the cries of Merlins, the moans of Common Eiders, the metallic notes of White-rumped Sandpipers, and the racket of a thousand or more chirping Semipalmated Sandpipers, all in a pristine environment.

To reach Sprague Neck Bar from the Watchable Wildlife area, follow the trail until you reach the open water of Machias

Bay. Landbirding along this trail during the fall migration can be excellent. Walk to the right (north) about fifty feet along the shore to the start of the spit. Sprague Neck Bar can also be reached from the end of the main road (about 0.3 mile past the campground loop road). Park at the turnaround and follow the shore trail north (right) about another 0.3 mile. Landbirding may be productive along this trail, as well. Scan Machias Bay for flocks of eiders, scoters, and other sea ducks. The path turns right near the start of the spit. Bear left and follow the shore about fifty feet to the start of the spit. *Rugosa* rose hips (high in vitamin C), raspberries, and gooseberries provide high-quality forage for the intrepid birder.

Avoid walking on beach grass and bring a plastic bag for carrying out bottles and cans that have accumulated along the strand line. Small groups of shorebirds, mainly Least Sandpipers, feed among the debris. Most of the shorebirds, gulls, and flocking passerines, however, will be located at the end of the spit. While walking, you will flush occasional Song and Savannah sparrows. Common Eiders, scoters, mergansers, and other seaducks are usually present on the open-water side of the bar.

Sprague Neck Woods: The forested habitats on Sprague Neck provide excellent nesting habitat for Neotropical migrants, including 19 species of warblers, Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, Merlin, and Swainson's thrush. Nesting Boreal forest specialties include Boreal Chickadee (uncommon), Black-backed Woodpecker (occasional), and Spruce Grouse (occasional). Other common or abundant nesters include Golden-crowned Kinglet, Hermit Thrush, Winter Wren, White-throated Sparrow, and Dark-eyed Junco. Gray Jays have been observed here late in the nesting season (probably dispersing birds) and during fall and winter.

Tower Field: You will pass the north end of the tower field on your way to and from Sprague Neck. Scan from the road. Winter is the best time for raptors. Rough-legged Hawks typically hunt from the guy wires when winds are calm to moderate. Look for Snowy Owls resting on the ground and Northern Harriers cruising over the fields. Northern Shrikes perch on tall shrubs. Snow Buntings are usually flushed from the road, while winter finches are best found in the alders along the road to and from Sprague Neck.

Little Machias Bay: Little Machias Bay borders the eastern side of the CNS. Because of security concerns, it must be birded from the blueberry barrens overlooking the bay. Little Machias Bay is noted for its fall shorebird populations (25



A bird's-eye view of Sprague Neck, in the foreground, looking north to Sprague Neck Bar and shallow Holmes Bay in the background.

Photo: Norm Famous

species, mostly from mid-July through October), winter waterfowl (October-April), and small gulls (late July-November). Arriving the first week of July, between 50 and 150 Whimbrels stage in the Little Machias Bay-lower Machias Bay area each summer, one of the highest concentrations of fall-migrating Whimbrels in the eastern U.S. (The region from Milbridge to Lubec supports between 200 and 400 Whimbrels each fall.) Plovers (typically Black-bellied, Semipalmated, and a few American Golden) are attracted to the coarse sand and gravel flats. Peeps, including Semipalmated, Least, and White-rumped (uncommon) Sandpipers, generally peak in mid- to late August at about 1,000 birds (95 percent will be Semipalmated). Little Machias Bay also supports as many as 700 small gulls (Bonaparte's with the occasional Little and Black-headed) and terns (Arctic and Common) from late July through October. In summer, look for Common Eiders and their crèches, and small numbers of all three scoters. Seaducks and other waterbirds

are abundant in winter: Long-tailed Duck, all three scoters, Bufflehead, Common and Barrow's (uncommon) Goldeneyes, Red-necked (as many as 250) and Horned Grebes, Great Cormorant, Black Guillemot, Common Loon, and Purple Sandpiper (uncommon). Scan intertidal ledges for Bald Eagles.

The best place to bird Little Machias Bay is from along Rt. 191 either above or below Turners Bridge (about 1.5 miles east of the CNS guard house). Parking is available at the turnoff east of the bridge. Scan from the parking area or walk onto the firm sand and gravel flats. The flats can also be viewed from the bluffs overlooking the bay. Whimbrels often feed in these blueberry barrens, especially when the tide is in. At high tide, shorebirds and small gulls roost on boulders along the shoreline. It is particularly rewarding to bird here in the morning in July while nesting landbirds are vocalizing. Winter Wren, Wilson's Warbler, Alder and Yellow-bellied Flycatchers, warblers, and sparrows (Nelson's Sharp-tailed, Lincoln's, Swamp, White-throated, Savannah, Song, and Vesper) can usually be heard.

Access and Getting There

Cutler Naval Station lies close to the town of East Machias, just off U.S. Route 1, the main route along the Maine coastline. The public is welcome to bird on the Sprague Neck peninsula, consistent with installation security requirements. Visitors must obtain a temporary pass in advance from the Technical Director (NCTAMS LANT DET

Cutler, 175 Ridge Road, Cutler, Maine 04626). To obtain written permission, your social security number, address, and place of birth must be provided in writing (fax 207/259-8300). If access is approved, a letter will be provided to security at the guard house. Two weeks' advanced notice is recommended to insure adequate time to process requests.

To reach CNS from U.S. Route 1 in East Machias, turn onto Route 191 (at the *Naval Station Cutler* sign), bear right after crossing the bridge, and travel 10 miles to the head of Little Machias Bay. Turn right onto Ridge Road (Route 191 makes a sharp left at the intersection). The tower field will be in full view. Travel 0.9 mile to the guard house and pick up your pass and any instructions from security.

A trip Downeast can be combined with a visit to Machias Seal Island, arguably the most important seabird nesting colony in the eastern U.S. Atlantic Puffin, Razorbill, Common Murre, Black Guillemot, Arctic, Common, and Roseate Terns, and Leach's Storm-Petrel nest on this remote island ten miles offshore. Manx, Greater, and Sooty Shearwaters, jaegers, phalaropes, Northern Gannet, and Wilson's Storm-Petrels are all possible in these waters during the later portion of the nesting season (mid-July to mid-August). Trips are available out of Cutler (Andy Patterson, 207/259-4484) and Jonesport (Barna Norton, 207/497-5933).

Norman Famous is a consulting wildlife and wetlands ecologist who formerly led natural history expeditions in eastern Maine and the Canadian Maritimes. He received an MS in Plant Systematics from the University of Maine in Orono and has worked in natural resources for 35 years. Chris Eberly is Program Manager of the Department of Defense Partners in Flight program and the series editor for "Birding on DOD Lands".

El Salvador Birdathon

SalvaNATURA, El Salvador's largest environmental organization, established El Salvador's first permanent monitoring program for bird populations in 2003. Three substations in protected forests managed by SalvaNATURA, plus one substation in shaded coffee plantations, are collecting the first reliable data on bird survival in El Salvador. A rich Central American avifauna is joined each winter by vast numbers of North American breeders, so monitoring efforts in the country have international significance.

SalvaNATURA's second annual birdathon, an important fundraising event for the organization, took place 2-3 October. Four or more teams of ornithologists were slated to spread out across El Salvador during the event. Oliver Komar, SalvaNATURA's program director, anticipated that about 300 of the 530 species on El Salvador's checklist would be tallied. We hope to provide a summary of the event's results in the next issue of *Winging It*. In the meantime, birdathon pledges to support SalvaNATURA's efforts are still welcome. You can visit the SalvaNATURA website at <www.salvanatura.org> for more information on the birdathon or the organization's programs, or you can pledge your support by emailing Oliver Komar at <okomar@salvanatura.org>.

Statement of Ownership, Management, and Circulation

(Required by 39 U.S.C. 3685)

1. Publication Title: WINGING IT
2. Publication No.: 003 - 289
3. Filing Date: September 9, 2004
4. Issue Frequency: Monthly
5. No. of Issues Published Annually: 12
6. Annual Subscription Price: \$12.00
7. Complete Mailing Address of Known Office of Publication: P.O. Box 6599, Colorado Springs, CO 80904-6599
8. Complete Mailing Address of Headquarters or General Business Office of Publisher: P.O. Box 6599, Colorado Springs, CO 80934-6599
9. Full Names and Complete Mailing Addresses of Publisher, Editor, and Managing Editor:
 Publisher - American Birding Association, P.O. Box 6599, Colorado Springs, CO 80934-6599
 Editor - Matthew L. Pelikan, P.O. Box 2272, Oak Bluffs, MA 02557
 Managing Editor - None
10. Owner: American Birding Association, P.O. Box 6599, Colorado Springs, CO 80934-6599
11. Known Bondholders, Mortgagees, and Other Security Holders Owning or Holding 1 Percent or More of Total Amount of Bonds, Mortgages, or Other Securities: None
12. The purpose, function, and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status for federal income tax purposes:
Has Not Changed During Preceding 12 Months
13. Publication Name: WINGING IT
14. Issue Date for Circulation Data Below: September 2004
15. Extent and Nature of Circulation

	Average No. Copies Each Issue During Preceding 12 Months	Actual No. Copies of Issue Published Nearest to Filing Date
a. Total No. Copies (Net Press Run)	19,560	19,000
b. Paid and/or Requested Circulation		
(1) Paid/Requested Outside-County Mail Subscriptions Stated on Form 3541 (incl. advertiser proofs & exchange copies)	17,019	15,460
(2) Paid In-County Subscriptions Stated on Form 3541 (incl. advertiser proofs & exchange copies)	0	0
(3) Sales Through Dealers and Carriers, Street Vendors, Counter Sales, and other non-USPS Distribution	946	1,126
(4) Other Classes Mailed Through USPS	0	0
c. Total Paid and/or Requested Circulation (sum of 15b (1), (2), (3), & (4))	17,965	16,586
d. Free Distribution by Mail (Samples, complimentary, and other free)		
(1) Outside-County as Stated on Form 3541	0	0
(2) In-County as Stated on Form 3541	0	0
(3) Other Classes Mailed Through USPS	0	0
e. Free Distribution Outside the Mail	91	0
f. Total Free Distribution (sum of 15d & 15e)	91	0
g. Total Distribution (sum of 15c & 15f)	18,056	16,586
h. Copies Not Distributed	1,504	2,414
i. TOTAL (sum of 15g & 15h)	19,560	19,000
j. Percent Paid and/or Requested Circulation (15c divided by 15g times 100)	99%	100%
16. This Statement of Ownership will be printed in the Oct. 2004 issue of this publication.
17. Signature and Title of Editor, Publisher, Business Manager, or Owner. I certify that all information furnished on this form is true and complete. I understand that anyone who furnishes false or misleading information on this form or who omits material requested on the form may be subject to criminal sanctions (including fines and imprisonment) and/or civil sanctions (including civil penalties).
/s/ Steven R. Runnels, CEO

RBA Updates

Corrected Number

Texas (Lower Rio Grande Valley): (956) 584-2731

New Hotlines

Ohio ("Bobolink Area": North-Central):

(330) 763-5119

Ontario (Barrie/Simcoe County): (705) 739-8585

Service Suspended

Tennessee (Statewide), was (615) 356-7636

Texas (Northeast), was (903) 839-4804