

Boston Harbor Islands National Park Area



PHOTO: KEN MALLORY

Peddocks Island Boston Harbor Islands National Park Area



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Boston Light looking toward Boston Harbor



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Over Hull and Worlds End looking back to Boston Harbor

Following Professor E.O. Wilson's March address to the Massachusetts Land Trust meeting that drew attention to National Parks as corridors for preservation of plant and animal species, a brief introduction to the Boston Harbor National Park area seems all the more pertinent to Newton Conservators and their mandate to preserve open spaces.

Designated a national park by an act of Congress in 1996, the 34 islands range in size from less than one acre — Nixes Mate, The Graves, Shag Rocks, and Hangman — to Long Island's 274 acres. All of the islands lie within the large "C" shape of Boston Harbor. The farthest island out, The Graves, sits 11 miles from shore.

Once an expanse of marshy plains and elongated, gently sloping hills called drumlins, the basin containing the Boston Harbor Islands National Park Area was produced by a retreating glacier 15,000 years ago. When the sea level rose, it flooded the lower lying land around the drumlins, forming many of the harbor islands.

After farmers, land developers, and the military finished cutting down the trees during the founding of Boston, the islands took on the appearance they have today: patches of native flora dominated by grasses and staghorn sumac, mixed with aspen, birch, pine, and white poplar.

Three rivers — the Charles, the Mystic, and the Neponset — arranged like spokes on a wheel, feed into the harbor. The result: a network of urban estuaries where wildlife thrives, despite its proximity to one of the nation's most populated metropolitan regions.

As the park opened for visitation this spring beginning May 13, ferryboats to Spectacle and Georges Island offered a first look at some of the harbor's large variety of wildlife including migrating and resident birds. Then beginning in late June and running to Labor Day, additional ferry service is available to Bumpkin, Grape, Lovells, and Peddocks, where overnight camping facilities are available.



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Great Egret chicks on one of the harbor islands

According to the park's web site, the Massachusetts Natural Heritage Program lists six rare species known to exist within the park, including two species listed as threatened and four of special concern. They are

the Barn Owl, Common Tern, Least Tern, and Northern Harrier representing the birds, and the Sea Beach Dock and American Sea Blite representing the plants.

The park also notes that field surveys have identified more than 200 bird species, including gulls, terns, herons, ducks, geese, hawks, plovers, sandpipers, doves, owls, woodpeckers, and perching birds. During migration, large numbers of shorebirds utilize the mudflats and salt marshes around the harbor, while transient hawks and songbirds regularly make



PHOTO: KEN MALLORY

Double-crested Cormorant



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Black-crowned Night Herons are usually well hidden in tree thickets on some of the harbor islands



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Black-backed Gull

use of the more remote islands or those with suitable habitat. In late fall and winter, great flocks of waterfowl gather in harbor waters.

As former editor of a Down East publishers book called the *Boston Harbor National Park Area*, I can attest to the amazing opportunities for viewing birds in the harbor. At one of the breeding islands where island visits by the public are strongly discouraged, I saw three different species of birds: the Great Egret, the Black-crowned Night Heron, and the Double-crested Cormorant, all nesting in the same tree.

Memories of peregrine falcons nesting atop Boston's Custom House Tower (where they can still be observed in a live web feed), snowy owls in winter at Logan Airport, and visits by Oyster Catchers are fresh in my mind. And

based on the advice of harbor rangers, Peddocks Island in particular offers a look at shore birds and a large marsh area along with camping facilities, a visitor center, and access to drinking water.

If you are a birder, check out the birds nesting on, or passing through, the islands. Record your own sightings on the eBird checklist and enter what you see at eBird.org — one of the largest biodiversity data resources in existence. A list of birds that have been observed in the harbor can be accessed at <http://www.bostonharborislands.org/downloads> or for information on operating hours and season information: <http://www.bostonharborislands.org> ■

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