



Migrating Whimbrel walks the seawall at Ft. Caswell



Waterbirds at west end

Brunswick Wildlife Birding Oak Island

For Oak Island residents and vacationing birders alike, the island offers a number of good sites for finding and photographing birds. Ocean, dune, estuarine, salt marsh, and maritime forest habitats host a wide variety of birds...and a mix of species that slowly but continually changes as seasons change...sometimes almost weekly.

Fall migration and winter offer the most exciting experiences; however, spring and summer offer the return of special breeding birds like Painted Buntings.

For the length of the island, check for American Kestrels, Peregrine Falcons, Merlin, and Sharp-shinned and Cooper's Hawks during winter. They may be on roofs or porch railings. Also, a few semi-rare Loggerhead Shrikes may be found from Ft. Caswell to the west end.

Let's start our birding tour at Ft. Caswell on the island's east end. It is the next hop for migrants coming south down the Ft. Fisher/Bald Head Island migrant trap that funnels birds along our coastal barrier islands.

After crossing the high bridge onto Oak Island, continue straight at the stoplight. This road will bend to the left and become Caswell Beach Road, ending at the fort. The guard at the entrance will direct you to the business office to purchase a pass.

Ft. Caswell, owned by the North Carolina Baptist Assembly, is open to the public from mid-August through early June when it closes for summer camps. Grounds access is available 8 AM to 5 PM, Monday through Friday. The \$3 cost for the pass is for liability insurance coverage.

On the entrance road, scan the salt marsh and tidal pools from the marina to the fishing pier for shorebirds, rails, gulls, and terns plus Northern Harriers over the marsh in winter. From the pier, watch for gulls, terns, and pelicans feeding along tidelines in the inlet and then take a nice long walk on the pristine beach that begins on the ocean side of the pier. You will see ocean birds but keep an eye out for winter sparrows lurking in the dune grass.

There are several bunkers around the fort covered with cedar and scrub, good for finding sparrows and migrant songbirds. The bunker on the right as you drove in the gate is especially good. Carefully read and obey the caution signs concerning climbing the bunkers and other fort structures

I saved the best for last! Many species of shorebirds such as Wilson's Snipe, Pectoral Sandpipers, and Black-bellied Plovers may be found on the massive lawns after heavy rains or during high tides. When the grass is waterlogged during rough weather in the fall, I head for the fort!

Leaving the fort, the golf course and adjacent residential areas with remnants of maritime forests may be good for finding songbirds just after a cold front and Painted Buntings during summer.

Stop at Yaupon and Ocean Crest fishing piers, located on Beach Road, to find winter seabirds such as Horned Grebe, Northern Gannet, and Red-throated and Common Loons plus there are possibilities of finding rare sea ducks or alcids. If access to a pier is unavailable, check around the pilings from the beach, especially the pilings near the end, for foraging rarities. Of course the other seabirds may also be observed from the beach.

From East Oak Island Road continue west to NE 52nd street and turn right. You should see a small brown sign for the nature center. Drive to the end to the Memorial Waterfront Park and nature center, which features feeders for land birds and a pier for watching birds of the salt marsh. Depending on the season, look for Pileated and other woodpeckers, White-throated Sparrows, waders, shorebirds, and feeder birds such as nuthatches and chickadees.

Further west, marsh crossovers make good birding locations. The first is a boardwalk with an elevated overlook near the recreation center. Traveling west on East Oak Island Road, turn left on 31st street. Cross the foot bridge over the Davis Canal. Then turn right and walk down the small island's trail to the elevated platform overlook and scan the marsh from the top. Finally, take the boardwalk that crosses the remainder of the marsh to the beach side.

The second crossover is at 20th Street East. Both give birders an up close and personal view of salt marsh habitat and its critters and may offer migrating songbirds in fall.

Along the Davis Canal and its islands, it is fairly easy to find Painted Buntings from late April into summer. Listen for them singing and scan the tops of red cedar trees. If not found at these two crossings, cruise around neighboring streets and look for them on trees, phone lines, and backyard feeders.

We will finish our tour at the west end of Oak Island. This is a wonderful place to find waterbirds and shorebirds all year.

As you drive west near the end of Beach Road, veer right on Kings Lynn Drive and drive to the parking area at the end. This site affords birders easy access to Lockwoods Folly inlet and estuary.

Tidal creeks and salt marshes give up their usual variety of waders, rails, and seaside sparrows. Savannah Sparrows overwinter in the dune grass. In March, I was fortunate to find the rare Savannah Ipswich subspecies here.

Bird the mud flats between the parking area and inlet and those across the tidal creek on an incoming tide for the best the west end has to offer. In summer, look for Wilson's Plover on the estuary's mud flats and watch for Piping Plovers during migrations and winter

No discussion of Oak Island birding would be complete without mentioning possible rarities...birds that may not be present every year but if found are "birder's gold". Examples include: Gray Kingbirds in early summer, Reddish Egrets in late summer, Western Kingbirds in fall, and White Pelicans and Lesser Black-backed Gulls in winter. Also, nor'easters may bring rarities such as American Golden Plovers to the grassy areas at Ft. Caswell.

John Ennis