

MAINE BIRDING TRAIL

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BEST NESTS Newsletter

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Money Birds!

Part One: Southern and Coastal Maine

Ask visiting birders why they choose Maine as a birding destination and they'll often give you a list of bird species. Few birders are coming for a generalized birding experience unless they are with a tour group or they are casual birders who were planning to vacation here anyway. Most individuals have a target list of birds they can't see back home. These are Maine's money birds and, not surprisingly, the majority of target lists are similar. Although Maine boasts over 300 species that can be seen in the state, most are either common across many states or they are habitually encountered in migration through the states south of us. Only a few dozen birds provide the real drawing power. Knowing what they are and where they are is a key to taking advantage of this ecotourism opportunity.

Not surprisingly, the chief money bird is the Atlantic Puffin. It is the only bird for which daily tours exist. There are five puffin islands off the coast of Maine and three of them are visited daily. At least nine Maine companies (and one from Grand Manan, Canada) make trips to these islands. Visiting birders often schedule a date with one of these tours, and then plan the rest of their Maine vacations around it. Any inn within 30 miles of a puffin tour boat should feature some information about puffins on its web site. For a list of tours, visit the Maine Birding Trail web site at www.mainebirdingtrail.com/Puffins.html. For general information about the Puffin Project, visit www.projectpuffin.org.



Puffins reach their southern limit at Eastern Egg Rock off Tenant's Harbor. The island is circled by three boats. Two boats visit Petit Manan just north of Schoodic Point in Acadia National Park. Two vessels visit Machias Seal Island from Jonesport and Cutler (and a third from Grand Manan.) It is the only island that permits landing and visitors are able to observe the birds closely from blinds. Thus, Machias Seal Island is particularly cherished by visiting birders.



Puffins are part of a larger family called *Alcidae*. Characterized by short, stubby wings and deep-diving ability, the alcid family also includes Razorbills (left) and Common Murres (right). Though puffins are rarely seen from land, the latter two



alcids are seen along the coastline occasionally. Another alcid – the Black Guillemot – nests in coastal cliffs and is commonly seen from the mainland. There are two other alcids that occur in Maine, though rarely. Thick-billed Murres are occasionally seen in winter. Dovekies are the tiniest of the eastern alcids and are sporadically encountered in migration in late autumn. It is not important that innkeepers remember all of these strange birds. It is only important to note that the Atlantic Puffin is the chief quarry for many visiting birders, but not the only one. These birders often desire to see their relatives, too. This can affect a birder's choice on where to stay and which tour to book, since each puffin island has different characteristics. Therefore, it can affect the content of an innkeeper's marketing.

Birds that live primarily at sea are called "pelagic" species. They come ashore only to nest. Alcids are pelagic. Puffins are slow to reach full maturity. Newly fledged hatchlings may not return to dry land for five to six years before they are finally old enough to mate. Alcids will spend most of their lives sitting on the water. A second category of ocean birds also lives at sea but tends to feed from the air. Several species that are found in Maine waters during the summer actually breed in the South Atlantic. They've flown NORTH for the winter. These include Wilson's Storm-petrels. At times, they are abundant off the Maine coast in summer. In contrast, Leach's Storm-petrel is a North Atlantic breeder and nests underground on Maine islands in enormous numbers. They are nocturnal and not easy to see. Greater and Sooty Shearwaters breed in the South Atlantic and flood our oceans in summer. Their local cousin, the Manx Shearwater, has traditionally nested around Scotland and Ireland, but has lately been spreading its breeding range across the northern coast of this continent for the last 30 years. More recently, Cory's Shearwaters have begun to occur routinely in Maine waters. Though they breed on the other side of the Atlantic, it is now being seen on whale watch boats out of southern Maine and around Monhegan. Another pelagic bird that breeds in vast colonies in Atlantic Canada is the Northern Gannet. This huge bird is constantly passing Maine's coast on the way to and from its colonies and it is frequently seen from land.



Once again, it is not important that innkeepers remember all these birds. It is only important to understand that puffins are the big draw, but they are not the only draw. The puffin and whale tour boats recognize the value of these money birds and include them in their marketing. Critically, it is the puffin family and the pelagic species that give Maine a big competitive advantage over all other states that border Canada in attracting birders. This advantage is not limited to offshore experiences, either.



Two very obscure little sparrows are a major target for birders in southern Maine, and they are closely related. At one time, they were considered to be a single species called the Sharp-tailed Sparrow. The northernmost of the two is now called the Nelson's Sparrow. The southernmost is the Saltmarsh Sparrow. Interestingly, both overlap in Scarborough Marsh near Portland, and to a lesser extent in Popham Beach State Park in Phippsburg and Weskeag Marsh in Thomaston. This overlap is unique to Maine and tantalizes many visiting birders. A third key species is the Roseate Tern. It nests on offshore islands but can sometimes be found roosting and foraging on the mainland. Its numbers have declined precipitously in recent decades, making it even more valuable to visiting birders. Among other places along the Maine coast, it nests on Stratton Island off Scarborough and can be seen regularly at Pine Point below Scarborough Marsh. It is also relatively easy to see on Eastern Egg Rock, the southernmost puffin island.

Another bird found along southern Maine's beaches is a federally endangered species. The Piping Plover nests and feeds on the beach, which has put it in conflict with humans, much to the bird's demise. They are findable in several locations from Kittery to Reid State Park.



Several sites in southern Maine are noteworthy. Kennebunk Plains is a unique habitat in Maine. Although its special birds can be found elsewhere in the U.S., they are not easy to find in New England. Grasshopper Sparrows, Vesper Sparrows, and Upland Sandpipers draw birders from Maine and Massachusetts. Biddeford Pool has attracted many oddities throughout the years and is a "can't miss" birding opportunity for any knowledgeable birder vacationing in southern Maine.

Coming next month: Money Birds, Part Two: Northern and Inland Maine