

JONES BEACH — BARRIER TO THE ATLANTIC

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Jones Beach, lying along the Atlantic Ocean on the western third of Long Island, is about 17 miles long. Like most barrier beaches it is narrow and its maximum width, except near the causeways, is about three-quarters of a mile. It is an island situated between Jones Inlet on the west and Fire Island Inlet on the east and is connected to Long Island by three causeways: Meadowbrook, Wantagh, and Captree. It was named after the widely known Jones family, the first, Major Thomas Jones having settled across the bay at Massapequa in 1696. For many years it lay isolated, approachable only by boat and undeveloped except for a few clusters of houses. Today over two-thirds of Jones Beach comprises State Park lands. The largest is Jones Beach State Park: this extends from the Town of Oyster Bay Lands at the well known Jones Beach Sanctuary Pond (Salt Pond on some maps) westward six miles to Jones Inlet, including Short Beach. Gilgo and Captree State Parks take up most of the eastern sector.

Its topographical formation bordering the ocean is caused by wind and sea erosion; its substance is made up almost entirely of white quartz sand, pulverized by the sea and piled by the wind into sea-edge dunes. Ocean Parkway, a concrete boulevard varying from four lanes to two lanes in width, extends down the center of the Jones Beach strip between the dunes and the marshes to about one half mile from either end. This parkway was built upon sand sucked from the bay and, being raised, has modified the terrain in much of its length by producing sandy stretches that slope away on both sides. Beyond this sandy slope on the north side, the inner edge facing the bays is marshy and extends out in a small neck into the State boat channel which separates Jones Beach proper from the adjoining archipelago of marshy islands.

The climate, tempered by the ocean, is somewhat less foggy than on extreme eastern Long Island and in some winters there is less snow. Prevailing winds are usually mild and from the southwest or west. Land and sea breezes help keep summers comfortable, the temperature seldom over the high eighties; and in winter, although bitterly raw and damp at times, zero is seldom reached. Summer thunder-showers on some occasions follow the water by running around to Long Island Sound on the north and to the bay and Jones Beach on the south thus missing the main island. Northwesterly winds drive the tides down to abnormal levels, often exposing bay flats. North-easters flood the low meadows and, when severe, in many areas transform the bays from segregated land-marshes to open bodies of water from the mainland to the beach.

Snow melts rapidly on the loose sand, especially on the sunny slopes of the dunes. The highest elevations consist of sand dunes which range to about 20 feet above sea level, the great majority somewhat flattened below this by wind or human agencies. Large concrete parking fields front the ocean; several others are back of the play areas in the State parks. Other weedy and grass bordered dirt parking fields, such as at Tobay (Town of Oyster Bay Lands), occasionally attract Horned Larks, Lapland Longspurs and Snow Buntings in late fall and early winter.

About six miles from the western end lies Jones Beach Sanctuary Pond, famed for its water birds. This is part of the protected land belonging to the Town of Oyster Bay. Permits are issued to interested nature students by the township. Entrance is not permitted during the hunting season.

Overland south-bound bird flights directly across Long Island in the fall must terminate at the outer barrier beaches, or else the migrants find themselves over the ocean. In fact this frequently occurs so that sometimes in the early morning many land birds (up to the size of Flickers) may be seen from some vantage point, as atop a breakwater, flying toward land. This occurs most frequently during times of offshore northwest winds. If such winds are strong, small birds such as warblers encounter difficulty in regaining land and may visit fishing craft some miles outward where they appear exceedingly tame and bewildered. These may often alight on fishing poles, even though in use, or in the scuppers to feed on small flies which are attracted by the smelly refuse or rejected bait. Southward migrating land birds, however, normally avoid the perils of the ocean and therefore pocket in favorable tracts. These migrants often occur in hundreds along the strip. They later use a convenient path down the extent of western Long Island and across lower New York Bay to the New Jersey coast. In spring shore birds travel up the barrier beaches of New Jersey to the northeast through Jones Beach and across eastern Long Island to Rhode Island and Cape Cod. They make use of the shallow sand and mud flats along the coast, but pass northward to breed rapidly, compared to their fall lingering. Occasionally, a few non-breeders fill the interval between north and south-bound migrants, usually through late June and very early July.

Because of the park status of Jones Beach, there has been little increase in resident human population; only an occasional private residence is added, generally in the present colonies: West Gilgo, Gilgo and Oak Beach.

Plant life comprises a few sycamore and other deciduous trees and extensive groves and clumps of Japanese black pine. Dominant shrubbery includes many acres of bayberry (*Myrica*) bushes and large tracks of shrub poison-ivy; numerous beds of Russian olive grow around the cultivated areas. There are many beds of wild roses and numerous blackberry thickets; great stretches of Phragmites line the borders of salt marsh and upland. Crab grass (*Digitaria*) grows on the strips bordering the ocean boulevard. On the sandy stretches, as well as on the dunes, beach-grass (*Ammophila*) is the dominant cover, beach goldenrod is abundant and clumps of beach pea occasional. On the upper marshes in places bulrush (*Scirpus robustus*) offers shelter for some wintering species such as Long-billed Marsh Wren. Here also grow Juncus, sedges and marsh elder (*Iva*), the latter four or five feet in height and dominating the undergrowth. On the marshes salt grasses (principally *Spartina patens* and *Distichlis*) occupy the damp areas and *Spartina alterniflora* ditch edges and wetter tracts.

Migration

Spring migration usually begins in February with small flights of Song Sparrows and blackbirds; singing Meadowlarks and the tinkling song of the resident Prairie Horned Lark even earlier, sometimes proclaim spring's advance prior to this. In late March or early April the plaintive notes of

the Piping Plover sound along the beach dunes; about this time some years floods of Song and Tree Sparrows, Juncos and occasionally a few Ipswich and Vesper Sparrows throng the grassy strips and pine clumps along Ocean Parkway. About this time also, large rafts of American, Surf and White-winged Scoters assemble offshore in the ocean and their mellow whistling is a characteristic sound then as one stops off at the ocean-front parking fields. (Incidentally, parking along the boulevard, except in parking fields, is strictly prohibited.)

Loons and grebes usually pass through in fair numbers. Occasionally Gannets migrate in numerous small flocks near the surf line against strong northeasterly winds, but normally pass farther offshore. Long strings of Cormorants fly coastwise in late April and early May; the Sooty Shearwater and Pomarine and Parasitic Jaegers occasionally put in a brief offshore appearance around very early June. The spring shorebird flights go through with fair numbers of Black-bellied Plovers, Knots and Turnstones into early June, with occasional Willets along the beach. Land birds vary in numbers from spring to spring. Warblers usually are not very plentiful, yet the Cape May, Kentucky and Mourning have been recorded in May.

Good late-summer records for Jones Beach Pond include the Avocet, Ruff and Curlew Sandpiper; Wilson's and Red Phalaropes have been found also. About a decade ago drainage produced large tracts of exposed pond edge providing excellent shorebird numbers. The more flooded conditions of recent years appear to be less attractive.

Fall usually provides a birding assortment: a falcon flight down the outer strip, several Western Kingbird records, some half-dozen of Dickcissel and Lark Sparrow and a few of Blue Grosbeak, although these vary from year to year. Usually for a few days each fall Juncos and White-throated Sparrows flood the brush and grassy areas and White-crowned Sparrows are fairly common. During the past few years both Red and White-winged Crossbills have been fairly abundant, the latter after an absence of about a half century. Two years ago an immature Golden-crowned Sparrow wintered near Jones Beach Tower to April; and in fall a Saw-whet Owl or two may turn up in the pines in the same area. A location well worth visiting at Jones Beach is the fishing station to the north of Parking Field No. 4. Here for a couple of years the Western Tanager appeared and put in several weeks on one extended visit.

Sporadic visitors in winter include, during invasions, a fair number of Snowy Owls on the dunes and an occasional Gyrfalcon about the pond. Rough-legged Hawks hunt over the Gilgo marshes some winters, especially snowy ones. Occasionally Sparrow Hawks perch on the light poles; the Duck Hawk, as a wintering bird, has been rather rare in recent years. Red-breasted Nuthatches often winter in the pines. Pine Siskins usually migrate in great abundance in November and on occasions up to 1000 have been counted before 9:30 a. m. when coming through in the early morning in flocks up to 50 or 60. Best flights are associated with clear fall days with northwest winds, the same weather which produces the best falcon counts along the coast. Winter finches, even Siskins and Goldfinches, are very irregular and erratic in their movements and their presence cannot be pre-

dicted. Late October often brings Snow Buntings and soon afterward the Lapland Longspur. Snow Buntings may occur by the hundreds in severe winters, but congregate more abundantly on eastern Long Island. Longspurs usually leave in late fall or early winter.

Good opportunities are offered in mid-October to attract Common and Acadian Sharp-tailed Sparrows and Seaside Sparrows by squeaking them up out of the tall *Spartina* growth in the marshes where they feed upon the luxuriant grain (somewhat oat-like in appearance). Gilgo is a good place to look for these. The Ipswich Sparrow occasionally winters at Short Beach; Audubon Christmas Counts usually record two to five and on one November day ten were counted at Gilgo. Myrtle Warblers flood the countryside in mid-October and many remain to winter on bayberries and, in late winter, on poison-ivy berries. Tree Swallows prefer the former berries and sometimes remain through to spring. Almost every winter Alcids are reported; dead or oiled Dovekies may be picked up along the beach after severe storms; more rarely Murres or Razor-billed Auks, also sometimes oiled, appear along the beach. A decade ago a Black Guillemot was seen outside the breakers at Gilgo.

At Jones Beach the little Sanderling, familiar to bather, fisherman or beach-stroller as it dashes up and down the surf-line following each receding wave and racing each advancing one during heat of mid-summer or in icy slush of winter, is, in this writer's opinion, of all Long Island birds the most symbolic of the wild, restless sea.

Breeding

The current trend of population is an advancement of southern species into the area, principally involving herons. The American Egret was recorded breeding for the first time in 1955 and an increase, estimated at 30 adults, was noted in 1956. A large increase of nesting Snowy Egrets also was recorded in 1956 after occurring about five or six years in the vicinity. The increase of Yellow-crowned Night Herons last summer also indicated a northern trend. Proportionately, the Black-crowned Night Heron appears to have declined and the Green Heron, not as gregarious, is about holding its own. In late summer, Snowy Egrets, where once rather rare, have become abundant, whereas the Little Blue Heron, once fairly common, appears less plentiful.

Other nesting colonies on Jones Beach include about 200 breeding Herring Gulls at Captree (extreme eastern end of Jones Beach); fairly large numbers of Common Terns, lesser numbers of Least Terns and Black Skimmers, and occasionally Roseate Terns are reported around these colonies. On the marshes, Clapper and Virginia Rails are found at Oak Beach and an unusual record of a nesting Black Rail came from there about 15 years ago. Among ducks omnipresent Blacks and Mallards constitute the breeding population except for a small number of Gadwall. The last has nested around the sanctuary pond for about a decade with varied success.

Fluctuation in nesting success is perhaps due to predators which are well

distributed over Jones Beach in the form of cats, rats, mink, Marsh Hawks, and, probably, an occasional fox. There appear to be no reports of snapping turtles around the pond area; the only reptiles are a pale, sandy colored hog-nosed snake (sometimes locally called "beach adder"), and an occasional black snake. Another presumable deterrent to nesting is the continual chemical fogging of the play areas, including tracts of shrubbery. These are around Jones Beach Tower at the end of the Wantagh Causeway and include agricultural plantations on loam fill formerly brought across the bay from the main island. Birds affected by the chemicals are Catbirds, Thrashers, Robins, Yellow Warblers, Red-wings, and Song Sparrows.

There appears to be no infiltration of more northern species of either land or water birds, and from all indications Jones Beach could never boast of a widely diversified list of breeding land birds, at least not in recent years.

Jones Beach is easily approached by three causeways. Two parking fields, one on the east and one on the west, afford good viewing of ocean birds in winter. Several more provide additional observation posts in summer. Parking Field 4 at the Tower is surrounded by fairly good migrant land bird tracts, including the fishing station to the northwest. Parking Field 9, another ocean fronting area good for ocean observing, provides the stopping-over place to visit the pond sanctuary over one-half mile distant. Nesting Herons and Egrets are in low trees and thickets behind the sanctuary pond. Visitors wishing to see large Herring Gull colony should stop at nearby Captree Parking Field from which the gulls may be seen at their nests. To view Sharp-tailed and Seaside Sparrows enter Gilgo Parking Field, walk eastward one-half mile to the Gilgo Marshes. Tern colonies may often be seen in the June-July nesting season from Ocean Boulevard. Any road map shows the three causeways and Ocean Boulevards and many mark off State Park lands, bay islands and other topographical features sufficient to identify specific areas.

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CALL FOR PAPERS*

The tenth annual meeting of the Federation of New York State Bird Clubs will be held at Schenectady on May 24-26, 1957. All members of the Federation are hereby invited to submit titles for inclusion in the "Papers" section of the program.

Papers may concern any phase of ornithology in New York, and will be limited to twenty minutes in length. Popular papers in previous years have included discussions of field techniques, birding in areas of particular interest, unusual occurrences of birds, studies of nesting, behavior, or other aspects of bird life, and general ecology. Papers illustrated with slides or moving pictures are of special interest to many members.

It is not too early to make plans to present a paper at this writing. A postal card or letter to the chairman of the papers committee will bring a form to be filled out by the speaker. The deadline for papers will probably be set at about May 1, but there is no reason to put it off until then. We want to continue to present the best in educational entertainment at our next annual meeting.

Allen H. Benton, Chairman, Papers Committee
N. Y. S. College for Teachers, Albany