

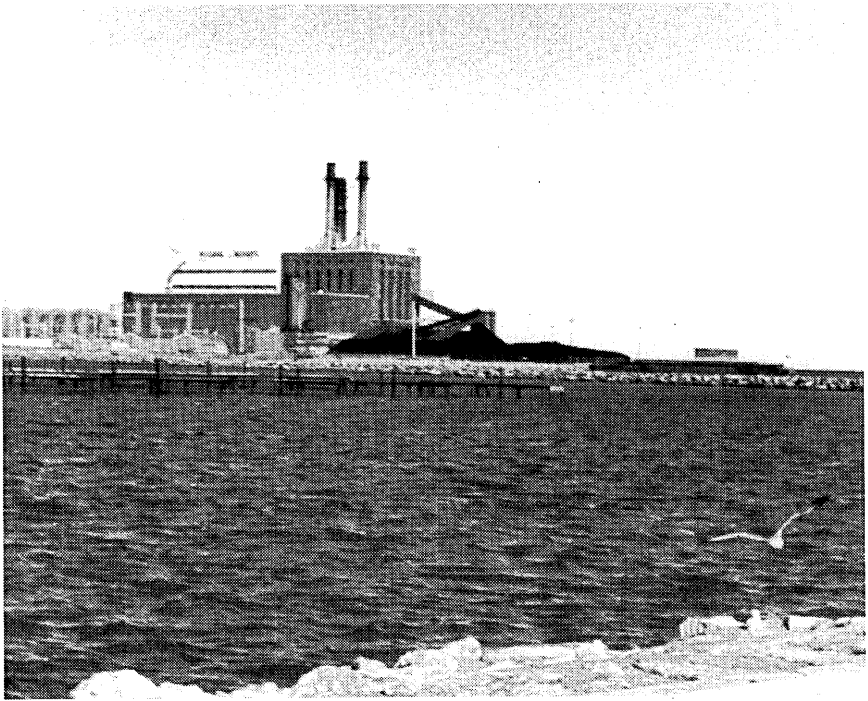


Figure 1. Dunkirk Harbor, Chautauqua Co., New York, looking west from the foot of the pier.

Photograph by Alan Benton.

DUNKIRK HARBOR: A PRIME BIRDING SPOT

ALLAN BENTON

On 1 January 1976, I decided to start my annual list with a trip to Dunkirk Harbor, a scant three miles from my home in Fredonia. There are three vantage points from which to look for birds, and I began at the westernmost, a marina at the foot of Mullet Street. Directly in front of me and a little to the left was the Niagara-Mohawk Power Corporation's steam powered electrical plant. To my extreme left was the southwest corner of the harbor, where the local conservation club has its club house and runs a duck banding operation in winter. As I got out of my car, I noticed a large bird on the tiny bit of beach in front of the conservation club. A quick glance revealed that it was a loon, and closer examination with my binoculars showed that it was not a Common Loon, but a Red-throated Loon, unusual here at any time. I was admiring this bird, and congratulating myself on a great start to the year, when a small bird landed on a rock just to the right of the loon. I switched my attention (and my binoculars) to the newcomer, and found that I was looking at a Purple Sandpiper, which we see perhaps once every ten years or so. What a day, I thought, as I reluctantly turned away and walked to the east side of the marina. Normally there are a few Mallard and some American Coot there, with a few gulls perched on the boat slips. But the first bird that caught my eye on this day was an Eared Grebe, a refugee from the far west which is a fairly regular but rare visitor. I had scored the hat trick: three rare birds in about ten minutes.

Dunkirk Harbor is not always like that. But from 1 November to 1 April it is one of the two best places for water birds in western New York; the other is the Niagara River. Lake Erie is a relatively shallow lake and, unlike Lake Ontario, it often freezes from shore to shore. The thousands of gulls, geese, ducks, grebes, loons, coots, cormorants and so on are left with only those two choices for finding open water. For many of them Dunkirk Harbor is the refuge of choice. The reason for the open water in the Niagara River is the speed of the current. At Dunkirk Harbor, it is due entirely to the works of man. The west end of the harbor was until about forty years ago a lovely fresh water marsh, haunt of Least and American Bitterns, rails, Marsh Wren and Red-winged Blackbird. The Niagara-Mohawk Power Corporation bought the land and built a coal fired power plant. The marsh, and all of its

inhabitants, disappeared. But the loss to the marsh birds was the gain for the water birds. The power plant draws thousands of gallons of cold water from Lake Erie just outside the harbor, uses it to cool its steam generators, and after passing through cooling towers discharges the heated water into the harbor at a temperature of no more (and probably not often much less) than 88°F. This warm water, pouring constantly into the end of the harbor, ensures that the harbor will never freeze over. Sometimes a northeast wind will blow floating lake ice into the harbor so that much of it is temporarily covered, but there is always open water. The birds know it, and flock to the fish filled water in great numbers.

I have been birding at the harbor for more than thirty years. My list of unusual birds seen there, in addition to the three already mentioned, includes Harlequin Duck, King Eider, all three scoters, Northern Gannet, Sabine's, Franklin's, Little, Laughing, Iceland, and Glaucous Gulls, and Black-legged Kittiwake. Moreover, I don't see every unusual bird that appears, such as Bald Eagle, Peregrine Falcon, Pomarine Jaeger, and others.

At the end of winter, local birders spend less time at the harbor proper, and divert their attention to Point Gratiot (locally pronounced "grass-shot"). This rounded projection into Lake Erie is just west of the power plant, a few hundred yards from the west end of the harbor. At the extreme end of the point is a historic lighthouse, and just inland from it is a tiny wood lot which, in April and May, is one of the best places in the area for migrating land birds. My theory about this exceptional place is that north bound migrants follow the lake shore in a northeasterly direction, arriving at the point to see water spreading out before them in the direction they are following. Great numbers of them drop into the little wood lot to rest and feed before continuing on their northward way across Lake Erie. At any rate, hundreds of warblers, sparrows, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, kinglets, Scarlet Tanager, orioles, Blue Jay and other migrants can be found there on a good day. There are resident Red-headed Woodpecker to add to the color as well as the sounds of this avian assemblage.

Dunkirk Harbor is easily reached from either east or west. If you are using the New York State Thruway, exit at Exit 59, and take a right on Route 60 at the first stoplight. Route 60 ends on Route 5, which runs along the lake shore in the city of Dunkirk (Fig. 2). If you go straight ahead on Lakeside Boulevard, you will drive along the lake on Wright Park Beach, which is outside the harbor but in winter may have good numbers and variety of waterfowl. In the years when the lake was lower, I saw my first ever Purple Sandpiper here.

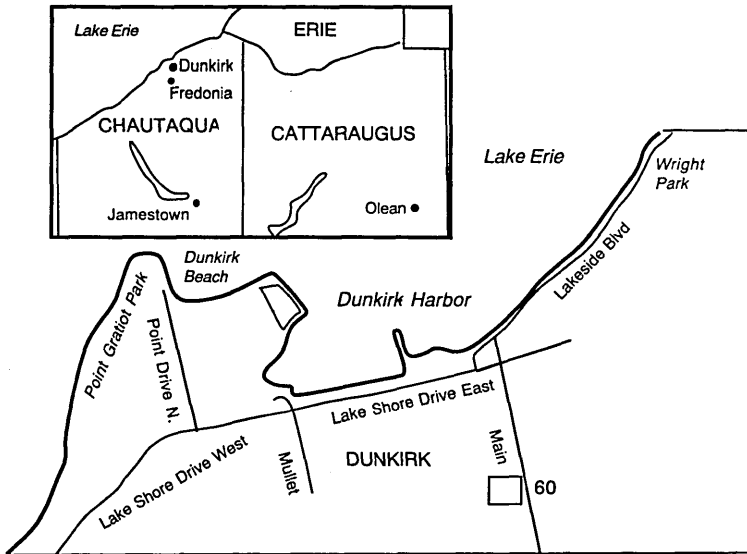


Figure 2. Map of Dunkirk Harbor and vicinity, showing routes to major birding sites. Many streets and roads in Dunkirk are omitted.

Return to Route 5, turn west on Lakeshore Drive East a few hundred yards to a stoplight at the foot of Main Street. The Dunkirk Pier lies directly to your right. This is the place from which to scan the harbor with a telescope. From the end of the pier you are within view of the entire harbor, both sides of the inner breakwalls as well as the outer harbor. Return to Lakeshore Drive (which now becomes Lakeshore Drive West), go west to Mullet Street on your right before the first stoplight. There is a lot at the end of Mullet Street where you can park next to the harbor and examine the western section of the harbor to better advantage. To the right of the marina, along the harbor wall, is the Dunkirk Yacht Club. Its extensive piers always harbor a variety of waterfowl, but a telescope is essential unless you want to walk a quarter of a mile. Last winter one of the Lake Erie Bird Club members, Joseph Gula Sr., was startled to see a pair of large yellow feet on a broken post under one of the piers. By bending over he could see that it was an immature Black-crowned Night-Heron. Usually the birds seen there are more prosaic: Pied-billed Grebe, Mallard, American Black Duck, an occasional Gadwall or American Wigeon, etc. Last winter several Double-crested Cormorant perched on these piers most of the time.

If you arrive via Route 5 rather than the Thruway, you will arrive at the junction of Route 60 and Lakeshore Drive East, and can follow the above directions from there. If you approach on Route 20, you will intersect Route 60 at a stoplight at the east edge of the village of Fredonia. Turn toward Dunkirk on Route 60, almost immediately pass the Thruway interchange and follow the above directions from there. Visitors who come from the east, perhaps coming from downstate on Route 17, or through Jamestown from the south, will find it easy to get on Route 60. The Jamestown exit of Route 17 is at Route 60. Exit northward there toward Dunkirk. You need only follow route 60 to reach Dunkirk in about 30 miles, following the directions given above after you pass the Thruway interchange.

Travelers from the south who enter Jamestown will most likely be on Route 60 already, and need only follow it through Jamestown and on northward to Dunkirk. You cannot get past Fredonia and Dunkirk from either east or west without intersecting Route 60 somewhere, and a turn onto it, northbound, will bring you to the lake sooner or later. If all else fails, consult your road map, or the map included as a part of this article. The tall stacks of the power plant are a good landmark, and can be seen for a considerable distance in all directions. And after all, Lake Erie is a pretty hard thing to miss. Birders who attend the 48th Annual Meeting of the Federation of New York State Bird Clubs in October will miss the best times for both the harbor and the point, but there may be a fall movement of land birds which is often rewarding, if less spectacular than the spring assemblages. Some early waterfowl and gulls will have arrived at the harbor, and both places are worth a look at any season. I hope to see you there.

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