

PATCH BIRDING GROWING UP ON LIDO BEACH: “THE EXCITEMENT OF DISCOVERY”

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The year was 1961. As a small child, it was my first experience with what was always referred to as “The Beach”. Long Island’s South Shore, with all of its fine sand, sprawling dunes and ocean waves. It was a very exciting time to take in all of these things with all the senses. Aside from all the fascinating visuals, there were different scents and sounds to be taken in that weren’t part of suburbia, all of which contain memories that have lasted a lifetime. I was way more fortunate than others of that age to have had the luxury of spending 45 consecutive summers at the very same location, in Point Lookout Town Park (PLTP) in Southern Nassau County, just west of Jones Inlet. The first cabanas were built at PLTP in 1957 to be rented exclusively to Town of Hempstead residents. Once a cabana was rented in those days, the tenant was immediately “Grandfathered in” as long as the original occupant could produce proof of residence to the Town of Hempstead for consecutive years on end. By the early 1980s, the “Grandfather” clause was eliminated to new tenants and replaced with a finite duration of up to three consecutive years of occupancy. We as a family were fortunate to have held on to that cabana for so long, and for me, it was so much more.... What I’ve written in this piece is my personal effort to describe “The Excitement of Discovery” within the roughly three mile stretch from the town of Point Lookout west to the Long Beach Hotel, which I commonly refer to as “The Lido Beach Strip”.

The rather quiet and somewhat private Town of Point Lookout borders with Jones Inlet and Reynolds Channel. Moving west on the Lido Beach Strip, beach clubs and complexes are as follows: Malibu Beach Club, Nickerson Beach (named after the highly regarded former Nassau County Executive Eugene H. Nickerson in 2002, and formerly known as Nassau Beach), Camp Anchor Town Park, Lido District Town Park (formerly known and still sometimes referred to as Atlantic Beach) and Lido West Town Park. The western edge of the strip ends at the Long Beach Hotel property, a large pink building which still maintains its attractive appearance today. Throughout the strip, there were shells, insects, crabs, driftwood and grasses, but it was the birds that constantly had me fascinated at a very young age. This was ultimately how I really got hooked on avian life. It was the excitement of finding something completely different, way before considering identification to species. Probably in late August of about 1973, I saw my very first Laughing Gulls in basic plumage while not knowing what they were, a group of four in a tight pack slightly apart from the other familiar gulls. I asked my Dad, the stoic individual that he was: “What kind of birds are they?” He paused, took

a drag on a cigarette and answered: "I don't know Bob. – Why don't you ask them?" So Dad wasn't too helpful with identifying birds in any capacity, though he was supportive of my interests. My mother knew more. When Sanderlings began to show up in numbers at the water's edge around the same time, she would simply call them 'Sandpipers', which was good enough for me. While swimming in the ocean in July, we'd see small birds hovering over the water at close range, then making a quick dive and flying off. My aunt would exclaim: "look at the baby seagulls!" Somehow, even at that age, I wasn't convinced that they were gulls. This was my first experience with Least Terns. It was more about observing everything, about so many experiences like this at such a young age, that really did the trick. With so many discoveries like this, I grew more and more interested in determining exactly what the individual species were while paying close attention to subtle field marks, flight styles, preferred habitat and perhaps more than anything else, vocalizations.

Cabana neighbors weren't very helpful in my profound interest in birds. There was plenty of teasing and ridicule along the way. One episode sticks in my mind with one particular tenant. By the late 80s when American Oystercatchers had expanded their range northward, typical noisy flight displays were common throughout the summer which interfered with this woman's involvement with her beloved Paperback Novel. She'd complain: "Bobby – would you please tell your lousy Piping Plovers to go somewhere else!" At least she knew something about the publicized awareness of an endangered species, but she wasn't anxious about any further details, so the nose went back to the book. Busted again. My sister also had something to say about the birds around us, both at the beach and in our hometown away from the coast in southwest Nassau County. I found comfort in her just knowing the difference between a Red-winged Blackbird and a Common Grackle. We didn't have access to any reliable field guides that served us very well in the 60s, but we DID have something very precious, and it still remains in the family to this day. It's a rather skinny 8" x 11" hard cover titled "An Illustration to BIRDS" by John Kiernan with illustrations by Don Eckelberry, copyright 1946 by Doubleday & Co. Inc. This book was designed for beginners, but basic enough to be useful in its own way for children, as well as generally covering birds of North America. This provided us with a useful tool for our purposes, and whether we knew it or not, practically served as a prerequisite for the more detailed field guides to follow in the early 70s.

Of course, there were many other activities associated with summer fun at the beach, and I was in the thick of it. Frisbee, baseball, volleyball, horseshoes, card games, swimming, body-surfing, good food and all of those summertime one hit wonders on the AM radio were all fond memories. I was a long-haired Beach Boy looking like I could be in Led Zeppelin, with a guitar and a girlfriend or two, while casually taking in the bird life that was constantly around. The summer of 1976 opened up so many opportunities, which for the first time extended into the rest of the calendar year now that I was driving. The next phase of discovery would be even more exciting because I literally had everything to myself.



Charlie Held, Steve Tetro, and Bobby Berlingeri, Point Lookout, 1991. Photo copyright Zephyrus, 1991.

Nobody wanted to be at the beach during the “off season”. It was a time when I was craving solitude, so I was content with my own company while finding exciting new things along the way. By 1987 through 1988, the winter brought me to another hobby: metal detecting. Some call it “coin hunting” which made perfect “sense”, pun intended. With extreme erosion occurring at PLTP during this period, there was a lot more than “cents”. It was quite a thrill to unearth currency from up to 100 years ago including Indian Head pennies, Liberty and Buffalo nickels, Barber and Mercury dimes, Liberty Standing quarters, three different half-dollar pieces, as well as many other historic items, but there was more to it.... Though I was busy listening for tones from the detector that could indicate a good find, I began noticing these “tern-like” birds that were streaming east in numbers. I knew they couldn’t be terns at this time of the year, so I surmised that this was my first encounter with Bonaparte’s Gulls. To my frustration, there were ZERO birders on the beach in those days, but in time, that all gradually changed. By 1994-1995, thousands of Bonaparte’s congregated on the Point Lookout side of Jones Inlet. With the New York Rare Bird Alert now publicizing this event, 10s if not 100s of birders were now on to what became a spectacle with a number of rarities mixing in, including multiple Black-headed, Little, Iceland and Glaucous Gulls. But the real prize for many on hand was the appearance of the ultra-rare

Ross's Gull. Harlequin Ducks became fairly reliable around the Point Lookout jetties as well, much to the delight of many birders and non-birders alike.

There are so many memories from my years at the beach that I can add, but way too many to include in this writing. I'll mention a few. In early April of about 1974 or so, I heard a distant, ambient series of prolonged, disheveled tinkling notes coming from a field between the PLTP cabanas and the maintenance building complex, all of which still exist as they were today—my first experience with a Horned Lark vocalization. In about 1982 and a few years beyond, Willets nested at this patch along with about 20-50 pairs of Least Terns. February of 1982 brought a group of sparrow-like birds to the gravel parking lot directly behind my cabana. They were creeping rather nervously and abruptly while searching for tidbits. 17 Lapland Longspurs. Whimbrel were seen in the area of PLTP which many of us today refer to as "The Rock Pile". One winter in the 80s brought me my first Snowy Owl, perched atop one of the cabana buildings, then flying off. Over the decades, there was much shifting of sand. Dredging projects created sandbars, peninsulas and all kinds of pooling, especially around the Nickerson Beach area which always had nesting Least Terns and Piping Plovers. Occasionally a Gull-billed Tern would visit. It wasn't until the 80s when Common Terns, Oystercatchers and Black Skimmers would nest here. These colonies were always ramped off and monitored for as long as I can remember. My first Baird's Sandpiper's turned up around a tidal pool in the late 80s in late August. Four birds together, perhaps a family group standing tall and alert, while doing some head bobbing. As a pre-adolescent, I remember seeing these stick-like pre-historic looking birds, flying low over the marsh off the Meadowbrook Parkway on the way to the beach, that took years to identify. Glossy Ibis. I can go on and on....

I conclude by noting how birding has exploded in its popularity over the last two decades with so much technology being used in so many ways. It seems as though people don't have to "drop everything" at a given moment to watch or listen to a bird as it passes through. Those moments I've described briefly put me in my own world while challenging myself (often without optics) to identify birds completely on my own. These experiences will forever remain irreplaceable. Often, many birds went by unidentified, but the memory of a call note, flight style, habitat preference or anything else associated with birds remained etched in my mind. It would sometimes take years and several repeated observations to determine an ID of a given species through the process of elimination. No matter how long it took, it was still "The Excitement of Discovery". Much of that special feeling continues today while teaching others how to find and identify birds, which for me is actually more rewarding than chasing down rarities, which seemingly has come to the forefront of birding in recent times. For many of us, it's more about "getting that bird" for the year rather than birding itself. With on-the-spot listservs, apps and texts, many people have become *chasers* rather than *birders*, which often becomes tedious and rudimentary while offering little to science. No doubt, we all chase from time to time, but I strongly feel as though much of the chasing that's become commonplace these days should be left to

those who've spent a lifetime pursuing and identifying birds. One of my mentors, the highly accomplished late, great Manny Levine, comes to mind. I remember a day about 25 years ago when a few of us were at Jones Beach on an afternoon break exchanging pleasantries when word came in with news of a Yellow-breasted Chat recently found in the area. One of us said: "You wanna go for it?" Manny quickly replied with his gruff voice in an ornery tone, "Oh...I've seen Chats before"....I gently urge birders to remember what got us here in the first place, especially for those who've gained interest in birds later in life: it's that "kid in the candy store" type feeling, while exuding a look of wonderment when finding something different. After a lifetime of birding, at least to some capacity, I'm still learning little subtle details about our resident species and expected migrants regarding appearance at different times of the year, vocalizations, habitat preferences, behavior, and much, much more. Hearing the Savannah Sparrow song away from breeding grounds, seeing an adult male King Eider or a flyover Black Vulture on Long Island could be as exciting as seeing a life bird, or getting that "tick" for one's year list. Find one of your favorite places to bird for a few hours and get into your own world. Let the birds come to you and you may find a lot more than you expected, even if it's as simple as familiarizing yourself with the many varying call notes of the Carolina Wren. Rarities will come in their own good time.... It's all about "The Excitement of Discovery".

