

PATCH BIRDING CROTON POINT PARK

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When I was a child, already fascinated by birds but stuck growing up in a residential neighborhood in Brooklyn, I had a plan: I would invent a portal that could carry me to all the places I dreamed of visiting. With just a single step, I'd travel to rainforests filled with colorful tanagers and toucans, vast savannas stalked by ostriches and other bizarre birds, and open oceans skimmed by albatrosses and shearwaters.

Alas, I never figured out how to create that portal. Instead, I realized early on that the idea of visiting so many diverse habitats in a single day was no more than a child's fantasy.

A fantasy, that is, unless you visit Croton Point Park in Westchester County.

Jutting into the Hudson River's shallow, fertile Haverstraw Bay, Croton Point Park's 508 acres contain a remarkable range of habitats. Along with unparalleled views of the river itself, the park boasts rocky shores, sandy beaches, a protected second bay (Croton Bay), patches of forest, marshes and ephemeral wetlands, mudflats, and—perhaps most distinctively—a former Superfund site that has been converted into a 100-acre native grassland.

Each of these little habitats boasts its own avifauna, of course. So, on a single morning's visit to Croton Point Park, you truly *can* feel that, within little more than a few steps, you can spot birds more characteristic of the Arctic tundra, boreal forests, Midwestern grasslands, northern coasts, and other habitats.

The park's forest patches—mostly vine-ridden second growth with scattered willows along the shorelines—are perhaps its least impressive feature. What makes them an exciting birding spot is their location. At up to three miles across, Haverstraw Bay is the widest spot in the entire Hudson River, so these woods can serve as an impressive migrant trap, with good numbers of warblers, vireos, flycatchers, and others touching down after crossing the river to the west.

There are three main forested areas where migration birding can especially shine: on the hill where the park's nature center is located; in the woods surrounding the model-airplane field; and in the stretch of woods between the RV area and Teller's Point, the park's southernmost spot.

With its slopes, proximity to the river, and relatively undisturbed forest, the nature center hill (built on an oyster midden left by Native American peoples who occupied the point up to 7,000 years ago) is often the most productive during migration. In about an hour one morning in mid-May of 2022, several of us got to watch—often at eye-level at close range—16 warbler species, many in multiples, including Worm-eating, Blackburnian, Bay-breasted, Canada, and others that

don't always show up here in waves. (As an added treat that same morning, an Olive-sided Flycatcher was working its way through the treetops at the base of the hill.)

Other unusual visitors I've spotted in various corners of the nature-center forest included (both in May) a beautiful male Hooded Warbler in 2021 and a pair of singing Cerulean Warblers in 2023.

Also located on the top of a hill (and also located where a Native American people, the Kitchiwank, once lived), the woods surrounding the model-airplane field can be very productive during spring migration. This area seems to be especially rich in flycatchers: along with nesting Eastern Kingbirds and Eastern Wood-Pewees, I've seen Yellow-bellied, Alder, and Least here. Other birds can also be abundant: big waves this past May included Wilson's Warblers and a Yellow-breasted Chat, along with a host of more expected species. And that same month, a young Mississippi Kite hung out there for at least a couple of days. (Might a Swallow-tailed be next?)

The lowland forest stretching south from the RV area has a somewhat different character. It features more pines (a Pine Warbler nested there in 2023); taller trees; vast areas of tangled scrub with emergent trees (Yellow-breasted Chat and Olive-sided Flycatcher have been seen in this habitat, too); a line of 19th-century yew trees near the point that are frequently migrant-rich; adjacent wetlands; and a couple of camping areas that provide some productive edge habitat. It was here in April 2022 that I came upon a Yellow-throated Warbler near the RVs, and overall this stretch always seems likely to produce something rare.

Just a few steps from most of these forested patches bring you to the river and bays, which can provide impressive wintertime spectacles. Large rafts of ducks, grebes (including Horned and Red-necked), and the two expected loons can gather there. During the winter of 2021-22, I had three flyby White-winged Scoters, while 2022-23 brought a pair of Surf Scoters that stuck around for a couple of days.

Among gulls, Bonaparte's Gulls occur occasionally, white-winged gulls are always a possibility in winter, and I still hold out hope for my lifer Little Gull flying past! The open vistas and fish-rich environment mean that unusual terns are also seen regularly, with multiple Arctic passing close by during their brief invasion in May 2022 and Caspian making several appearances in the summer of 2023.

The park's wetlands can be alternately frustrating and wonderfully exciting. The marshes, stretching between the east side of the park and Croton Bay, tend to be a mess of introduced phragmites and mugwort. However, though they host a limited number of nesting passerines (Willow Flycatcher, Common Yellowthroat), you never know what you might see or hear there.

In the fall of 2022, an open patch near the path hosted an unafraid Sora (and eventually a chick, which sadly did not survive), while Virginia Rails also put in regular appearances. (Could Yellow Rails be lurking there, too?) And then, in

June 2023, I was showing a couple of young birding friends a singing Willow Flycatcher on a bare branch near the park entrance, when just beyond it a Least Bittern rose from the marsh and gave us all a beautiful view as it skimmed the reeds for perhaps thirty feet before dropping back down.

Much of Croton Point Park's mowed lawns were once wetlands, too, and when there's been a hard rain, large puddles still appear amid the picnic tables. These can be surprisingly fertile traps for passing shorebirds. For a couple of days in early May 2023, for example, one puddle in the area known as "Mother's Lap" (located between the swimming beach and the nature-center hill) hosted Pectoral, Least, and Solitary Sandpipers, both Yellowlegs, and a pair of Dunlin. Unusual ducks, including Northern Pintail, can also utilize these ephemeral wetlands, and Snow Geese of both color morphs sometimes join the resident Canada flocks.

The small swimming beach itself is always worth a scan over the fence for shorebirds. In early September 2023, a Baird's Sandpiper spent several hours there before heading on.

But it is the grassland hill, restored by the county and state in the late 2010s (though now under threat again), that I think of as Croton Point's greatest glory. By replacing mugwort, spurge, and other invasive plants with native grasses, the hill has drawn nesting birds that are under intense pressure elsewhere in the region. Each year produces a bumper crop of Bobolinks (August post-breeding flocks of adults and young birds can reach 50 individuals), while Grasshopper Sparrows have also frequently nested there. In the summer of 2022, visitors had the joy of watching three male Dickcissels stake out territories on the hill, sing for several weeks, and then finally attract mates and rear successful broods.

Beyond the breeding birds, in every season many species that are rare in the region use the grassland for food and shelter. Raptors are always a feature: Northern Harriers and (more rarely) Short-eared Owls quarter the hill, while a single day during migration can bring a dozen or more American Kestrels. Even forest-loving species—including Great Horned Owl, Red-tailed, Red-shouldered, and Broad-winged Hawks, both common accipiters (as well as a likely Northern Goshawk in the winter of 2022-23), and Merlins and Peregrines—hunt here.

It was on a mowed lawn beside the hill that, in April 2023, I came upon a female Yellow-headed Blackbird foraging with a small flock of other blackbirds. When others came to see the blackbird, they spotted not just one, but two separate Lapland Longspurs nearby, both in breeding plumage.

June and August 2022 brought Loggerhead Shrikes (either one bird twice or two separate individuals) perching on the poles scattered around the grassland. (It later turned out that birders riveted by the shrike had their backs turned on a male Blue Grosbeak!) And August 2023 saw a hatch-year Horned Lark, a Dickcissel, and a young Lark Sparrow show up on the hill as well.

Fall brings its own panoply of species to the irreplaceable grassland. It was in September 2021 that a Sedge Wren made an unexpected visit, granting just a few of us close views and diagnostic listens to its distinctive "chip" call and buzzy alarm note.

It was also a September evening in 2022 that my wife and I heard an unusual call ringing out from above the hill. We soon spotted a large, long-winged shorebird circling above before landing out of sight: an American Golden-Plover, which was subsequently seen by others as well. And almost exactly a year later, September 2023, one thirteen-hour span brought a Northern Wheatear and an Upland Sandpiper to this invaluable habitat.

But it's in the winter that I think the grasslands are at their peak of beauty and richness, especially when they're dusted with snow. That's when I feel most vividly that I've stepped into a different time and place.

Here small flocks of Horned Larks peck at grit and seeds along the paths, while Snow Buntings flash white, brown, and buff as they fly past, and calling American Pipits bounce through the air like avian popcorn. Here, in December 2021, two skulking LeConte's Sparrows played hide-and-seek with countless birders over the course of several days. (Those of us lucky enough to have had up-close encounters with these elusive birds sympathized with those who spent cold, fruitless hours chasing them. Been there, froze like that!)

And it was just a year before that, the winter of 2020-21, that the winter-finch irruption reached Croton Point Park. A flock of at least two dozen Common Redpolls spent several days on the hill and in nearby trees...along with one or two (hotly debated) Hoarys. And, the cherry on the sundae of that winter, a LeConte's Sparrow, driven into plain view by the snowpack, favored all who visited with remarkably easy views during its brief stay.

And then, as winter transitions again into spring, the American Woodcock festival begins. On a single moonlit night, a dozen or more can be heard displaying (and sometimes seen rocketing across the sunset sky), the hill resounding with their "PEENTS," the twitter of their wings, and the odd chirps they make as they descend. It's a magical experience.

And, as you have seen, just one of many. As I walk around Croton Point Park, coming upon southern warblers and northern longspurs, marshland bitterns and open-ocean gulls, coastal shorebirds and grassland sparrows, I'm always reminded of my childhood fantasy. And I marvel at how lucky I am to have discovered a place that brings my dream so close to reality.

