



A Birdfinding Guide to Bombay Hook National Wildlife Refuge

Background

Unquestionably Delaware's single best-known birding site, Bombay Hook justifies its fame with exceptional bird and wildlife viewing throughout the year. Centered around an Auto Tour loop road that traverses a cornucopia of habitats, including fresh & salt marshes, ponds, mudflats, woodlands, and fields, Bombay Hook also features 3 observation towers and several short walking trails.

You should plan an absolute minimum of two hours for a visit here; four is much better, and you could easily make multiple trips over several days before really getting a feel for the varying diurnal and tidal rhythms.

Bombay Hook National Wildlife Refuge was created in 1937 as a refuge and breeding ground for migrating birds and other wildlife. It currently comprises nearly 16,000 acres of land, with about 80% being tidal salt marsh. The Refuge is open every day of the year from sunrise to sunset.

There is an entry fee of \$4.00 per car or motorcycle or \$2.00 per bicycle or hiker. Holders of a valid Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp (often called the "Duck Stamp") enter for free. Purchasing these stamps is an easy way for birders and other wildlife watchers to contribute to habitat acquisition. For complete information on user fees, please visit the web site or call the visitor center.

Visitor Center

Open fields and plantings attractive to native wildlife surround the Visitor Center. Inside, you'll find useful birding information, a nature-oriented book shop, and helpful staff and volunteers. A visitor-maintained bird sighting log, found on a clipboard near the rest room doors, is worth checking--remember to add your own observations when you leave.

At the Visitor Center, pick up a copy of the Auto Tour pamphlet, which includes a detailed map and much useful information. The numbers in the following paragraphs refer to the tour stops in the brochure. Also pick up a refuge bird checklist which summarizes the species and their occurrence on the refuge.

Raymond Pool

Your first stop will probably be **Raymond Pool**. The best birding at Raymond Pool is usually to be found along the long, straight stretch of dike road (Tour Stop #3) that borders the northeast edge of the pool, beginning about 1 mile from the visitor center. Note that along Raymond Pool, as in most of the refuge, the dike road divides the freshwater impoundment from tidal saltmarsh.

Raymond Pool is the single most reliable spot in Delaware to find American Avocets (spring and late summer - early winter are best) and is often loaded with other shorebirds and waterfowl during spring and fall migrations. Lighting here is most favorable in the morning. The number of shorebirds here, even at peak migration periods, can vary dramatically over the course of the day, with many birds departing Raymond to feed along the bayshore and in tidal marshes when suitable flats are exposed, then returning as they submerge, so a revisit 4 to 6 hours later may yield different species and numbers.

Other noteworthy areas around Raymond Pool include the observation tower, a short walk from the first parking area on the left (N) side of the road, and the boardwalk trail, which enters the woods on the right (S) side of the road, just a few hundred yards beyond the tower parking lot. The woods at the beginning (and end) of the boardwalk trail can be particularly good for migrant songbirds, especially in April, May, and mid-August through early November. The boardwalk trail itself is a great place to see breeding Marsh Wrens and Seaside Sparrows, and to listen for Clapper and Virginia rails. Both of these spots are reached on the one-way portion of the Auto Tour before Tour Stop #3.

Sheariness Pool

The largest impoundment at the refuge, Sheariness Pool hosts a great variety of waterbirds, as does the open area of salt marsh to its east, called Leatherberry Flats (Tour Stop #5). The Snow Goose spectacle here from late October into midwinter is often stunning. Bald Eagles are frequently seen here at all seasons. Leatherberry Flats can appear as a huge brackish pool, or as a vast mud flat, depending on wind and tide.

Bear Swamp Pool

Bear Swamp Pool, which hasn't had bears for a very long time, does tend to have lots of birds. Traditionally productive areas include the SE (Tour Stop #7) and NE corners of the large impoundment, where shorebirds, ducks, and waders are often numerous. Carefully scan the bushes and trees in the impoundment's northeast corner for roosting Black-crowned Night-Herons, which may be joined by a few Yellow-crowned Night-Heron.

Finis Pool

Finis Pool (Tour Stop #13) presents a very different face of Bombay Hook--a smaller, freshwater pond with a luxuriant growth of aquatic plants, surrounded by tall deciduous woods. While birds are often not as conspicuous here as elsewhere on the refuge, a stop here adds diversity. Egrets, herons, Wood Duck and Prothonotary Warbler are all regular here, and patient searching might reveal a Least Bittern.

Directions to the Visitor Center

From Route 1 near Smyrna, take exit 114 (Smyrna-South exit). At the end of the ramp turn right (N) at the traffic light onto Route 13 North. Turn right (E) at the next light onto Road 12 (Smyrna-Leipscic Road). This road merges with Route 9 South in just under 5 miles. Immediately after joining Route 9, turn left (E) onto Whitehall Neck Road which ends in 2.5 miles at the refuge headquarters area ($39^{\circ}15'34.92''N$ $75^{\circ}28'23.85''W$).

The Visitor Center and The Refuge Store are open Monday-Friday from 8:00am to 4:00 pm throughout the year. On spring (March-May) and fall (September - mid-December) weekends (Saturday & Sunday) it is open from 9 am to 5 pm.

Directions for the Auto Tour

The Auto Tour begins and ends at the visitor center (mileages are total, from there): From the visitor center, turn left (E) out of the parking lot. At the "T" intersection (0.1 miles), follow the tour loop to the right around Raymond Pool, passing the observation tower and the boardwalk trail before paralleling the pool's edge. The road then makes a "T," (1.6 miles). A left here will return you to the visitor center; a right parallels the northeast face of at the eastern extent of Sheariness Pool. (1.7 - 3.0 miles). Beyond Sheariness, turn right (E) to circle Bear Swamp Pool (3.3 - 5.4 miles). At 5.4 miles, the Bear Swamp Loop rejoins the road from Sheariness. Turn right (W), then left (S) at 5.5 miles, to reach Finis Pool (6.4 miles). A direct return from Finis to the visitor center takes another 3.6 miles, for a total circuit of about 9 miles.

Bombay Hook National Wildlife Refuge
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<http://www.fws.gov/northeast/bombayhook/>

