

# DON'T MISS THE POINT

## Stone Harbor Point is a 7 Mile Beach Treasure

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The Wetlands Institute Birding Tour at Stone Harbor Point



Sanderling



Black Skimmer



Juvenile Red Knots and Ruddy Turnstone

Stone Harbor Point is a treasure of Seven Mile Beach waiting to be explored. Extending from the jetty south of 123<sup>rd</sup> Street to the southernmost tip of Stone Harbor, the point is a wildly dynamic and untamed beach and dune complex that delights the senses.

Hereford Inlet defines the southern end of the point and is one of only a few inlets along the New Jersey and mid-Atlantic coastline that is not hardened and fixed in place. It is not marked for navigation, and only those with extensive local knowledge even attempt to pass through. The constantly shifting sands that make it a difficult place for boats to travel make it an amazing place for wildlife. The ever-changing dunes, beaches and offshore bars create a critical habitat that is favored by numerous species of birds for nesting, roosting, fishing and feeding. These same shifting sands are also a photographer's and beachcomber's delight.

The wide-open expanses, low dunes, and extensive sand flats and lagoons make it a remarkable place to relax, breathe deep, reconnect to the rhythm of the tides and smell the salty air. Beachcombing, nature observation, bird-watching, photography and fishing are among the favored activities at the point. Stone Harbor Point is a place to find the perfect shell, photo or tranquil moment. It's an island treasure waiting to be discovered.

In addition to its stark beauty, the point is also one of the most important havens for coastal birds along the East Coast. Breeding shorebirds including piping plovers and American Oystercatchers, as well as colonies of least terns, black skimmers and even royal terns are among the species seen nesting on the ground among the scattered dunes and shelly wash over areas. In the spring and summer, portions of the high beach area

are closed to protect these beach-nesting birds and their chicks. The site is perfect for birds that use the intertidal areas for foraging, and the mud and sand flats are alive with birds finding their next meal. The skies are filled with the aerial antics of the agile fish hunters – the terns, skimmers and ospreys – diving in the shallows and grabbing a meal for themselves or their young.

Each spring, northbound arctic-nesting migrating shorebirds use the point as a roosting habitat after spending the day foraging on horseshoe-crab eggs on the shores of Delaware Bay. Many of these birds (red knots, ruddy turnstones, semipalmated sandpipers and sanderlings) make nonstop flights of several thousand miles and touch down here to refuel before continuing on to breeding grounds farther north. The combination of a superior roosting habitat in close proximity to an excellent foraging habitat

is one important reason why the Delaware bayshore has always been one of the best sites for long-distance migrant shorebirds and is a site of hemispheric importance for these birds. At Stone Harbor Point, incoming flights of more than 10,000 red knots can be routine during May evenings as the birds leave the Delaware Bay feeding beaches for the safe haven of the point. Scientists now believe that at times during the refueling stopover, the entire Delaware Bay shorebird population can be found on Stone Harbor Point. Its wide-open expanses, undeveloped shoreline and relative safety from predators and disturbance make this an ideal location for them to rest – and it is one of the few such places that is left.

By late summer and throughout the fall, the point is used by southbound migrating shorebirds for feeding and resting before they move on to their

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wintering grounds farther south. Their return flights are more leisurely but still exhausting for them. Juvenile birds making their first flights spend weeks resting and refueling for the journey. Predators also make an appearance during the migrations and it is fairly common to see peregrine falcons and others hunting the weary shorebirds. Western willets make an appearance feeding in the surf. Many species of terns, gulls and other seabirds can be found loafing around at the point after their breeding season comes to an end.

Some shorebirds stay into the early winter on the beaches of Stone Harbor Point and are a welcome sight running in the surf on a cool winter day. They will be joined by their northern neighbors moving south to spend the winter in New Jersey. Winter visitors that can be seen in the waters off the point include northern gannets, and common and red-throated loons. Long-tailed ducks and a host of Scoters form rafts and dive in the surf. Some winters, especially our most recent one, snowy owls make a visit and can be seen perching in the dunes. Unexpected visitors also make appearances so that a winter hike at the point is always an adventure.

Over the years, the point has changed dramatically and unpredictably in the face of storms, wind and tides. Each visit reveals a new landscape changed by the energy of the sea. Those who have visited the point over the years can tell you how much it has changed. In 1991, the point ended at about the position where the pond is now, and the area to the south was a series of sandbars and sand islands not

attached to the island. By 1995, the point was growing, but as a sandspit extending to the west more than south. Offshore islands were well-developed in the inlet (Map 1). By 2001, the point had lengthened and had a sand beach extending more than 2,000 feet past the new pond area. Champaign Island was well-developed as an island in the inlet not connected to the point (Map 2). By 2006, the point extended more than 4,000 feet and Champaign Island was even larger, but only separated from the point by a narrow channel (Map 3). By 2008, the point was almost 1 mile long, with a series of well-developed dunes. By 2009, the point continued to grow, but Champaign Island had shrunk quite a bit and was located farther offshore at the outside edge of the inlet. By 2011, Champaign Island was gone and the point was more than 1.2 miles long. However, most of the southern end of the point was very low-lying and appeared dark gray in color (Map 4). Hurricane Sandy extended the point even further but also leveled much of the dune field and lowered the overall beach elevation so that large portions are intertidal and inundated at high tide. Much of the growth of the point can be attributed to the sand supplied by southward drift projects of Avalon and Stone Harbor.

The lower elevations at Stone Harbor Point today are a challenge for beach-nesting birds that place their nests on the upper beach in shelled areas and among the sparsely vegetated dunes. Very high spring tides and tropical storm surges can bring water into these areas and flood nests. To help improve

the habitat for coastal birds and increase resiliency of the southern Seven Mile Beach to future storms, a habitat-restoration project will be undertaken at Stone Harbor Point beginning next year. The project, funded by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation Hurricane Sandy Coastal Resiliency Grant Program, will be undertaken by a team of partners led by New Jersey Audubon and includes: The Wetlands Institute, Niles and Associates, the New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife, the Conserve Wildlife Foundation of New Jersey, The Richard Stockton College and the Borough of Stone Harbor.

Stone Harbor Point is a very special place. It's a designated conservation area and, because of this, its uses are limited. It is not a beach for swimming, landing your boat for a picnic, or walking your dog. It is a place to enjoy nature walking, fishing, beachcombing and bird-watching. When you visit the point, please do your part. Stay out of areas protected for beach-nesting birds. If you see shorebirds or their young resting or feeding on the beach, give them wide berth and don't

cause them to fly. It wastes critical energy and impacts their health and well-being. Enjoy the beauty and wonders of the special place that is Stone Harbor Point and remember that for the species that spend time there, it's a critical place. With habitat loss and coastal development, the point provides some of the last great wild places for their survival. You never know what you'll see during a visit to the point. It's a great place to catch a glimpse of some amazing wildlife in action and also a great place to help them. It's also a great place to recharge your batteries and reconnect to the wonders of Seven Mile Beach.

Information about Stone Harbor Point and rules specific to it can be found at [stoneharbornj.org/community-interest/stone-harbor-point](http://stoneharbornj.org/community-interest/stone-harbor-point). The Wetlands Institute Fall Migration Festival is Sept. 20-21, and guided tours of the point will be part of the event. Go for a walk or join Institute staffers for a bird-watching adventure. Check the Institute website for details on the festival and dune walks ([wetlandsinstitute.org](http://wetlandsinstitute.org)).



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