

Maine & Monhegan Island | Trip Report

Sept. 12–18, 2021 | by Dan Donaldson & Steve Shunk



With guides Dan Donaldson and Steve Shunk, and participants Christina, James, Karen, Linda, Lisa, Paul, Robert, Sheryl, Steven, Susan, Valerie and Will.



Sun., Sept. 12th

Arrivals in Portland | Gilsland Farm Audubon Center

On arrival day and we spent the afternoon birding in Portland, Maine. Participants arrived on various flights this first morning, but by 2:00 pm we're all here and out for some afternoon birding at Gilsland Farm Audubon Center a mere fifteen minutes away. This Audubon Center is a 70-acre sanctuary located inland- not on the coast but bordering the tidal Presumpscot River, giving us wide ranging habitats to explore this first afternoon. Upon disembarking our van, we were greeted with a flock of Wild Turkeys working the grounds around the visitor center. A quick check of the center's feeders gave us great looks of Downy and a family of 4 Red-bellied Woodpeckers, the juveniles barely recognizable. Exploring the meadow and forest trails, we were rewarded with a large feeding flock of warblers, and we followed the flock containing Chestnut-sided, Black-throated Blue, Northern Parula, American Redstart and Black-and-white Warblers along the edge of a small tidal bay. We watched them foraging in the forest covering all the habitat from the ground to 15 feet up in the canopy giving



us all fantastic looks. This was a fantastic start to our trip!! We hiked up to meadows overlooking the bay offering views of the entire area. We spotted Kingfishers and Great Blue Herons out in the bay and watched a couple Bald Eagles soar above the uplift of the hill's edge. We also were lucky to have two quick flybys of a Peregrine Falcon and a Merlin streaking by us, just a few minutes apart at this great vantage point. We enjoyed a wonderful first meal at Scales Restaurant in the heart of the Waterfront District this first evening.

Mon., Sept. 13th To Monhegan! | Birding on the Bay

This morning, we departed our Portland hotel and drove to Port Clyde to catch the ferry to Monhegan Island. Our two-hour drive to the ferry landing took us through quintessential coastal Maine as we drove through upland forests and tidal river valleys and salt marshes. Upon arrival at Port Clyde, we had time for provisions (ice cream bars) and for some harbor birding, which was quite good. Many gulls were feeding and resting along rocky shore around the marina including Great Black-backed, Herring, and Laughing Gulls picking through the intertidal zone. Several Ravens, Great Blue Herons, and Rock Pigeons also joined them. We boarded the Elizabeth Ann ferry and took advantage of our 40-minute bay crossing as a mini pelagic birding session. Easy, comfortable crossing with smooth waters of the bay and only a slight haze allowed for good birding, and we got our first looks at some great seabirds from the ferry. Our first encounters of these seabirds were of a lone Surf Scoter and several basic plumage Black Guillemots. We passed through several rafts of Common Eider in wildly varying plumages. It was awesome to observe these dramatically different plumage stages! We also observed our first views of target birds for the trip, Northern Gannets.

Arriving on the island, we settled into our hotel, the historic Island Inn. Built in the early 1800s and perched on a bluff, the Inn has a commanding view of the harbor and an adjacent island. Its inviting wraparound porch with



Adirondack chairs proved to be a favorite spot for us to gather. We settled into our rooms and met for our first lunch on the island. We had time for some afternoon birding and used the opportunity to familiarize ourselves with the small village and residential areas nearby and visited the many local gardens and birding patches throughout the town that we would visit again during our time here. With the proximity of the ocean to our amble through town, we had opportunities to view sea and water birds basking on rocks including a flock of 62 Great Black-backed Gulls, Double-crested Cormorants and birds on the wing, too-a flyby Northern Gannet, Ospreys and Ravens passing by overhead, and our first view of the local Bald Eagle. The woodlots, roadsides and gardens held many passerines and we quickly located Eastern Kingbirds, Gray Catbirds, flocks of Cedar Waxwings, and goldfinches. Of course, we also took the opportunity to peek in local shops and art galleries. We returned to the Inn for some relaxing on the porch during sunset and got freshened up for our first Island dinner at the Island Inn.

Tues., Sept. 14th.

Exploring Monhegan

Monhegan Island is only about 5 square miles in area and 80 percent of it is a privately owned nature preserve that offers miles of trails throughout the island. The village is the only developed area and only comprises a small portion of the western side of the island. Today, we started our typical birding routine here on the island. Our morning birding routine consisted of an optional pre-breakfast bird walk at 6:30 am (the sun rises early in the northeast!). Breakfast was at 8:30 am, then our regular morning outing was at 9:30 am. Our morning birding route took us throughout the village portions of the island, hitting the known birding patches and exploring woodland paths, inland ponds, gardens, feeders, wetlands, meadows and ocean overlooks. In the afternoon, we switched gears and hiked up into the nature preserve to explore the forest habitats and stunning ocean cliffs. As there were many trails and overlooks in the preserve, each afternoon hike was on a new trail to a different destination. We began birding immediately upon meeting outside the hotel on this morning. There was a bit of a fallout overnight and we picked up warblers right away with Yellow and a Northern Parula warblers working the hedges in front of the Inn. We decided to walk straight to Ice Pond, a nearby pond of fresh water and forested



edge that is a local favorite hotspot. The wooded road edge down to the pond is pretty birdy and we got good looks at a Swainson's Thrush working the ground below the roadside pines. As soon as we arrive at the pond, we spotted Black-and-White Warblers and Downy Woodpeckers in nearby trees that were soon joined by a Red-breasted Nuthatch. Brown Creepers and Ruby-crowned Kinglets worked the low shrubs around the ponds. It ended up being such good birding, we spent 2 hours in this area. When we finally moved on, we headed to the east side of the island, birding the village yards and gardens. Western Kingbird and Dickcissel were the best birds of the morning and garnered 56 species for our morning walk, which was a wonderful start to our first full day on the island. We lunched at the Fish House Market and of course kicked off this first full day with Lobster Rolls. After lunch, we took a break back at the Inn with some of our group heading back out to explore the nearby shops and galleries.

In the afternoon, we explored town and walked east across the village, passing though row after row of lobster traps that were being readied for the upcoming season. Piles and ropes and markers of every color made for brilliant photographs in the crisp sunshine. As migrating Merlins had arrived on the island, they were a constant presence for our entire time here. We observed 20 on this morning and they constantly harassed and vocalized in chasing the many Northern Flickers that were also migrating though in good numbers. Flickers are nearly the same size but are a difficult prey for them. Many flocks of Cedar Waxwings made for easier meals for the Merlins and we observed them preying on waxwings. Least and "Trail's" (Willow/Alder-type) Flycatchers were also actively feeding on the wing this afternoon. We had good numbers of Ruby and Golden-crowned Kinglets, but birding slowed, so we headed back to town and got word that there was a Clay-colored Sparrow near the overgrown ball field. We bee lined there, finding our first Pine Warbler of the trip en route, and successfully located the Clay-colored as well as a Savannah Sparrow utilizing the same sandy grassland habitat. After this, we headed back to the Inn to catch the sunset from the porch and enjoyed another wonderful dinner at the Inn.



Wed., Sept. 15th Foggy Morning | Lobster Cove | Burnt Head Overlook

We woke to a bit of fog, so we decided to stay close to the Inn and bird the wetland and meadow that bisects the village this morning. Ruby-throated Hummingbirds worked the flowers along the meadow edge along the main road. We spotted a Northern Harrier foraging over the far side of the meadow. It was a male harrier and we got good looks at this gray ghost of the wetlands, but he was too far away for decent photos in these foggy conditions. In his low flight over the wetland, he helped us by scaring up the occasional Great Blue Heron and American Black Duck that were obscured from view deep in the wetland. We worked our way past the wetland up by the woodlots by the brewery and found Black-throated Blue, Cape May and more Northern Parulas low in the nearby hedges. This same woodlot has a small wetland pond deep in the brush that produced a Northern Waterthrush for us the day before. The morning remained foggy, but the expected rain didn't materialize, so we returned to bird the hedges and trees near the brewery and located a nice male Black-throated Blue Warbler and a Northern Waterthrush.

The residents are very welcoming to birders and often invited us onto their properties when they see us birding from the roads or nearby trails. On this day, a gentleman welcomed us onto his property overlooking nearby Lobster Cove. It was a beautiful property with amazing views. We stayed in his backyard for 30 minutes birding and just sitting on rocks enjoying the moment. We noodled our way back towards the Inn, took a quick stop back at Ice Pond but it wasn't as birdy as it was the previous morning. We did spot a pair of Belted Kingfishers here, however, and we watched them hunt and chase each other around the edges of the pond. Several young Herring Gulls came down into the pond to bathe and drink the fresh water, and we watched these young birds run into trouble when they tried to fly out as the forest surrounding the pond limits the airspace. We watched more than one slow down and collide with trees and flop to the ground after taking off. Concerned at first, we watched them walk their way out of the woods into the yards of nearby oceanfront houses and after a rest, they



successfully got airborne again. These are large birds, almost as big as eagles, and it takes a long time for these juveniles to build the muscle mass and strength to become powerful flyers.

Lunch was at the Barnacle Café. It is a small provisions store just down slope from the Inn with a wicked good café and coffee shop inside. We ordered our food and sat outside overlooking the harbor watching the American Black Ducks, Mallards and Cormorants below. Across the harbor, Common Ravens were calling while they rode the uplift from the breeze coming off the ocean. A pair of Belted Kingfishers noisily made an appearance, but quickly moved on along the shoreline. Perhaps these were the same birds we observed at Ice Pond just an hour prior. Deciding that the weather would hold off, we hiked the preserve trail to the Burnt Head Overlook. This trail is listed as easiest on the map, so we gave it a try. It's a typical New England trail with some rocky portions, but we found the hike easy and comfortable. We were rewarded for our efforts as the trail broke out of the forest to a rocky cliff overview. We had our first of the famed dramatic granite cliffs dropping off into the ocean. Here we observe many Common Eiders in various plumages working the surf along the cliffs. Double-crested Cormorants were resting on the cliffs just above the surf. With some effort, we located 4 Great Cormorants off to themselves on a rock outcrop. Individual Northern Gannets were flying by at a rate of about one every five minutes. They were just a bit too far out to photograph, but they were pleasing nonetheless to view through our binoculars. Our hike back from Burnt Head Overlook took us up in elevation a bit, through a crisp hemlock forest. As we reached the top, the forest thinned out a bit and we were surprised by views of a cooperative female Scarlet Tanager. We exited the preserve on the far side of town and took our time walking back through town, talking to other birders and rechecking some of the locations we birded this morning. We relocated the Western Kingbird along the road in front of the Trailing Yew Hotel. This evening, we enjoyed the sunset from the lighthouse that sits above the village. The views were stunning as the sun peeked through the clouds illuminating the bay between Monhegan and nearby Manana Island. After sundown, we walked back to the Island Inn, freshened up, and enjoyed another local dinner at the Inn.

Thurs., Sept. 16th

Lobster Cove | Seal Ledges

On this morning, we decided to head straight to Lobster Cove on the eastern side the village. The wood-lined trail leading down to the water offered good birding opportunities. Merlins were back in the area chasing Northern Flickers and feeding on juvenile Cedar Waxwings. We watched a Merlin snag one from atop a tree not 30 feet from us. Along this trail, we observed a Least Flycatcher on more than one day. We added some foot trails behind the houses along southern shore of the island to our established morning birding loop. This popped



us out right at the Trailing Yew Hotel and we took advantage of their good coffee and cookies that they offer in the mornings. Birding from picnic tables in their courtyard, we watched Yellow-rumped Warblers and Red-breasted Nuthatches in the nearby pines. A Blue-gray Gnatcatcher was also observed from the picnic tables-a new species for the trip. We lunched at the Fish House again. As the Fish House is located right on the water, it was enjoyable to walk along the sand while we were waiting for our orders. We ate on the nearby picnic tables and then headed back to the Inn for free time and perhaps a quick nap.

We met up for our afternoon hike at 3 pm after our afternoon siesta. Heading back up into the wildlife preserve, we aimed toward to the appropriately named Seal Ledges. This hike winds through beautiful pine forests along the northwest side of the island. As the fall is the season for mushrooms, we are dazzled by an incredible mushroom show on the forest floor and spend a good hour photographing the many species along the trail. What a wondrous experience to emerge from the dark woods onto the bright open cliffs of Seal Ledges! This location is on the western side of the island, protected from the swells of the Atlantic Ocean. The waters here were relatively calm and Seal Ledges, a small and low island outcrop just offshore, offers great views of and allowed for photographing Harbor Seals resting, sunning, and relaxing. The sun was cooperative, and the water was clear here, so seals were easily observed swimming between kelp beds and the nearby granite rock formations. Our return hike took us along the sunny shoreline for a few hundred yards before we headed back into the forest. As we made our way back to town, we explored the ball fields and light house again before we arrived back at the Island Inn in time for sunset and cocktails before dinner.

Fri., Sept. 17th Spectacular Sunrise | White Head Point

On this morning, we were graced with a glorious sunrise. Our early birders photographed the pink and gray popcorn clouds over the island. Savannah Sparrows arrived overnight as we observed several in the hedges near the Inn. Our walk towards Ice Pond was very birdy and we found a female Orchard Oriole sharing the top of a nearby pine tree with a flock of Cedar Waxwings. Our afternoon hike was back in the preserve to White Head Point. This was our most physically challenging, but also rewarding hike. The woods along here were also full of mushrooms, but the views from the cliffs at White Head Point stole the show. These cliffs are among the highest on the east coast and here we were high enough to photograph flying gulls from above. Here we captured



stunning images of Lesser and Greater Black-backed Gulls, Northern Gannets, and Herring Gulls in flight. Another group of Great Cormorants was located here as well, this time closer and in bright light. We spent the entire afternoon walking the cliff top trails, photographing, and just sitting taking in the stunning scenes of cliffs, ocean, and forests. Our final dinner on the island was again at the Island Inn.

Sat., Sept. 18th Return to Mainland | Birding by Boat

Saturday was our last morning on Monhegan Island, and we would be boarding the ferry at 12:30 for our mini-pelagic ferry ride back to Port Clyde Harbor and then traveling on to Portland. It was foggy this last morning, but we birded our regular (optional) sunrise hike at 6:30 am anyway and visited our “regular” spots of Ice Pond, the marsh, and the always productive apple trees along the road to the lighthouse. We did not find any new birds this morning, but perhaps due to the fog, the birds seemed a bit more cooperative, and we got wonderful looks at Cape May Warbler, Yellow-rumped Warbler, and Red-eyed Vireos. Our return ferry ride started out foggy, but we quickly cleared the fog as we pulled away from the island. Standing out on the bow of the ship, we got great looks at several Common Loon, Northern Gannets, and Harbor Porpoise along the route back to the mainland. Back at Port Clyde Harbor, we were greeted by our driver and local guide, Michael Good. We travelled straight to Dodge Point Nature Preserve for a pre-dinner woodland walk where we observed Swainson’s Thrush, Eastern Wood-Pewee (a lifer for our western participants!), Brown Creepers, Black-capped Chickadees, and White-breasted Nuthatches. Dinner was en route back to Portland at the Damariscotta River Grill, in the river town of Damariscotta for our last evening meal together. The restaurant was perfect for our last dinner with large table and comfortable surroundings that allow us all to chat and share our favorite experiences of the trip. In addition to the amiable shared experiences, we also enjoyed our last chance at dining on Maine lobster, oysters, and seafood as well as other delectable food.

Sun., Sept. 19th Scarborough Marsh | Departures

On our last morning together, we travelled to the famous Scarborough Marsh for some morning birding. Scarborough Marsh is a 3000-acre saltmarsh near the town of Piney Point Maine on the coast in southern Maine. We arrived as the tidal waters were quickly rising in the braided streams and the water soon covered much of the available mudflats. This concentrated the wading birds in remaining flats and shallow



areas, and we observed groups of Great Blue Herons and Great Egrets. Here we also had the opportunity for briefs looks and comparisons of Snowy Egrets with much larger Great Egrets. We hiked along the dike and had quick looks at Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Merlin, Yellow-rumped Warbler, and Song Sparrows here. As we desired to add some shorebirds to our list of birds for the trip, we headed into the town of Piney Point Beach which boasts a large crescent beach in a busy beach town. Walking the beach, we found a large flock of about 200 Sanderlings working the biomass washing up in the surf. This was a very cooperative flock, and we were able to spend about a half hour picking apart this flock at close range. By the time we left, everyone in the group was able to correctly identify fall plumage Dunlin, Sanderling, and Semipalated Sandpipers. We returned to our hotel to freshen up, exchanged contact information, and said our goodbyes before we transferred to the airport. We left Maine with new birds on some of our life lists, recollections of watching these birds in these beautiful habitats, fond memories of classic Maine Coastlines, the scents of salt, pine and salt marsh lingering in our memories, and a new appreciation for fresh New England seafood. Safe travels and may we meet again!

Photo Credits: Birders Welcome Sign (Dan Donaldson - DD), Group Photo (Valerie Gebert - VG) Port Clyde (VG), Ring-necked Pheasant (DD), Monarch Butterfly on Flowers (VG), Crab Claw (Steve Shunk - SS), View at the Inn (VG), Cedar Waxwing (SS), Eastern Kingbird (Kim Nelson - KN), Yellow Warbler (VG), Merlin (SS), Cape May Warbler (KN), Island Inn (KN), Lighthouse (VG), Group Birding (KN), Buoys (DD), Red-eyed Vireo (KN), Myrtle Warbler (SS), Pinecones (VG), Scenic (VG), Ring-necked Pheasant (VG), Birding Hike (DD), Rope Detail (DD), Lobster fishing gear (VG), Harbor Seal (SS), Greater and Lesser Black-backed Gulls (SS), 2nd Year Great Black-backed Gull (DD), Purple Asters (VG), Great Cormorants (DD), Sanderling & Dunlin (KN), Dan at Port (SS), Group Birding (VG)