

# Nickerson Beach and Long Island, June 2019



The **American Oystercatcher** photograph above was taken shortly after sunrise on a June Saturday morning at Nickerson Beach, Long Island, New York State. On Friday evening I had been at a desk in Canary Wharf, London, which is where I was also to be found on the subsequent Monday morning. I know which I prefer. This time there was no missing/drunken AirBnB host, no gigantic trip-ending thunderstorm, just me and lots and lots of fabulous birds. In short it was a wonderful two days that I thoroughly enjoyed, and that I would like to repeat when time allows.

## Logistics

- Friday night after work to JFK, returning overnight on Sunday and thus straight to work on Monday morning. Slightly brutal, but days off are somewhat at a premium. As usual I burned some airmiles to get a flat bed on the way back - this ensured I survived Monday without falling asleep at my desk.
- After my absurd drunken AirBnB host experience three years ago I decided to camp by the beach. Unfortunately I could not ever get the Nickerson Beach campground website to work so I decided to wing it and sleep in the car. If I got really tired I could always go to a motel. This worked out fantastically well, and (with apologies to the campground, but you know, fix your website eh?) I was able to park right next to the beach and use the toilet block and showers. It was more of an RV park anyhow, I didn't see a single tent.
- I hired a car from Avis with a nice big back seat. I can't remember what it was but it fitted me just fine and I slept perfectly well.
- eBird and the Audubon App came in very useful as always.
- Ticks are a problem on Long Island. Keep yourself covered up, apply insect repellent to all areas of likely ingress, and check yourself frequently as well as at the end of the day. If you do discover a Tick attached, lever it off and seek medical attention. You will probably be fine if you remove it quickly, it allegedly takes time to get infected.

## Itinerary

Day 0: Friday night after work to JFK and straight to Nickerson and to sleep.

Day 1: Saturday morning on the beach, afternoon birding around Long Island.

Day 2: Sunday morning on the beach, all afternoon at Jamaica Bay NWR, and then overnight to London.

## Day by day account

### Day 0

I got a fortunate upgrade on the plane after displaying gentlemanly conduct and giving up my bulkhead seat to a nursing mother who needed room to spread out, and thus crossed the Atlantic in relative comfort. I probably got to Nickerson at around 11pm local time once I had picked up my car and bought some provisions. The road to the car park was open so that late RV'ers could return to their luxurious buses at any time, and I was able to simply park up where they left their cars and pickups and thus gain some comfort from not being exposed. Mrs L was quite worried I was going to get shot in the wilds, this being the USA 'n'all, but in fact I was just fine and went to sleep with the sound of the large **Common Tern** and **Skimmer** colony in my ears. Far more dangerous were the Ticks that proliferate across Long Island, but more on that later.

### Day 1

I had a surprisingly good sleep and was awoken by cars speeding past to the beach at around 5.30am. The day was dawning and it looked like the light was going to be fantastic. I surmised that the procession of early morning vehicles contained bird photographers and this proved to be spot on. I hurried to join them. Another benefit of an early start was that the car park booths are not manned until much later on in the morning, perhaps 9am, so I avoided some kind of obscene fee (\$30 I think).

The beach was crawling with camotwats taking photos into the rising sun. This is the disadvantage of going to popular places, but the beach is big enough and the colony (40.586103,-73.599228) large enough that you can generally find your own spot. Far more irritating was the local policeman on a quad bike driving up and down the beach disturbing the feeding **American Oystercatchers** and their chicks. I suspect he was there to keep an eye on photographers as I have heard that there have been problems with people trying to go inside the ropes, which I suppose shouldn't come

as any great surprise. Nobody transgressed at all, so he ended up being the only person causing disturbance which is a bit ridiculous as he had no need to repeatedly drive up and down. No matter. The light was brilliant, and I had with me my skimmer pod and gimbal head and so spent a happy few hours pushing my lens around on the sand trying to get some artistic shots of birds. The colony was very active - no **Skimmer** or **Tern** chicks this early in the season, but lots of squabbling in the dunes. The **American Oystercatchers** had chicks, and I probably spent most time with these as they fed in the surf and then brought back morsels for the youngsters - small crabs for the most part. See map below for the car park, campground and main colony locations.



Nickerson Beach Map

On the photography front don't think I did all that well, but crucially I did better than last time so that's something, and of course it beats the heck out of being in Wanstead in June. This is always my trouble on short trips, it takes a while to get used to what I am doing again and remember what works and what doesn't, as it has generally been a very long time since I found myself in a similar situation. Those that are able to take great shots from the very first moment deserve much adulation.



American Oystercatcher

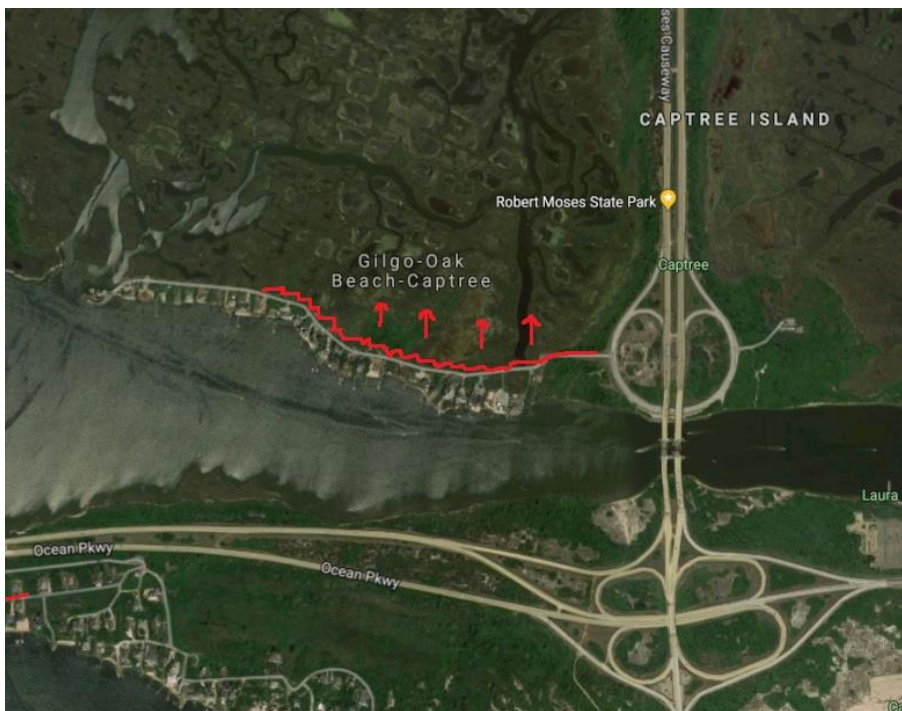
The disadvantage of fantastic golden hour days is that the light becomes harsh quite quickly, and so by 9am it was all over. I returned to the car, swapped my camera for a towel and went and had a shower. Time to go birding! Enter once again eBird.org, one of the most fabulous birding resources ever developed. Before I left I had spent a happy few hours on this website exploring all of what they call "birding hotspots". You can see what people have seen recently, or the totality of what has been seen over the last ten years. Most importantly you can search by species and thus match your wants with what has been seen. It is fabulous, and I am gradually uploading all of my birding lists to it so that other people can benefit from my sightings.



Black Skimmer (Top), Common Tern (Bottom)



My first stop was Captree Island (40.644663,-73.270366), reached along the barrier island of Jones Beach State Park. The target was **Saltmarsh Sparrow**, a specialist of low-lying coastal sites that somehow I had never encountered in all of my visits. Captree island did not have many options unless you had a boat or a canoe, so I chose the one available road, a nice residential street with big houses with sea views on one side, and saltmarsh on the other. Gold was struck more or less instantaneously when I spotted some small birds flying low across the water and disappearing into the vegetation. Unfortunately they never came close, rather the opposite in fact, as an incoming **Great White Egret** flushed them much further away. Still, a tick is a tick, and I like ticks. Well, most ticks.



Map of Captree (L), Saltmarsh Sparrow (R)

A nearby Denny's served up a great breakfast, and my next birding stop was Connetquot River State Park Preserve. Ominously the lady at the entrance booth gave me a massive wad of paper warning me of the danger of Ticks - three types, one, the Deer Tick, capable of carrying the dreaded Lyme disease. I was keen to avoid this, so I was clearly going to have to be quite careful. Keeping to paths and avoiding all vegetation, I walked a loop around the lake up to the trout hatchery and back. It was very quiet, and photography-wise a complete bust. In the woods I found plenty of **Ovenbirds**, **Eastern Towhees**, **Cardinals** and others, whilst an **Osprey** fished over the water. Due to the Tick danger I did not go off paths which probably limited my species counts, and yet despite being extremely careful when I got back to the car I discovered a **Lone Star Tick** crawling up my leg.... This forced me to basically undress in the car park, but I didn't find any more.





My next stop was a field above Calverton airfield, at an eBird location known as Calverton VOR (CCC) – GPS 40.929616,-72.800152. I found **Grasshopper Sparrows** here in decent numbers, along with **Savannah Sparrow** and **Prairie Warbler**. More birds were on the southern edge of the airfield at 40.904697,-72.815653, where you can leave your car by the side of the main road and walk up onto the runways. At Calverton Ponds Preserve a short distance away I went on another nice walk and picked up yet another Tick - they are crafty little buggers! It was around this point that I decided that I was done with birding near plants and headed back to the beach.



Map of Calverton (L), Grasshopper Sparrow (R)

Back at the beach the wind had really got up, and a stiff breeze was coming off the ocean. For those of you who have not been, Nickerson beach is composed of very fine sand. The strength of the wind whipped this up into a frenzy, and when I made the mistake of trying to lie down and get a low shot of an **Oystercatcher** I got a mouthful and two earfuls of sand and realised that photography was over for the day. I had another shower both to get rid of the accumulation of sand as well as to perform a *very* careful examination of all parts of me for errant insects with unpleasant ambitions, and went and had a very large dinner in Island Park in celebration of a productive day.



## Day 2

I was awoken by rain on the roof of the car, not the best way to start a day of planned photography. It did stop but the light was dire, nonetheless I had a short wander on the beach in search of opportunities. Not much doing, though some [unfortunate] interest in some **Common Tern** that were being harassed by a red balloon that had drifted into the breeding colony. Even though it was the fault of humans I didn't feel I could go and deal with it in case I caused even greater anxiety or even worse trod on an egg. In the end they popped it and settled back down. I just hope that nothing eats it.



Finding no photographic scenes of note I changed tack and went birding over the road at the Lido Passive Nature Area, as indicated by the dotted red lines on the Nickerson Beach Map on Page 2. This is not a big area but it had lots of birds – breeding **Osprey**, both species of **Night Heron**, plenty of **egrets** and best of all a **Clapper Rail**. I followed the path to the end where there was a viewing platform out towards the last few remaining bay houses. Unfortunately it soon became apparent that I was the dish of the day for vast swarms of mosquitos that also inhabited the swampy shoreline, and I was forced to beat a fairly rapid retreat back to the car. The weather had not really improved – grey muggy skies – so it looked like birding was going to be the order of the day rather than photography. I never view this as a problem and I had plenty of ideas of where to go. Fed up with **Ticks** of the small crawly kind and wanting to be close to the airport for a quick getaway, there was only really ever one plan – Jamaica Bay NWR, that splendid nature reserve with rather unexpected views of the Manhattan skyline. After a truly excellent multi-thousand calorie breakfast at the Crossbay Diner which would ensure I didn't need to eat again for the rest of the day, I pulled up at the reserve. It is free to enter, and the damage wrought by Hurricane Sandy had been repaired since the last time I visited which meant that the entire West Pond is able to be walked. I thought about not taking my camera, but the weather seemed to have improved marginally so once more I hauled it onto my shoulder.



Diamondback Terrapin

Per eBird my ABA targets at Jamaica were a summering **Long-tailed Duck** and breeding **Barn Owl**, with an outside possibility of **Eider** and **Black Scoter** in the bay. The **LT Duck** fell quite quickly, floating about incongruously among



the **Canada Geese** and **Mallards**. An odd way to see one but gratefully notched up. I ended up walking around the West Pond twice there was so much to see. The best area was probably closest to the newly repaired bund – **Song Sparrow**, **Tree Swallow**, **Yellow Warbler** and **Brown Thrasher** were numerous and quite obliging, I was pleased I had brought my camera even though it was a fair distance to lug it. Lots of **Grackles**, **Common Yellowthroat**, and **American Goldfinch**. A **Barn Owl** was present and correct in its box for the second ABA tick of the day, and basically I had an unhurried, Tick-free and extremely pleasant wander. As well as birds the paths held the occasional **Diamondback Terrapin** in egg-laying mode. An exasperated yet extremely patient volunteer was attempting to pick up these errant reptiles and take them somewhere more suitable for excavating a hole, the beach say, but they were giving her the runaround! I helped her pick one up and put it in a bucket, it was surprisingly heavy.



Jamaica Bay Map and Song Sparrow

After my second loop I crossed the road and went to Big John's Pond which held another occupied **Barn Owl** box and four **Black-crowned Night Herons**. The much larger East Pond had **Wood Duck**, **Black Duck**, and a flock of nine **Glossy Ibis**, but all were over the far side next to the A-Train tracks. I was surprised to find that it was now mid-afternoon and as I didn't want to head back out on another foray instead I packed up, got changed and drove the short distance to JFK. This meant quite a lot of time at the airport but I was able to have a shower and then hunker down in the lounge and get on with my birding notebook which I was severely behind on. I caught up on another few days of my Utah trip and then flew home. A far better trip than my last attempt.



Brown Thrasher (L), Tree Swallow (Middle), Prairie Warbler (R)

## Trip List

I notched up 66 species in a weekend split more or less equally between birding and photography. I used eBird to work out any targets, gaining 5 ABA birds in the process, as well as to give an indication of where the productive birding sites were. In summary a nice weekend if it is something you are able to do.

1	Brant	23	Lesser Black-backed Gull	45	American Robin
2	Canada Goose	24	Great Black-backed Gull	46	Gray Catbird
3	Mute Swan	25	Common Tern	47	Brown Thrasher
4	Wood Duck	26	Black Skimmer	48	Northern Mockingbird
5	Gadwall	27	Double-crested Cormorant	49	European Starling
6	American Wigeon	28	Great Egret	50	Cedar Waxwing
7	Mallard	29	Snowy Egret	51	House Sparrow
8	Black Duck	30	Little Blue Heron	52	House Finch
9	Long-tailed Duck	31	Black-crowned Night Heron	53	American Goldfinch
10	Ruddy Duck	32	Yellow-crowned Night Heron	54	Eastern Towhee
11	Pigeon	33	Glossy Ibis	55	Chipping Sparrow
12	Mourning Dove	34	Osprey	56	Savannah Sparrow
13	Chimney Swift	35	Barn Owl	57	Grasshopper Sparrow
14	Clapper Rail	36	Red-bellied Woodpecker	58	Saltmarsh Sparrow
15	American Oystercatcher	37	Great Crested Flycatcher	59	Song Sparrow
16	Semipalmated Plover	38	Willow Flycatcher	60	Red-winged Blackbird
17	Piping Plover	39	American Crow	61	Common Grackle
18	Sanderling	40	Tree Swallow	62	Boat-tailed Grackle
19	Willet	41	Northern Rough-winged Swallow	63	Ovenbird
20	Laughing Gull	42	Barn Swallow	64	Common Yellowthroat
21	Ring-billed Gull	43	House Wren	65	Yellow Warbler
22	American Herring Gull	44	Blue-gray Gnatcatcher	66	Northern Cardinal