

The Hampton-Seabrook Estuary Important Bird Area

The New Hampshire Important Bird Area Program is part of a national and international effort to identify areas that provide critical habitat to birds during some stage of their annual cycle. In New Hampshire the program is a partnership of the Audubon Society of New Hampshire, the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department, and the University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension. IBAs are identified based on strict scientific criteria, including 1) the presence of threatened or endangered species, 2) other species and habitats of conservation concern, and 3) areas where birds congregate during breeding, migration, or winter. It is hoped that recognition of IBAs can help guide future conservation and research efforts at areas that meet these criteria.

The Hampton-Seabrook Estuary meets categories 1-3 of the IBA criteria, as follows:

1) Endangered and threatened species

Piping Plover (state endangered, federally threatened). Seabrook and Hampton Beaches are the only areas in New Hampshire where this species nests, and at only 5-7 pairs the population is quite small. Predator exclusion devices and public outreach are thus important management tools at this IBA.

Common Tern (state threatened) – Prior to the re-establishment of the tern colony at the Isles of Shoals, the Hampton marshes were the primary breeding area for this species in the state. In the most recent survey, an estimate 15-20 pairs bred there in 2002, down from roughly 35 in 2000. During the post-breeding period, numerous terns (100-1000, including federally endangered Roseate Terns) roost and feed in Hampton Harbor.

Four other listed species occur in the area to a lesser extent:

Osprey (state special concern) occur regularly during migration, 1-2 pairs have bred since 2003

Northern Harriers (state endangered) pass through on migration, and sometimes winter.

Least Terns (state endangered) have occurred irregularly in Seabrook, but without evidence of breeding.

2) Other species and habitats of conservation concern

The principal habitat of note in this category is salt marsh. The important species nesting in this habitat include Willet, Common Tern, Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrow, and Seaside Sparrow. The Willet and the two sparrows are all listed as species of conservation concern in New Hampshire, and also appear on regional lists of priority species. Although detailed data are not currently available for these three species, we estimate that 25-30 pairs of Willets, 150-200 pairs of Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrows, and 1-2 pairs of Seaside Sparrows breed in the marshes each year. Saltmarsh Sharp-tailed Sparrows, as well as the more northerly Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow, can also be quite common here during fall migration. In addition, the marshes of the estuary provide year-round habitat for American Black Ducks, although numbers are low relative to the major wintering area on Great Bay.



Although the remnant dune system at Hampton-Seabrook is small and fragmented, it occasionally provides breeding habitat for Horned Larks, which otherwise are restricted to artificial airport habitat in New Hampshire. Dunes also provide important nesting and resting habitat for the aforementioned Piping Plovers.

3) Congregatory species

The area is the primary stopover area for migrating shorebirds in spring and (especially) in fall. These birds feed in Hampton Harbor and associated shallows, and roost in salt panes and dunes. Of the 18 regularly recorded species, the following are most common (annual numbers in parentheses):

Black-bellied Plover (100-300)	Semipalmated Plover (600-1200)
Greater Yellowlegs (50-200)	Lesser Yellowlegs (25-50)
Whimbrel (5-20)	Hudsonian Godwit (2-4)
Semipalmated Sandpiper (1000-2000)	Least Sandpiper (50-100)
White-rumped Sandpiper (2-6)	Dunlin (50-300)
Short-billed Dowitcher (50-400)	



In addition to shorebirds, the marshes are important for up 9 species of herons. Most common are Great Blue Heron (5-15), Great Egret (5-15, max of 46), snowy Egret (25-50, max of 252), and Glossy Ibis (previously up to 30, now <10). Other congregatory species of note in the harbor include Double-crested Cormorant (50-400), gulls (several species), and terns (above). Hundreds of Dunlin and up to 150 Purple Sandpipers use the Hampton Inlet breakwaters during winter. Species congregating in the dune areas include Tree Swallow (300-500+ in early fall), Horned Lark (100 ± in fall and winter), and Snow Bunting (50-150+ in fall and sometimes winter).

For the purposes of the NH IBA Program, the marsh portion of the Hampton-Seabrook Estuary IBA is defined as the area below the high tide line in the towns of Hampton, Hampton Falls, and Seabrook, plus a 250 foot buffer as defined by the Shoreline Protection Act. The dune area includes parts of Hampton Beach State Park, Seabrook Beach, and the dunes west of Route 1A in Seabrook. The two portions overlap in dunes along the southeastern edge of the harbor just below the bridge over the inlet.

For more information on the New Hampshire Important Bird Area Program, contact:

Pam Hunt
Audubon Society of New Hampshire
3 Silk Farm Road
Concord, NH 03301

(603) 224-9909 extension 328
email: phunt@nhaudubon.org



More details on the IBA Program are also available on the N.H. Audubon web site.