

# CAPE COD TIMES



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## Cape Cod a popular rest point for shorebirds on long migrations. ‘Lesser-known tourists.’

WEST BARNSTABLE — Whenever he gets a chance, one of Peter Crosson’s favorite things to do is to go to work, counting shorebirds.

“Any excuse to go birding,” he said as his truck bounced, soft-tired, over swales of deep sand between Sandy Neck Beach and the Great Marshes on Aug. 6.

Birding is a passion of his. The “work” comes in when he ventures out to conduct surveys of shorebirds as a volunteer for Manomet Conservation Sciences, a nonprofit that uses science and collaboration to improve the health of flyways, coastal ecosystems, and working lands and seas.

This month Crosson was among dozens of volunteers contributing to Manomet’s second annual Massachusetts Shorebird Blitz, a nine-day survey that ended Sunday.

### ‘Thousands of birds in one roost’

Sandy Neck hosts some of the highest numbers of shorebirds in the state.

During last year’s inaugural blitz, Crosson estimated about 5,800 shorebirds were present at Sandy Neck on

the day he conducted his survey — about 8% of the total estimated 73,088 shorebirds, comprising 29 species, that were observed at 115 Massachusetts coastal sites.

Crosson on Aug. 6 gave a tour of part of the route he follows when he’s in the field. Joining him was Manomet staff member Lisa Schibley, the North American coordinator for the [International Shorebird Survey](#).

Crosson’s frequent birding excursions on Sandy Neck have taught him where the shorebirds tend to feed and where they tend to settle down



Peter Crosson trains his spotting scope out onto Cape Cod Bay on Aug. 6 from a viewing spot at Sandy Neck Beach in West Barnstable. Crosson volunteered for the Manomet Conservation Sciences annual bird count, known as the Massachusetts Shorebird Blitz. *Steve Heaslip /Cape Cod Times*

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“You’ll see thousands of birds in one roost. And often, especially out at the tip, you’ll see 10 to 12 different species together in one roost.”

## The ‘art’ of counting birds

The birds can be “very flighty” when there are small disturbances, taking flight in unison — a remarkable sight to see, he said, though it can cause issues when it comes to doing a count.

“There’s nothing more fun than counting like three quarters of this giant roost and then having a peregrine buzz them and they all explode in every direction.”

Crosson admitted he finds counting challenging.

“I mean, anybody can count, but it’s allowing yourself to stay focused and count



One of Peter Crosson’s favorite things to do is to count shorebirds. “Any excuse to go birding,” he said as his truck bounced, soft-tired, over swales of deep sand on Aug. 6 in West Barnstable. Crosson was volunteering for the annual bird survey by Manomet Conservation Sciences. *Steve Heaslip /Cape Cod Times*

intelligently, thinking more in terms of looking at a small group of maybe five or 10, and counting those in clusters,” he said. “It’s a real art. I tend to be more like trying to look for the rarity in there, and I have to remind myself ‘I’m here to count, I’m not here to look for the rarity.’”

Schibley agreed it’s easy to slip into that treasure-hunting mode.

When it comes to counting birds for the surveys, like the blitz, Schibley said the focus is on estimation and calculating percentages of different species of birds, rather than getting exact counts.

“What we’re interested in is the trend. So, if one person is counting these birds in this spot the same way year after year after year, that’s going to tell us the trend, even if we don’t have the exact number of birds,” she said.

## Volunteers matter

Among the Manomet staff, Crosson is thought of as a “super volunteer” because with Sandy Neck, which is near his home, “he’s taken on this very difficult, complex space and has been sending us great data for a long time,” Schibley said.

Crosson's work, and that of other volunteers on the Cape and elsewhere, is invaluable to Manomet, she said. Sometimes their work reveals locations are more important for shorebirds that scientists thought. Chapin Beach in Dennis, which is regularly surveyed by Mary Jo "MJ" Foti, another volunteer, is a case in point. Foti's work revealed that the beach "is one of the most important feeding areas on Cape Cod for shorebirds," Schibley said.

"That's something I don't think most shorebird scientists understood."

## **Why is it important to count migrating shorebirds?**

Cape Cod, said Liana DiNunzio, one of Manomet's shorebird biologists, supports upwards of 100,000 migrating shorebirds a year.

Unlike the piping plovers and American oystercatchers that nest on the beaches here, many of the shorebird species that visit Cape Cod during migration in spring and fall breed farther north, some even as far as the Arctic, DiNunzio said.

"They use Cape Cod as a place to rest and refuel — known as a staging area — during their long journeys between their breeding grounds and non-breeding grounds in the south," she said. "Some birds fly as far as 9,000 miles between the Arctic and Chile twice a year to complete their annual cycles."

These birds must have enough food and safe places to rest at their staging areas "so they can survive their long migrations and have successful breeding seasons."

"This is the lesser-known group of 'tourists' that visit the region," she said.

The goal of the Massachusetts shorebird blitz in particular "is to get a minimum estimate of the number of shorebirds using our coastline during peak fall migration" and to identify significant stopover locations all along the Massachusetts coastline.

Data collected during surveys, she explained, will guide future research and conservation in the region.

"The blitz is also an opportunity to bring awareness to shorebirds and their amazing migrations. This is particularly important because many of the shorebird species that visit here are in decline," DiNunzio said. "The success of shorebirds reflects the health and well-being of the coastal ecosystems that make the Cape such a special place."

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