

Greenwich Point News



Friends of Greenwich Point - PO Box 711 - Old Greenwich, CT 06870

WINTER 2010



Winter Birds at Greenwich Point

by Cynthia Ehlinger

The Friends of Greenwich Point enjoy providing birds at the Holly Grove some extra sustenance during the winter. FoGP Board member Dick Lane leads a group of dedicated volunteers who refill the feeders each week from late fall through early spring. We are grateful to Millie George, Bobbie Littlefield, Lynda Elliott, Betty Davies, Jan Linskey and Cynthia Ehlinger.

But not all birds visit our feeders. A highlight of observing birds during the winter at Greenwich Point Park is viewing the variety of waterfowl that float, dabble and dive in the waters just off shore. While a few Black Ducks, Mallards and Canada Geese are here year round, many more ducks, geese, loons and grebes spent their summers in northern lakes throughout Canada and only visit Long Island Sound for the colder part of the year.

The Brant (*Branta bernicla*) is one example often seen among the rocks in the water at either end of the beach. This small cousin of the Canada Goose with a 48-inch wing-

span is frequently found in groups, like the one shown above, close to shore feeding on vegetation. Its favored food of eelgrass has been in short supply since the 1930s when disease wiped out most of this marine plant along the Atlantic Coast of the United States. The result was a crash in the Atlantic Brant population. Fortunately, the birds adapted to also eat sea lettuce, cord grass, and cultivated grass, and the population rebounded. In the mid-1970s, severe winters contributed to another decline, but by the early 1990s the numbers had bounced back.

Other common waterfowl around the Point include Common Goldeneye, Red-Breasted and Hooded Mergansers, and Bufflehead, all of which dive to get their food. Of all diving ducks, the Long-tailed Duck (formerly Oldsquaw) spends the most time under water, according to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology website, staying submerged when foraging three to four times as much as it is on top of the water. In contrast, dabbling ducks like Mallards and Black Ducks are nearly always on the surface

and simply tip themselves over to eat with their tails up in the air. Consequently the dabbling ducks are often found closer to shore.

There are a number of resources related to the birds of Greenwich Point – to help you find out more or to share your own discoveries. Free, naturalist-led bird walks co-sponsored by Wild Wings, Audubon, and Bruce Museum take place on the first Sunday of every month and meet near the southern concession stand. The Anniversary Holly Grove shelter holds a simple log of bird observations made at the Point. For more advanced data collection, see the website eBird.org, which is designed to turn the observations of birders into a valuable contribution to understanding broad-scale patterns of bird distribution and abundance. With eBird you can start your own private bird list, submit sightings at Greenwich Point or elsewhere, and explore the data with maps, charts, and records.