

THE GREAT OUTDOORS



Winter walks in the Delaware Bayshore region are full of adventure and surprises – with or without snow. Photo: Karla Rossini.

More Winter Hikes

The mosaic that defines the southern New Jersey Delaware Bayshore, along with its varied ecotones, supports a greater number of endangered species than any other region in the state.

J. Morton Galetto, CU Maurice River

Two weeks ago I focused on winter exploration and some of the benefits of exploring in Southern New Jersey, especially in the snow with a youngster. This article will be devoted to picking a trail and offers some suggested places to stroll in cold weather.

Locations with mixed habitat types offer the best viewing opportunities for wildlife and for exploring different kinds of vegetation. Since we live in a coastal plain with lots of waterways and forests there are many places for habitats to interface. These areas are called ecotones, where two biological communities meet and integrate. The size of these interfaces can be narrow or wide. In some places they can be localized, while in others they may encompass an entire region.

Along the New Jersey Delaware Bayshore we have vast wetlands that are ribboned by large forested buffers, some of these uninterrupted for miles. For example connected preserved lands from the Maurice to the Cohansey Rivers span about 17 miles of bayfront. The collective acreage along the bay exceeds 15,000 acres and, if you move inland, Bevan Wildlife Management area alone is an additional 40,000 acres. For the purposes of this article I will not address the

land to the southeast of the Maurice, which stretches to the Villas along the Bay.

Envision this 17-mile stretch of bayfront with a ribbon of wetlands about 2 miles wide, and then a forested community or farmland which abuts it. The forest is often hardwood swamp before it rises to upland: a blend of forest and upland woods. There are areas of open water, either tidal pools or former mining operations. In some stretches there are sandy beaches. This is the mosaic that defines the Southern New Jersey Delaware Bayshore.



Views from Turkey Point Road offer wonderful vistas of preserved properties. Photo: J. Morton Galetto.

Again, where each of these ribbons and patches of habitat meet is an ecotone. These areas are often more populated by species than either of the two habitats that they bridge. It is the integrated community of animals and their shared use that causes a greater richness and abundance of species. When protecting lands, many biologists/researchers argue that it is these ecotonal areas that are biodiversity-rich centers and therefore deserve the greatest investment in conservation.



The Maple Ave. Trail has lots of old ditches that are frequented by wildlife. Photo: J. Morton Galetto

Our state's wildlife managers have divided the state into six landscape regions for the purpose of sustaining wildlife populations. The area extending from Cape May to Salem that borders the Delaware Bay is not

surprisingly called the *Delaware Bay Landscape Region*.

This regional approach gives a special framework for management efforts based on rivers, watershed boundaries, ridgelines, soils, vegetation, and the like. The state's landscape project, prepared by the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, Division of Fish and Wildlife, Endangered and Nongame Species Program in their 3.3 plan, described the *Delaware Bay Landscape* region as follows:

"This landscape encompasses all or parts of Cape May, Atlantic and Cumberland counties. It features significant populations of bald eagle, barred owl, eastern tiger salamander, Cope's gray treefrog and 30 other endangered and threatened species. The vast woodland tracts of this region are among the largest in the state and support a large portion of New Jersey's neotropical birds and interior-forest bird populations. The extensive saltwater marsh and sandy overwash beaches support a significant horseshoe crab breeding area and shorebird migrations of worldwide ecological significance, including that of the red knot. Despite significant losses of habitat, the Cape May Peninsula remains one of the country's most important migratory "stopovers" for hundreds of bird and insect

species. The expansive habitat mosaic of rivers and streams flowing into the tidal Delaware Bay supports concentrations of rare wildlife and wintering waterfowl.” Each region is evaluated based on habitat types, quality and species usage in an effort to be proactive in the protection of species located within its boundaries. Our Delaware Bay Landscape region is remarkable in that it supports a greater number of endangered species than any other region in the state.



Sometimes in winter snowy owls will make a surprise appearance on the New Jersey Delaware Bayshore. Photo: J. Morton Galetto.

Here in Southern New Jersey we are afforded many great wildlife viewing opportunities. And because a great deal of space is

protected and publicly owned we have a great deal of recreational access to do just that.

Knowing this, I suggest you seek out the vast areas of connected space, or a patch surrounded by urbanization that has ecotones and therefore acts as a biological sink or magnet for activity. By way of example, Millville's Maurice River Bicycling and Walking Trail concentrates activity along the waterfront. The trail offers riverine, tidal wetlands, hardwood swamp, and upland forest. In addition it is paved and much of it is handicapped accessible. Because it is surrounded by homes it acts as an oasis for wildlife that is funneled into this space for lack of other options in the surrounding area. In winter I like to choose preserves that have some forest as part of the mix to break windchill. For instance if you view the marsh or open water areas for ducks, birds of prey, and possibly a mink or otter, you can re-enter the woods to warm up and look for song birds.



Millville's Maurice River Bicycling and Walking Trail along Millville's downtown waterfront. Maps and checklists are available at the CU office for this trail; 17 E. Main St., Millville, NJ. Photo: J. Morton Galetto



You never know what creatures await you on the trail. CU file photo.

The following trails are level and offer little challenge with the exception of water. One has limited handicap accessibility. All fall within the 17-mile stretch of Bayshore as defined in the article except for Millville. This is far from a complete list but is a good starting point.

(Please scroll down)

Natural Lands Trust Trails

Mauricetown Preserve Trail – Commercial Township. Off North Ave. on east side of road before Port Norris. 1.5-mile loop blazed white trail. Trail sign for orientation. Northern edge of trail borders the marsh but there are no marsh views. The woods offers a respite from winter winds.



Many of the Natural Land's trails have signage at their trail heads with maps of the trail. Photo: B. Johnson.

These next three trails are accessible off Maple Ave./Turkey Point Rd. in Dividing Creek, Downe Township. Given in order of occurrence: beginning at Rt. 553 turn on to Maple Ave. where you will cross impoundments. Be sure to scan them for winter waterfowl. All are a part of the Glade's 7000+ complex of preserves. Boots are recommended in all instances, especially on Eagle Trail.

After crossing the impoundments turn left onto Franklin Lane. Go to the gate of the Garrison Property Preserve – this relatively recently purchased preserve offers little cover from the wind but more fields than the other three trails. During eagle breeding season you can walk about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile in and out.

Return to Maple Ave. Make a right and in two-tenths of a mile the entrance to the Maple Ave. Trail is on the left. There is a trail head sign and it is clearly marked. It offers lots of ditched streams and plenty of cover from the winds. There are a few marsh views. It is well marked. This is a 1.5-mile trail with a loop at the end. The loop is sometimes overgrown and you can simply double back.

Continue on Maple Avenue; it will turn into Turkey Point Rd. (do not turn right – go

straight). On the right will be the Eagle Trail's trail head, also marked with signage. This trail floods on high tide events and sometimes during regular high tides. Boots are necessary. This trail is also a 1.5-mile trail with a loop at the end. (See Egg Island suggestion under Wildlife Management Areas).

If you return to 553 (Main St.) via Turkey Point Rd. and travel westward, turn on Methodist Rd. (Rt. 732) Newport, turn left on to Newport Landing Rd., and then left onto Fortescue Rd. (Rt. 637). Two-tenths of a mile after Cabin Rd. there is a gate on the left which is the trail head for the Tat Star Trail. The 1.6-mile path crosses woods and ends at the large marsh complex of Oranoaken Creek.

After enjoying Tat Star, a drive to the waterfront in Fortescue is a must. The beach is accessible on New Jersey Ave. at either end of the waterfront homes. Raybin's Beach is at the south end and there is a public access beach by Fortescue Creek at the north end. Parking is available at each end of the island as well.

Suggested Hikes at New Jersey Wildlife Management Area



Turkey Point viewing bridge. Photo: J. Morton Galetto

It is customary after to drive to the end of Turkey Point Rd. to enjoy the viewing platform and the bridge crossing Johnson's Ditch. This is the Egg Island Point New Jersey Wildlife Management Area. There is a very short .2-mile dike walk on the other side of the bridge. This is a super spot to watch for waterfowl and raptors, especially eagles and northern harriers.

A favorite hike for many local birdwatchers is Hansey Creek Rd., Downe Township. Most of the trail is bordered by Egg Island Wildlife Management Area. If you begin your walk at the confluence of Russell Lane and continue

to the end it is about three miles one way. There is a parking area and boat launch at the end from which you can walk from marsh to woods, until you've accomplished a distance with which you are comfortable. The road gets little traffic but you need to be mindful of vehicles anyway. Most folks travel from the Russell Lane end so the woods opens up into the marsh. There are tidal ponds and then large ditches at the end that are part of a kayak trail. Winter kayaking here is only for very experienced paddlers. The Lake Audrey Wildlife Management Area in Commercial Township is a half mile west of the Maurice River Causeway Bridge on Route 649. This is an inactive mining pond that has been restored for fishing, and for this purpose the water has been limed. It offers some nice views and treks.

(Please scroll down)

Hikes at PSEG Restoration Site Properties Commercial Township



Germantown Ave. access to PSEG Commercial Township Restoration Site. Photo: T. Klock

PSEG has restored what were once bayfront diked salt hay farms to tidal flow, and all have public access.

In Port Norris across from the Bayshore Center on Bivalve's High Street there is a short spur called Germantown Ave. At the end you can park and explore the eastern side of the 4,100-acre Commercial Township Restoration Site. The Site has two more access points, one of which comes off Strawberry Ave. on the southside of Route 553. It is possible to walk from one access point to the other and southward for a two-

mile trek in each direction. There is little to no cover from the wind but great views of the marsh. Optics will be necessary to see avian denizens. The Georgetown Ave. entrance offers handicapped access for outdoor wheelchairs.

A mile further east on Route 553, Robinstown Rd. heads south to the marsh. At the end of the road you can access another Commercial Township PSEG restoration site. You can choose to walk the dike or duck into the woods on two or three spurs. There are nice vernal pools at this location and in the spring it is a favorite place to listen for calling frogs.

Travel Route 553 into Fairfield Township and turn left on Back Neck Rd. to take in views of the 1,000-acre Cohansey Restoration site. There is a marked viewing area on the north side of the road.

Afterward a trip from Schoolhouse Rd. to Seabreeze Rd. is in order. Seabreeze is a ghost town on the Bayfront. Many of these areas are on AllTrails.com. The Natural Lands also manages a phone application. Do not rely on the application onsite in case cell connection is sketchy. I recommend taking phone snapshots for easier access on the hike, in case you lose connectivity.