

Thacher Island National Wildlife Refuge is managed  
under Parker River National Wildlife Refuge.

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U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# Thacher Island

## *National Wildlife Refuge*

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### *Trail Guide*



*Welcome to the Thacher Island National Wildlife Refuge, where coastal habitat is actively protected and managed for migratory birds. Its location within the Atlantic Flyway, means the refuge provides an important resting, feeding, and nesting habitat for many species of songbirds and shorebirds.*

## **Welcome**



This goose, designed by J.N. "Ding" Darling, has become the symbol of the National Refuge System.

Thacher Island National Wildlife Refuge, administered by Parker River National Wildlife Refuge, sits 1.5 miles off the coast of Rockport, Massachusetts. The refuge encompasses the northern 22 acres of the 52-acre island and is only accessible by boat. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service manages the refuge to protect migratory birds, endangered species and other wildlife and their habitats.

## **Tern History**

During the 19th century, common, roseate, arctic, and least terns nested on islands along the entire New England coast. At the turn of the century, hats adorned with tern feathers became the height of fashion and a drastic reduction of the tern population followed. During this decline, gulls, which compete for the same habitat as terns, started to encroach on feeding and nesting sites traditionally used by terns. In the 1970s, the closing of open landfills displaced hundreds and thousands of gulls, who moved to offshore nesting habitat used by the declining tern population. Again the large, aggressive gulls kept the terns from their traditional offshore habitats. When they nest inland, terns not only have to compete with gulls but also have to deal with mainland predators, thus limiting their reproductive success.



*Common Tern*  
© Julien Beauregard

In 1956 Thacher Island was the breeding ground for 1125 pairs of arctic, common and roseate terns. There are currently no nesting terns on the island. However, Thacher Island has the potential to regain its status as a prime area for tern breeding. The refuge initiated a tern restoration program in 2001. If successful, we can look forward to the return of terns to Thacher Island in the next decade.

## *Thacher Island*

Kevin J. Leach/USFWS All other photos Kathy Whittemore/USFWS

## Tread Lightly

You are about to embark on a national wildlife refuge. This and all refuges are places for wildlife first. Please respect the wildlife and its habitat. This includes minimizing disturbance to wildlife, staying on designated trails, obeying refuge rules and regulations, and packing out any trash you may have. On this refuge, plants and animals are protected. Please leave them undisturbed. Take only pictures; leave only footprints.

*In January 2001 the Cape Ann Light Station was designated a National Historic Landmark by the National Park Service.*



## Off to the North Tower

As you start toward the North Tower you can enjoy the view of Rockport Harbor on your left. Once an open field, this heavily shrubbed area now surrounds you. Along this trail you'll find 2 non-native, invasive species — honeysuckle and bittersweet. Non-native species such as these typically arrived on the island through intentional introduction or their seeds could have been carried by birds. Watch out for the poison ivy on your right; the shiny green leaves of three turn red in the fall. While its berries provide food for birds, poison ivy will likely trigger an allergic reaction in you. Notice the bull thistles in fall attracting butterflies, moths and bees. Take some time to view the birds. You are likely to see herring and great black-backed gulls nesting from April through August. You may also see cormorants, black ducks, mallards and Canada geese. Sea ducks, such as eider and scaup, feed in the waters near the protective shore of the island.

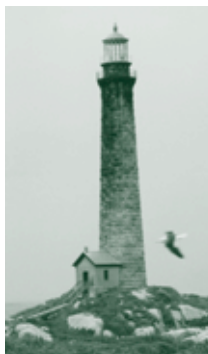


*Gull eggs*

Rounding the corner, notice the Virginia creeper climbing the rocks and the mint attracting butterflies. Closer

## Climb the Tower

3



*North Tower*

to the North Tower, you'll see staghorn sumac, named for its velvety branches that resemble a deer's new antlers.

Bear left on the trail to get to the North Tower; it gets a bit rocky here, so keep a sure and steady step. The North Tower uses a 15-watt fluorescent bulb that replicates the amber light of its original kerosene oil light and can be seen for almost 8 miles. Climb the tower's 156 steps for a magnificent view of the island and the Atlantic Ocean surrounding it. Cormorant nests can be seen on the rocks below and, if you're lucky, harbor seals can be spotted frolicking in the sea or basking on the rocks. If you are not interested in climbing the tower, simply look around the island from the base; it, too, affords a lovely view.



*Birds on rocks*

## Wedmore Walk

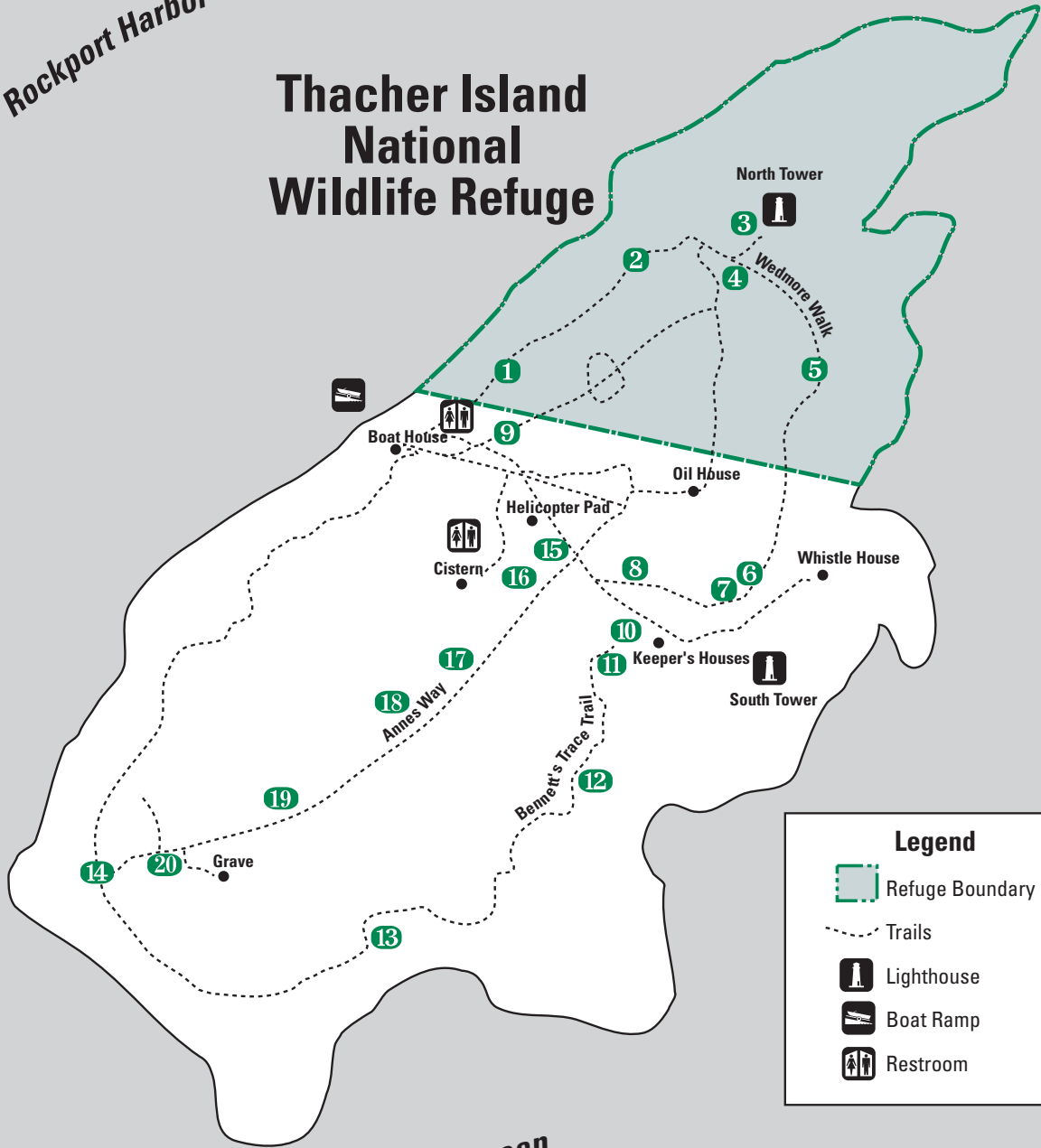
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Here you come to a fork in the road. The trail on the right takes you through a damp woodland of arrowwood, black cherry trees and wrinkled rose whose berries, called rosehips remain intact through the winter and are a valuable food source to wildlife.

The trail to the left is Wedmore Walk. If you choose it, you will pass through more staghorn sumac to get to an oceanside path. Walk slowly over the rocks and keep an eye out for garter snakes, a species introduced to the island by people. Notice the crab carcasses strewn about, the remains of some gulls' meal.

Rockport Harbor

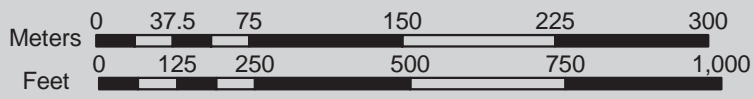
# Thacher Island National Wildlife Refuge



**Legend**

- Refuge Boundary
- Trails
- Lighthouse
- Boat Ramp
- Restroom

Atlantic Ocean





Around the bend you'll come to large rocks on the right, behind which grows purple loosestrife - another non-native, invasive plant known to invade wetlands. Each plant can produce up to 2 million seeds. As

*Purple loosestrife*

5

loosestrife grows, it shades out other plants like the native smartweed, also seen here. Waterfowl feed on the seeds of smartweed. In late summer you will come upon goldenthrum, a parasitic plant that strangles the plant it lives on.

6

Here grow cattails, probably the most familiar of all wetland plants. This small wetland has not yet been completely invaded by purple loosestrife. As you continue on this trail, which will take you to the keeper's houses and the South Tower, listen for the songs of warblers, finches and other songbirds.

7

Here you'll come across shadbush and arrowwood. Shadbush was so named because their numerous white flowers appear at about the same time that American shad start their migration inland. It is believed that Native Americans used the wood of arrowwood to make arrow shafts. With their fatty content, arrowwood berries are a source of sustained energy, making this site an important stopover for migratory birds.

8

The Virginia creeper, seen here, produces lots of berries that are a valuable food source for wildlife. As you leave this trail and head toward the boat house, you'll pass more arrowwood on the right and, on the left, multi-flora rose, crabapple trees, red chokeberry and bayberry.

#### Center of refuge

9

This path will take you through the center of the refuge. Explore the plant life; see where birds like to hide. Watch for snakes. Depending

on the season, black raspberries may be ripe.

#### South side

10 11

Explore the south side of the island. Start at the "bus stop" to begin the Bennett's Trace trail. As it winds its way to the ocean, this trail passes under staghorn sumac, arrowwood and black cherry trees. The black cherry tree thrives in coastal areas because of its ability to adapt to high winds. Wild cherries are an important wildlife food during the summer. Birds make repeated trips to harvest fruit off the branches.

#### View the South Tower

12



*South Tower*

Take some time to stop and enjoy the view of the Atlantic ocean. Turn to see a splendid view of the South Tower with the solar panel that provides power for it and the current foghorn. The South Tower is still operated as an official aid to navigation by the U.S. Coast Guard and its blinking red light can be seen for miles.

Follow this oceanside trail as it winds around the southern tip. Listen for birds singing. Look for goldenthrum, pokeweed and goldenrod. Goldenrod is mistakenly thought to be an allergen, mainly because its emergence coincides with that of other allergens, like ragweed, which is also abundant along this trail.

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Here is a large stand of multi-flora rose, a non-native, invasive species. As with the wrinkled rose, the fruits are valuable for wildlife because they endure the winter. Poison ivy climbs the rocks, surrounded by marsh ferns, bull thistle and common nightshade. Look closely at the stock of the pokeweed plant. In late summer the stem turns bright pink and the berries turn black. Milk Island can be viewed from here; it was once a home to cows. Buoys can be seen washed up on the rocks. Look for gulls hunting crabs at low tide.



Look for grasshoppers and butterflies like the swallowtail and monarch. You may also see red raspberries, yarrow, ragweed and greenbrier. The small berries of greenbrier are eaten by several species of songbirds.

### Bird viewing

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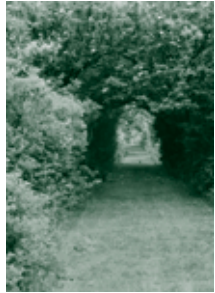
This is another nice viewing spot. Cormorants can be seen basking in the sun, and ducks, geese, gulls and shorebirds may also be observed. For a longer tour, follow the path straight ahead along the coast and resume the guided tour at the boat house. For a shorter tour, turn right onto Anne's way and follow the guided stops in reverse from stops 20 to 15.

### Cart Path

At the boat house, take the cart path, which was originally used to shuttle food and supplies from the boat to the keeper's houses. This path leads you by the campground, cistern, outhouse and helicopter pad.

### Annes Way

15 16



This trail, arched with crabapple trees, offers a peaceful opportunity to observe the habitat of many songbirds. Here is the invasive asian bittersweet; its green to yellow fruits split open at maturity to reveal red-orange arils that surround the seed.

A crabapple tree arches over the trail here. Notice the woodpecker holes in the trunk, common in older trees as the woodpeckers hunted for worms.

### Burnt Potato Chips

17 18

The bark of this black cherry is typical of older cherry trees. It is called "burnt potato chips" because of the way it peels back from the tree.

Black raspberries can be found all along this trail, as well as staghorn sumac and honeysuckle. Honeysuckle is another non-native, invasive plant that is especially problematic in coastal areas. Honeysuckle leafs out in April, a good month before our



*Nesting area*

native trees. Many of our native wildflowers that have adapted to flowering before trees leaf out are unable to survive with honeysuckles competing for sunlight. The honeysuckle's berries contain mostly sugar. The bright red berries may be inviting to migratory birds but offer no sustained nutrition. The birds fill up but quickly lose energy during their long migration.

Many different birds can be seen and heard along this trail throughout the summer: goldfinch, warblers, hummingbirds, catbirds and crows to name a few. And watch for snake holes; striped adders may be seen here.

### Nesting Area

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This grassy area, scattered with pokeweed, is currently used by gulls. It would be ideal tern nesting habitat, as terns like open areas with little vegetation.

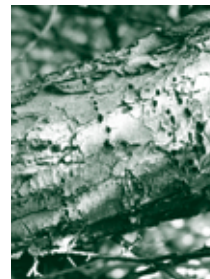
### Path to Grave

20



*Grave*

This short path leads you to a stone-marked grave, believed to be that of the ten-year-old niece of Anthony Thacher; for whom this island is named. Thacher and family were aboard a small boat out of Ipswich, bound for Marblehead. It was caught in the Great Storm of 1635 and was dashed to pieces on the rocks of the island. Of the 23 passengers and crew, only Thacher and his wife survived. In 1636-37, the General Court voted to grant Thacher the island "at the head of Cape Ann, as his inheritance."



*Woodpecker holes*

We hope that you have enjoyed walking the trails of Thacher Island National Wildlife Refuge. To learn more about the National Wildlife Refuge System, stop by the visitor center at Parker River National Wildlife Refuge in Newburyport, Massachusetts.

To arrange boat transportation to the island, contact the Thacher Island Association at 978/546 7697.