

PRIME HOOK AUTO TOUR ROUTE

By: Bill Fintel

This article describes an auto-tour covering the best wildlife viewing locations at Prime Hook NWR. The entire route is about 22 miles long and takes 2 to 4 hours, depending on how much time one spends at the various observation points. There is very little walking required, and the route is good year round, with the best times being spring and fall, but also winter if the weather has not been so cold as to freeze over the impoundments.

The potential wildlife to be observed include a wide variety of birds, from Bald Eagles to Black-necked Stilts to Wild Turkeys. **Be sure to take a Prime Hook bird check-list so that you know the best times of year for the over 300 bird species which occur on the refuge.** Other wildlife which may be encountered include Otters, Muskrats, Red Fox, and a host of insects, most attractive of which are the dragon and damsel flies.

The six locations to be visited, noted in order beginning at the Refuge Headquarters, are:

1. Broadkill Impoundments
2. Broadkill Beach
3. Deep Branch Road
4. Prime Hook Road Impoundments
5. Bridge on Cods Road
6. Fowler Beach

At most of the locations there are several stopping points you can use to get the best views of wildlife encountered.



So let's begin our auto-tour. From the Headquarters proceed back to Broadkill Beach Road and turn left. Be alert for Wild Turkeys and Red Fox in the refuge fields on both sides of the road as you leave. Go east on Broadkill Beach Road about 1 mile until you come to a small bridge. You can stop here to scan the marsh and impoundment on the left. Swamp Sparrows breed in the marshes and Northern Harriers can often be seen hunting over the marshes.

Proceed about ½ mile to a pull-off on the right with impoundments on both the right and left. This stop is excellent for shorebirds and waterfowl in the right seasons (see check list). In winter, Snow Geese can number in the tens of thousands here quite close to the road. There is a second pull-off on the right which should also be checked as it has the best overall views of both right and left impoundments.

From the second pull-off drive to the end of Broadkill Beach Road, and, except in summer, park and walk over the dune crossing to the check the Delaware Bay



for seabirds, such as Greater Scaup and Surf Scoters. This can also be a good location for a variety of gulls, and for beach loving shorebirds, like Sanderling and Ruddy Turnstone.

From Broadkill Beach go back west on Broadkill Beach Road until you come to the traffic light at Route 1. Turn right, proceed

From Broadkill Beach go back west on Broadkill Beach Road until you come to the traffic light at Route 1. Turn right, proceed about $\frac{1}{4}$ mile, and turn right again on Deep Branch Road. Drive slow along Deep Branch, which passes through some excellent parts of the refuge and is a very low traffic road. There are several good locations to stop along the road, the first being where the road crosses a small wooded creek. Often Prothonotary Warblers can be detected at this point. The fields along the road often have Grasshopper Sparrows and Eastern Bluebirds. The second woods opposite a small hunter parking are good for Summer Tanager, and Pileated Woodpeckers are regular residents in the woods. Winter can offer an excellent variety of sparrows.



Continue along Deep Branch Road until you rejoin Route 1 where you turn right. Proceed about 1 mile over a small bridge at Waples Pond and take the next right at signs for Prime Hook Beach and Fowler Beach. Go to the first intersection and turn right on Prime Hook Road. after about $\frac{1}{2}$ mile you will have large cultivated fields on both sides of the road. In winter these can hold large flocks of feeding Canada and Snow Geese, as well as rare White-fronted, Ross' and Cackling Geese.

Continue to a junction in the road and bear right staying on Prime Hook Road. Proceed to where the road crosses a large body of water. There are about six gravel pull-offs along this road. The second one and the one just before a major left curve are usually the two best, but stop anywhere you see wildlife. In winter, as long as the water is unfrozen, this area will usually yield the largest numbers and variety of waterfowl. This can include some hard to find species, such as American Wigeon and Common Merganser. If you are really lucky, there may be a Eurasian Wigeon in with the American Wigeon. In spring and summer these are usually good areas for shorebirds, and when water levels are low, Black-necked Stilts will nest here. If you are a photographer, the culverts which pass under the road often host herons and terns feeding on small fish being swept along by the water flow.

Once you have reached the end of Prime Hook Road, make a U-turn, go back to the first intersection, and turn right on Cods Road. The fields along Cods Road often have very large flocks of Snow Geese feeding in them in winter. Continue along Cods Road about 1 mile to an intersection where 13 Curves Road joins Cods Road. You can pull off the road here just before the bridge and walk out onto the bridge, just be alert to the few cars that may also be using the bridge. This is probably the best location on the Refuge to observe River Otter, although you

will still need to be very lucky. Waterfowl are also present in winter, with Hooded Merganser being a highlight. Shorebirds are present in spring and fall, often with large numbers of Greater Yellowlegs. With a spotting scope, it is often possible to pick out Black-crowned Night-Herons roosting in trees on the far shore to the east.

From the bridge continue to where Cods Road T's into Fowler Beach Road and turn right. Proceed about 1.7 miles to a small bridge and water control structure on the right. Scan up and down the waterway for Belted Kingfisher and waterfowl. Continue on with an excellent salt marsh on the left and what is now a salt water tidal flat on the right. The marsh holds good numbers of Clapper Rails in spring through fall, and if you are patient, you can often see them. Other highlights on the sand bar to the right are Least Terns, American Oystercatchers and Black Skimmers. The former two have nested here.

Proceed to the end of the road at the Delaware Bay and park to scan the beach and bay. Be careful here as sand has sometimes drifted over the road. The bay holds numbers of Surf and Black Scoters in winter, and the beaches are good for shorebirds, such as Black-bellied Plover. The winter highlight here in the past few years has been a regular adult Iceland Gull. This location also dramatically illustrates how the Delaware Bay shoreline is changing. Past the current end of the road are the remains of a wood observation platform. When first installed in (2004?), this platform was inside the dune line about 100 feet above the high tide line.

This concludes our auto tour of Prime Hook. Obviously you can skip stops not of interest, just do a portion of the tour, or whatever appeals to you. All the roads you will be travelling on are public roads, so be guided by common sense and road safety.

Fowler Observation Platform



SEP 2009



SEP 2010



SEP 2012