



Prime Hook National Wildlife Refuge (NWR)

Location: Milton, Delaware

Address: 11978 Turkle Pond Rd, Milton, DE 19968

Phone: (302) 684-8419

URL: <http://www.fws.gov/northeast/primehook/>



Birding Hotspot

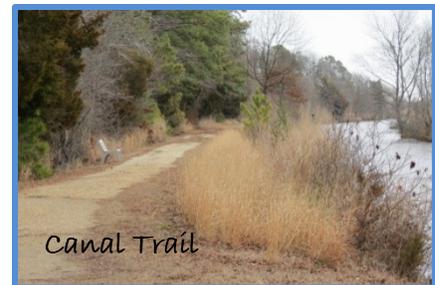
SITE DESCRIPTION:

Prime Hook NWR is part of the US system of refuges managed by the US Fish & Wildlife Agency. It was established in 1963 as part of the Migratory Bird Conservation Act with the purpose of providing a refuge for migratory birds. The refuge includes more than 10,000 acres of which 6900 are fresh & saltwater marshes, 1500 are grasslands & fields, and 1600 are upland forests and brush. In 2007, it was combined with nearby Bombay Hook NWR to become the Coastal Delaware National Wildlife Refuge Complex.



Snow Geese at Dusk

REVIEW: We first visited Prime Hook Refuge in November 2007. We had been on a vacation to Ocean City and decided to take a side trip up into Delaware and to visit the refuge. I had no idea what to expect but figured there ought to be some birds or other critters on the refuge worth seeing. Little did I know that the refuge hosts one of the largest populations of snow geese on the east coast during the winter. Since the day we had picked for visiting the refuge was a Federal holiday (Veteran’s Day – November 11), we were dismayed to find that the visitor center/ranger station was closed. We were even more dismayed to find the refuge was filling up with hunters, being November and at the start of hunting season. But we were pleasantly surprised to find that (1) the back door to the center was open which allowed visitors to access the bathrooms and, (2) the hunters on this day were more interested in the forests where the deer roamed than the impoundments and marshes where the geese and waterfowl were gathering. We did not see many birds anywhere notwithstanding the reputation of the place. But it was a beautiful autumn day and not too cold so we headed down the “canal” path behind the visitor center. It was an obvious choice for a first visit to the refuge since it is right there at the parking lot. This is an unpaved roadway that allows the rangers to access the impoundments in this area so the path was flat, clear, and a relatively easy walk along the canal through the marsh. The path is about a mile round trip and ends at a marsh overlook tower. Kayakers and canoeists and fishermen in small boats use the canal to access the marshes so we sort of expected to see plenty of ducks and waterfowl. We were disappointed in that – there were very few ducks in the canal along the path although we could see plenty of ducks in the distance out along the paved road going to Broadkill Beach. But we continued and made our way to the tower and climbed up just to see what might be seen. We were on top of the tower when we heard a noise in the distance that was difficult to describe although it was becoming increasing louder



Canal Trail



and louder. And then just when we had begun to doubt we'd ever know what that roaring sound was, the snow geese came into view. There were thousands of them, all honking and chattering as they flew. Did I say thousands? They circled over and around the marshes and headed to the impoundments closer to Broadkill Beach Road. It was a magnificent show and it was happening right over our heads. We were hooked. The refuge has become a favorite of ours and each winter, we make a pilgrimage to Prime Hook to see the snow geese. To date, we have not been disappointed – we always see snow geese at Prime Hook although sometimes we have to go looking for them by driving up and down the area roads through farmland and marshes until we find the flocks either feeding in farmer's fields or settling into the marshes for the night. It is a miracle that I pray will continue until the end of time.



But back to the review: At the main part of the refuge with the visitor center, there are several things to see. The visitor center itself includes a small shop where you can purchase the usual t-shirts, bird and nature books, hats, socks, and other nature souvenirs. The center is combined with the refuge office so you can also purchase duck stamps and hunting licenses and obtain information about the refuge and the National Refuge System. There is no fee to enter the refuge.

Although the refuge is closed on Federal holidays, the gates are open from sunrise to sunset so you can access the refuge and enjoy the walking paths and boardwalks. While there are canoeing and kayaking opportunities, I have never seen a concession for renting them so you must bring your own and you should probably check in with the refuge office before heading out into the marshes. There are vending machines outside the visitor center where you can purchase drinks and snacks. Although Prime Hook is well known in the birding community, I have never seen more than 3-5 cars in the parking lot and never really felt that the walking trails were crowded; more often, we have been the only people on the walking trails at any given time.



There are quite a few hiking trails on the refuge but most are no more than mowed paths through an area. Otherwise, there are three main hiking paths with boardwalks that I have found to be good paths for those who would rather not risk breaking new ground through the woods and wetlands. One is isolated and rarely used. It is a short path that starts at the eastern edge of the visitor center and goes for a short distance into the wetlands. We have walked this path only once and found it to be relatively short, a bit dark since it goes through the trees and the wetlands here are more mucky than marshy. But I do plan to do this path again but probably on a summer trip. Of course, it would be full of mosquitos in summer but the chance to encounter summer warblers like a Prothonotary Warbler would make it worth the effort. The second path and the one I most prefer is the marsh walk that begins just west of the parking lot and is a ½ mile loop that includes a boardwalk through the edge of the marsh. The beginning of the path is an old road, is flat, and an easy walk back to the boardwalk. The boardwalk is excellent and gives an open view of the wetlands where we have seen ducks of all kinds, plenty of herons and egrets, and wonderful views of hawks and bald eagles swooping and soaring over the marshes. But we have never seen huge quantities of waterfowl here and no snow geese. The boardwalk ends at a path through the wood which provides opportunities to spot smaller birds such as sparrows, nuthatches, and chickadees. A wonderful addition to the boardwalk would be a couple of benches; the boardwalk is relatively narrow but there is no place to sit and enjoy the view or to rest for a bit. The last part of the path parallels an overgrown meadow/field where we have seen indigo buntings, mockingbirds, robins, jays, and eastern bluebirds. There are a couple benches in this area. The final path we like is the canal path referenced in our first visit above. The canal path offers opportunities to see smaller birds like marsh wrens and sparrows and woodpeckers in the hedges to the left of the path and all sorts of waterfowl in the canal and impoundments to the right of the path. Because the canal path is a roadway, it provides a flat, easy walking trail. However, there are no benches along the canal so adding a few here and there would be a good idea.





During the summer, the feeders by the visitor center attract songbirds and the martin houses around the parking lots are pretty much filled with martins. Just sitting in the parking lot offers good opportunities to observe the martins and take exceptional photographs. As you drive in/out of the refuge, the road takes a 90 degree turn and goes along an open field where we have spotted flycatchers, foxes, raccoons, eastern bluebirds, juncos, sparrows, etc. As you exit this part of the refuge, there is a road on the right of the main road that leads down through the pine woods to two ponds, Turtle and Fleetwood. These areas are popular with hunters so, while we like to drive down the roads and check the ponds for ducks and geese, we have not taken any hiking trails through the area although there are trailheads clearly marked. Up until this year (2013), we had not ever seen ducks and waterfowl in the ponds. We had wondered at this when ducks were plentiful elsewhere on the refuge in the winter. But this year, we spotted cormorants, scaups, and a couple grebes in Fleetwood pond.



Purple Martin

Because of the pine trees in the forest, we have spotted various woodpeckers along the drive and have hopes of seeing a red-headed woodpecker there in the future.

While Broadkill Beach Road is a public road, it runs directly through the impoundments and marshes that are part of the refuge. So it is a good side trip to turn left as you leave the refuge and drive up to the beach. There are a few good "pullover" spots along the road that makes this road a good road for "car-birding" but it is a public road and the locals do sometimes seem to get a little impatient with those of us who are moving along at a snail's pace as we look for birds in the impoundments. There are places to pull over along the road but make sure the ground is stable and only pull over in designated areas – these are, after all, wetlands. At the end of the road, there is a small parking lot with public access to the beach on Delaware Bay. We always check the beach and the Bay for any geese or waterfowl there. We have in years past seen large rafts of the snow geese floating on the Bay. Now, in years past we have seen thousands of geese, both snow and Canada geese, resting and feeding in these ponds along the road along with hundreds, if not thousands, of other waterfowl to include mallards, American Blacks, northern pintails, teals, scaups, mergansers, shovelers, etc. However, on our last visit (1/29/13), the impoundments were almost entirely empty. We did see many flocks of snow geese flying over the area during the time we were there but most seemed to be heading to the northwest. We asked the docent at the DuPont Nature Center at Mispillion (nearby) and she indicated that most of the snow geese this year were staying near Bombay Hook Refuge to the north. Bombay is a "sister" refuge to Prime Hook.



Eastern Bluebird

To access other parts of the refuge, you should also drive down Fowler Beach Road to the north of Broadkill Beach Road. There are more rustic parking areas along Fowler Beach Road which allow access to more natural trails in that area of the refuge. Again, the trails here are not as improved and certainly not paved or containing boardwalks so we have not explored these trails. Fowler Beach Road goes through the marshes and ends at the Beach which can get washed out in storms right near the Beach. This is a popular area for birders since there are opportunities to see many shore birds to include red knots (in May), sandpipers, plovers, sanderlings, black & white stilts, oystercatchers, etc., depending on the time of year that you visit. The road is also good for car-birding but it is narrow, gets washed out, and there are few areas along the road suitable for stopping. But most people using the road are other birders or nature lovers so understand those of us creeping along in our vehicles. When we were here in January 2013, sand had washed in and over the road at the very end so it was a bit dicey to turn around and head back out. Fortunately, there were few others on the road that day so we didn't really have a problem but I can see where it would be a problem on a busier birding day like in May when the red knots are migrating through and the place is crawling with bird-watchers and nature lovers.

Prime Hook has to be one of the best birding spots in an area that has quite a few refuges, parks, and birding hotspots. But much depends on the time of year that you visit. Winter is always the time to go for snow geese and other waterfowl wintering over in the area. Due to the large populations of waterfowl, there are always bald eagles and hawks soaring over the impoundments in search of a good meal (yes, they have to eat too). Spring is the time to spot red knots and shorebirds stopping over to fatten up on horseshoe crab eggs on their way north to their breeding grounds. Summer can be nice but the large masses of birds are not usually present in summer which is probably more the time to spot human beach-goers and do a little people watching on the boardwalks at Rehoboth and Ocean City.



For accommodations, try Rehoboth which is only a few miles down the road (South) and includes a variety of B&B's and the usual franchise hotels. There are also hotels and restaurants to the north of Prime Hook in the town of Milford and at Rehoboth to the south. For the past several years, we have driven into Rehoboth to the strip along Route 1 for lunch and have always been a little disappointed with the usual fast food or franchise restaurants. This year (2013), we allowed our trusty GPS to find restaurants nearby and were so surprised to find the whole town of Milton right there almost outside the refuge on Route 17. This is the very same road we use to get to the refuge and we had never taken the time to explore the town. This just goes to show that you need to make a turn at the intersection sometimes. When we followed the directions given by the GPS, we found the historical town center and several local restaurants and not one chain restaurant among them. We selected a nice place called "Irish Eyes" and had a very hearty lunch on a cold day. We will probably eat here again on future trips.

- Birds Spotted:**
- | | | |
|----------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|
| Bald Eagle | Snow Geese | Canada Geese |
| Eastern Bluebirds | Great Crested Flycatcher | Purple Martins |
| Black & White Stilts | American Oystercatchers | Northern Pintails |
| Plovers | Red Knots | Black Skimmers |



UP Side: Well-known birding hotspot on the Delaware Bay. Easy to find with GPS and located right off Route 1, Coastal Highway. Small but nice visitor center with indoor bathrooms. Several easy walking trails with lots of opportunities to birdwatch and observe nature.

Down Side: Like all wildlife refuges, hunting is permitted and the season usually coincides with the best bird watching opportunities in winter. The Visitor Center is relatively small. Restaurants or accommodations in the area are somewhat difficult to find.

BirdingBoomer Rating: 