

# Parker River National Wildlife Refuge

# Accessibility Guide

Welcome to Parker River National Wildlife Refuge! This guide describes the buildings, boardwalks, and other visitor resources at the refuge with an emphasis on physical accessibility. We welcome comments and suggestions for ways to improve accessibility for all visitors.

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### About the Refuge

Parker River National Wildlife Refuge encompasses a barrier beach system on the coast of Massachusetts. Its unique habitats include an undeveloped beachfront, dunes, maritime shrublands, salt marshes, and impoundments (manmade wetlands). The refuge was established to provide habitat for breeding and migrating birds. Staff and visitors have since documented more than 300 species of birds on the refuge, including the federally threatened piping plover. The refuge also hosts a variety of mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and plants, including several state-listed and at-risk species.

The refuge provides a variety of recreational opportunities and activities. Such opportunities include hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, and other forms of nature exploration and immersion. Additionally, the refuge delivers a variety of interpretive programs both virtually and in person. Upcoming programs are listed on the [refuge website](#).

The refuge is open daily from sunrise to sunset, but it may occasionally be closed for wildlife management purposes or during severe weather. A single two-lane road runs along the entire length of the Refuge. The first 3.5 miles of this road are paved, while the southern 2.5 miles of the road have a gravel surface. The paved road and parking lots are plowed after snowstorms, but boardwalks, trails, and the gravel portion of the road are not. Beach access is also seasonally restricted for the benefit of federally protected piping plovers, which nest on the beach and are sensitive to human disturbance. Please check the refuge website or call for updates on seasonal closures.

### Passes and Fees

The refuge is a federal recreation fee area. An annual refuge-specific pass is available for \$20. The daily entrance fee is \$5 for motor vehicles or \$2 for bicycles and pedestrians. Entry is free for holders of a Federal Duck Stamp or any of four Department of the Interior passes: America the Beautiful, Senior, Military, and Access Passes. Access Passes are free to all those with documentation of a permanent disability. See <https://store.usgs.gov/access-pass> for additional information. All passes are generally available for purchase at the refuge entrance on Plum Island when it is staffed. Please note that the refuge does not currently accept credit cards but is working on making this option available. Visitors interested in purchasing a pass should call ahead to confirm that the refuge entrance is staffed, as the staffing schedule is variable. Note that phone messages and email are checked once daily by refuge staff.

### COVID-19

During periods with high rates of COVID-19 community transmission, shared indoor spaces on the refuge are closed to the public. Restrooms are still open for single-occupancy use. Refuge staff may be teleworking and may not be as available via phone. The status of closures and the availability of other resources will likely change over time as the COVID-19 situation continues to develop. Please check the refuge website or call for updates on COVID-19-related closures and regulations.

### Accommodations

Please call or email to inquire about accessibility or request specific accommodations. Note that phone messages and email are checked once daily by refuge staff. Accommodations include, but are not limited to, the following.

- *Service animals:* Leashed service animals are welcome on the refuge in accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act. Emotional support animals and other pets are not permitted on the refuge at any time.
- *Beach wheelchair:* A non-motorized beach wheelchair is available upon request. The wheelchair has large, wide wheels that can roll across sand. Visitors may use the chair to access the refuge beach at Lot 1.

## Public Buildings and Restrooms

### Visitor Center

Open year-round (8:30am to 4pm, 7 days a week) and located before the Plum Island Airport, the refuge Visitor Center includes a variety of informational displays, a library/reading area, an auditorium, a classroom and outdoor gardens for gathering or wildlife viewing. The visitor center is also located along the Bay Circuit Trail, which begins on Plum Island and ends at Kingston Bay in Kingston, MA. A Connector Trail connects the Refuge Visitor Center to Mass Audubon Joppa Flats Education Center and the Spencer Pierce Little Farm. In addition to traditional visual displays, the Visitor Center includes a few tactile-interactive and audiovisual exhibits. Some, but not all, audiovisual displays include captioning. The visitor center has several benches and seating areas, air conditioning, WIFI, and water fountains. No stairs are necessary to access any portion of the visitor center, but there are two sets of heavy unpowered doors at the front entrance.

The Visitor Center includes multi-stall restrooms with handrails on both sides of the toilets. Additionally, a single occupancy bathroom with similar features is located next to the front entrance of the visitor center and is open at all hours, even when the main building is closed. Next to the native garden is a picnic table, with accommodations for one person in a wheelchair.

### Visitor Contact Station and Restrooms (Lot 1)

Located at the northern end of Lot 1, the Visitor Contact Station has a large outdoor deck, two restrooms, and a single indoor room with an information desk. The deck is accessible by a short ramp (5 feet wide) and has three large benches but minimal shade. Two multi-stall restrooms and a family restroom are accessible from the deck, but operation of a relatively heavy unpowered door with a pull handle is necessary to enter. Each restroom has large stalls with handrails present on the back and side of the toilets. When possible, the indoor information desk is staffed by volunteers and is open to the public, but this occurs infrequently. Access to the room requires operation of an unpowered door with a turn handle. An outdoor kiosk will be staffed by volunteers during the warmer months when feasible.

### Sub-Headquarters Restroom

Two large individual restrooms are located next to the public parking area at Sub-Headquarters. A 3-foot-wide gravel path leads from the parking area to this building. No steps are required to access the restrooms. Handrails are present on the back and side of the composting toilets. Access to the restroom requires operation of an unpowered door with a turn handle.

### Hellcat Restroom

Two large individual restrooms are located next to the main parking lot. No steps are required to access the restrooms. Handrails are present on the back and side of the composting toilets. Access to the restroom requires operation of an unpowered door with a turn handle.

### Refuge Road and Parking

The refuge road stretches approximately 6 miles from the refuge entrance to the south end of Plum Island. It runs directly adjacent to dunes, shrublands, and salt marsh and provides excellent wildlife and scenic viewing opportunities by car. The road is generally flat and paved up to the entrance to Hellcat Parking Lot, beyond which it is gravel and may have potholes or uneven surfaces. Although it lacks sidewalks or bike lanes, visitors frequently walk or ride along the road as well. Bikes are not allowed on boardwalks, trails, or beach, but bike racks are available at most parking lots.

Most parking lots also have designated accessible parking spaces, which are noted in each boardwalk, trail, or overlook description below. However, dirt and gravel lots do not have painted lines or access aisles. These lots may also have potholes or uneven surfaces.

### Boardwalks, Trails, and Overlooks

Boardwalks, trails, and overlooks are listed from north to south along the refuge road. Boardwalks leading to the beach (including but not limited to boardwalks at Lots 2, 3, 6, and 7) are closed seasonally for the protection of nesting piping plovers, a federally threatened species. Except for Lot 2, all parking lots remain open even when boardwalks are closed. Boardwalks 5, 7, Bill Forward Blind and Pines Trail may be inaccessible by vehicle after a snowstorm. Visitors are encouraged to hike, snowshoe or ski when this lower road is closed due to weather conditions.

Please stay on boardwalks and trails at all times to protect sensitive habitats. Staying on boardwalks and trails also reduces risk of exposure to poison ivy and ticks. Note that portions of boardwalks and stairs near the beachfront may be covered by sand, as dunes shift continually. Sand and sand-covered surfaces may be uneven and slippery. There are benches at the end of some boardwalks to enjoy the view; see below for details.

#### Lot 1 Boardwalk

This 0.1-mile boardwalk provides year-round access from the main parking lot to the beachfront.

- *Surfaces:* The entire length of the wooden boardwalk has a gentle slope. While there are no stairs along its length, there are 20 steps leading down to the beach at its end. The final 100 feet of the boardwalk and the steps are often partially covered in sand.
- *Dimensions:* The boardwalk is a minimum of 6 feet wide and has 3-foot-tall railings along its entire length.
- *Additional features and considerations:* A small viewing platform with a bench is located at the end of the boardwalk, prior to the stairs leading down to the beach. For visitors who wish to access the beach using a beach wheelchair, an alternative sand path through the dunes is available. If you use a wheelchair and wish to access the beach via this path, please contact refuge staff to request that the gate to the path be opened. A beach wheelchair is also available upon request.

## Boat Launch and Water Trail

Located directly across from Lot 1, a 300-foot gravel road leads to a cement boat ramp, providing non-motorized watercraft access to Plum Island Sound. During the summer months, two marked “water trails” indicate out-and-back paddling routes along two salt marsh creeks. Each water trail is roughly 4 miles round trip. From shore, the boat launch area also provides wildlife viewing opportunities along an expanse of salt marsh.

- *Surfaces:* The gravel road has very little slope, but large potholes and bumps may be present throughout. The concrete boat ramp is typically wet and slick.
- *Dimensions:* The road is approximately 20 feet wide with a large turnaround area at the boat ramp.
- *Additional features and considerations:* The refuge recommends launching and retrieving boats only within two hours of high tide. While vehicles may drop off kayaks or canoes at the boat launch, parking is not permitted along the gravel road or at the launch. Visitors may walk, ride, or drive along the road and boat launch area to view wildlife but should be aware that vehicles may pass through to drop off boats.

## Lot 2 Boardwalk

This 0.2-mile elevated boardwalk passes through rolling sand dunes, ending with direct access to the beachfront.

- *Surfaces:* This wooden boardwalk begins at a paved parking lot with two designated accessible parking spaces. Small sets of stairs are scattered along its entire length, with 58 stairs in total. Most of the boardwalk is completely flat. The beginning and end of the boardwalk may be partially covered by sand.
- *Dimensions:* The boardwalk is a minimum of 4 feet wide. Approximately 3.5-foot-tall railings are present on both sides of the boardwalk for the majority of its length.

## Salt Pannes Overlook

The Salt Pannes Overlook is a 0.1-mile paved pull-off lane immediately adjacent to the Refuge Road. It provides excellent roadside viewing opportunities of salt marsh and wildlife.

- *Surfaces:* The pull-off lane is paved and is smooth/flat for its entire length.
- *Dimensions:* The overlook is slightly wider than a typical road lane, allowing visitors to safely exit their vehicles for wildlife viewing.
- *Additional features and considerations:* This is not a parking area, and vehicles may not be left unattended. Benches are located in grassy areas at each end of the overlook.

## Lot 3 Boardwalk

This 0.2-mile elevated boardwalk passes through sand dunes and shrublands, ending with direct access to the beachfront.

- *Surfaces:* This wooden boardwalk begins at a paved parking lot with two designated accessible parking spaces. The boardwalk is flat or gently sloping throughout. There are no stairs along the entire length of the boardwalk, but there is a single step up at the boardwalk entrance of about six inches. The steps down to the beach may be partially or fully covered by sand.
- *Dimensions:* The boardwalk is a minimum of roughly 4.5 feet wide.

### Sub-Headquarters

Sub-Headquarters is a gravel lot with a set of buildings used for the maintenance and storage of heavy equipment, in addition to a public restroom. This area is open to the public with visitor parking near the road. Visitor vehicles are not permitted beyond the gate into the work area. This area provides wildlife viewing opportunities along grasslands and salt marsh.

- *Surfaces:* The lot has a gravel/crushed stone surface and is generally flat, but potholes are present in many spots.
- *Additional features and considerations:* A short, grassy path (< 100 feet) leads from the gravel area to a single bench overlooking the salt marsh. Note that refuge vehicles and heavy equipment may sometimes be active in this lot.

### North Pool Overlook

The North Pool Overlook is a small dirt lot providing wildlife viewing opportunities of shrublands and freshwater wetlands.

- *Surfaces:* The flat lot has a crushed stone surface. Potholes and small bumps are common.
- *Additional features or considerations:* No benches or sitting areas are available at this overlook, but it provides an elevated vantage point over part of North Pool even while seated in a car.

### Hellcat Boardwalk

This 1.3-mile loop boardwalk spans both sides of the refuge road, stretching along North Pool, a forested wetland, shrublands, and dunes. In 2020, this trail was specifically reconstructed to be fully wheelchair accessible. It is particularly popular for birding and photography.

- *Surfaces:* This composite lumber boardwalk begins at a paved parking lot with three designated accessible parking spaces. There are two additional accessible parking spaces where the trail crosses the paved road. The trail is mostly flat or gently sloping.
- *Dimensions:* The trail is a minimum of 5 feet wide. Most of the boardwalk has a 7-inch curb with occasional stretches of higher railings. Viewing platforms also have railings approximately 3.5 feet high.
- *Additional features and considerations:* There are three short spurs that branch off from the main boardwalk and lead to viewing platforms. One platform is surrounded by dense vegetation on the edge of North Pool, one overlooks North Pool, and one overlooks an expanse of sand dunes and the Atlantic Ocean. There are three benches: one at the North Pool overlook, one at the dunes overlook, and one along a forested section of the boardwalk.



### Hellcat Dike

Roughly 0.15 miles of dike along North and Bill Forward Pools are open to the public, providing viewing opportunities along impoundments and salt marsh, accessible from Hellcat parking lot. The remainder of the dikes are closed to all visitor traffic, except for a 1-week period in mid-October during National Wildlife Refuge Week.

- *Surfaces:* The path along the dikes has a crushed stone surface, with some patches of low grass. The dikes are accessible by two paths: a split-off path from Hellcat Boardwalk and an unpaved access road. The boardwalk transfers to a smooth gravel path with a very gentle slope, while the access road is slightly steeper and has a somewhat uneven surface.
- *Dimensions:* The path on the cross-dike is roughly 15 feet wide, while the paths on the outer dikes are roughly 8 feet wide.
- *Additional features and considerations:* There are three small backless benches along the dikes. An observation tower is also located at the end of the cross-dike. There are 31 steep steps leading to the upper viewing platform with railings on both sides of the stairs. A small backless bench and chain link railings are present on the upper platform.

### Bill Forward Bird Blind

This 250-foot trail leads through patchy grassland and shrubs to a bird blind with views into Bill Forward Pool, which hosts a variety of waterbirds.

- *Surfaces:* The crushed stone trail begins at a dirt parking lot with one designated accessible parking space. Both the trail and wooden blind are nearly level. Within the blind, five steps lead up to a small platform with a higher vantage point over the impoundment.
- *Dimensions:* The trail is a minimum of 4.5 feet wide. The blind has three solid sides, one with an open window facing the impoundment. The window is approximately 3.5 feet off the ground.
- *Additional features and considerations:* Views from the blind to the pool may be partially obscured by tall vegetation, especially during summer and fall.

### Pines Trail

This 0.3-mile loop trail is shaded by oaks and pines underlain by dense shrubs. It also includes a viewing platform directly adjacent to an expanse of salt marsh.

- *Surfaces:* A short stretch of dirt road connects the Refuge Road to the parking lot. The road may include mud and potholes. The crushed stone trail begins at a dirt parking lot with two designated accessible parking spaces. The trail is nearly level or slopes gently, while the wooden viewing platform is level. The trail is also assessable from Parking Lot 5 via the Pines Connector (details below).
- *Dimensions:* The trail is a minimum of 5 feet wide and lacks any railings or curbs. The viewing platform has railings approximately 3 feet high.
- *Additional features and considerations:* The viewing platform includes two benches and a set of stationary binoculars. There are two additional benches along the trail.

### Pines Connector

The Pines Connector is a 300-foot spur trail through shrubs and pitch pines. It connects the Pines Trail directly to Lot 5.

- *Surfaces:* The trail has an uneven surface of dirt and sand with some exposed roots.
- *Dimensions:* The trail is relatively narrow (approximately 2.5 feet wide) and lacks any railings, curbs, or other infrastructure.

### Lot 5 Boardwalk

Lot 5 has a crushed stone trail which transitions into a boardwalk (0.2 miles in total). It passes through pitch pines, shrubs, and dunes before it ends at a viewing platform overlooking the beach and ocean. There is no beach access from Lot 5.

- *Surfaces:* The crushed stone trail begins across the road from a dirt parking lot with one designated accessible parking space. The trail and boardwalk have gentle slopes. Eighteen moderately steep steps lead to the elevated viewing platform. The steps may be partially covered by sand.
- *Dimensions:* The trail and boardwalk are approximately 5 feet wide and lack railings or curbs except for one short, narrow (3.5 feet wide) section with railings. The viewing platform has railings approximately 3 feet high.
- *Additional features and considerations:* The viewing platform includes two small benches and a set of stationary binoculars.

### Lot 6 Boardwalk

This 0.1-mile boardwalk passes through shrublands and dunes, ending with access to the beachfront.

- *Surfaces:* This gently sloping boardwalk begins at a dirt parking lot. There is a single step at the beginning of the boardwalk, two steps in the middle, and a moderately steep set of steps at the end. The steps at the end of the boardwalk may be partially or fully covered by sand.
- *Dimensions:* Most of the boardwalk is 4 feet wide with a minimum width of 3 feet. Most of the boardwalk lacks railings or curbs, but short stretches have railings approximately 3 feet high.

### Stage Island Trail

This 0.75-mile (each way) out-and-back trail leads past Stage Island Pool, fields, shrublands, and salt marsh, ending on a bluff overlooking Plum Island Sound. A small sandy and cobble beach at Sandy Point State Reservation can also be accessed along this trail.

- *Surfaces:* The trail starts across the road from Lot 6. It is mostly flat or gently sloping, but there are two short, steep hills. The trail is primarily mown grass, but the uneven surface has patches of gravel, dirt, and sand.
- *Dimensions:* The dirt entrance to the trail is narrow (approximately 3 feet wide) and uneven. The remainder of the trail is mostly wide (greater than 6 feet) but variable.

- *Additional features and considerations:* There are several benches spaced along the length of the trail, and there are three additional benches along the bluff. There is also a low viewing platform with stationary binoculars with obstructed views of Stage Island Impoundment. Three steps lead up to the platform. Fishing is allowed along the shoreline of Stage Island bluff.

### Lot 7 Boardwalk

This 200-foot boardwalk leads to a large viewing platform overlooking the beach and ocean, including a cobble bar exposed at low tide. It also provides beach access via a set of stairs.

- *Surfaces:* This boardwalk begins at a dirt parking lot with two designated accessible parking spaces. There are no stairs between the dirt parking lot and the viewing platform, but visitors can access the beach via a steep set of 14 stairs leading off the platform. The lower stairs may be partially covered by sand.
- *Dimensions:* The trail is a minimum of 5 feet wide. Both the boardwalk and platform are lined with railings approximately 3 feet high.
- *Additional features and considerations:* The viewing platform includes three benches and a set of stationary binoculars.

### Lot 7 Observation Tower

Located across from Parking Lot 7, this 150-foot boardwalk leads to a low viewing platform surrounded by dense vegetation on the edge of Stage Island Pool. An observation tower with views over the impoundment is located at the end of the boardwalk.

- *Surfaces:* The boardwalk is mostly flat with one gentle slope.
- *Dimensions:* The boardwalk is approximately 5 feet wide with a 5-inch curb. There are 32 steep steps leading to the top of the observation tower. There is chain link fencing approximately 3.5 feet high along the top of the observation tower.
- *Additional features and considerations:* There is one small backless bench on the low viewing platform and one at the top of the tower.

### Nelson Island Trail

This 0.8-mile (each way) out-and-back trail passes through salt marsh along an abandoned road leading to shrublands and grasslands and ending at the edge of Plum Island Sound. This is the only trail on the refuge that is not located on Plum Island. Rather, it is located at the end of Stackyard Road, off Route 1A, within an infrequently trafficked portion of the refuge in Rowley, MA. As such, visitors should exercise appropriate caution. The trail is also closed Monday through Saturday during waterfowl hunting seasons (various times during fall and winter). Please contact the refuge to inquire about the current status of the trail.

- *Surfaces:* The trail begins at a crushed stone parking lot. The first 0.3 miles of the trail pass along an old gravel road. Long sections of this road are regularly flooded with up to a foot of water, creating a slippery surface and making waterproof knee boots necessary. The upland section of the trail is primarily composed of downtrodden grasses and other plants. While the upland trail has gentle slopes throughout, the surface of the trail is uneven and bumpy, and the trail is generally not mowed.
- *Dimensions:* Most of the grassland portion of the trail is less than 2 feet in width, with tall grasses or shrubs on either side. Multiple paths can be made along the trail, making it difficult to keep to the main trail.
- *Additional features and considerations:* The grassland section of the trail is frequently overgrown, making ticks, poison ivy, and thorns potential concerns. No benches are present along this trail, and shade is minimal throughout. Fishing is allowed at the end of this trail.