

Bird Biodiversity of Sandy Point Bird Sanctuary in Winter

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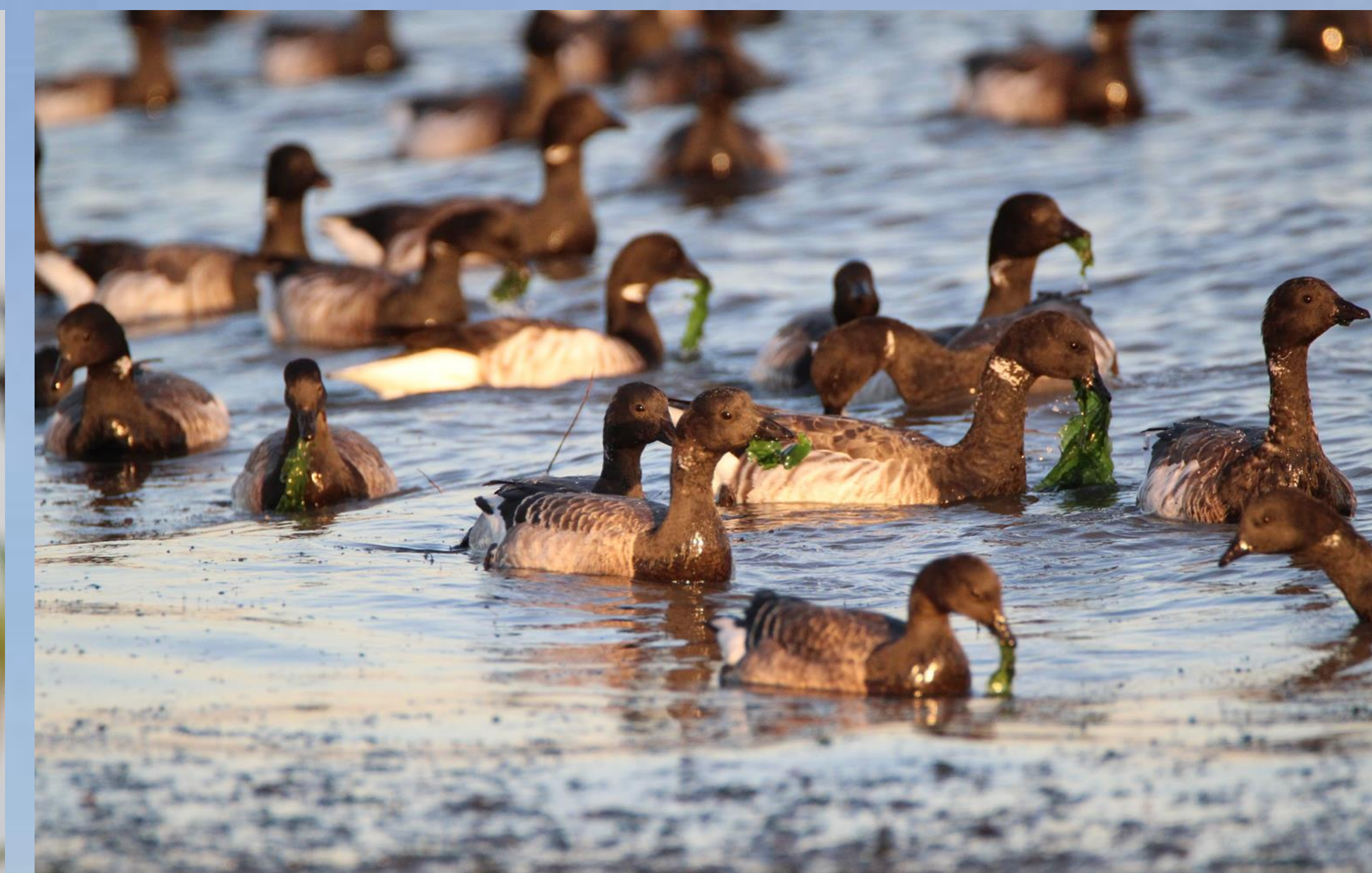
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Introduction

The Sandy Point Bird Sanctuary is considered a Globally Important Bird Area by the National Audubon Society. In the summertime, parts of the dunes and beaches are fenced off for nesting Piping Plovers.

The sanctuary is not as popular for birders during the wintertime and there is little data on which bird species use the land for migration and as a winter residence. Biodiversity is a key indicator of the health of an ecosystem and knowing what species reside at Sandy Point helps ecologists assess the area.

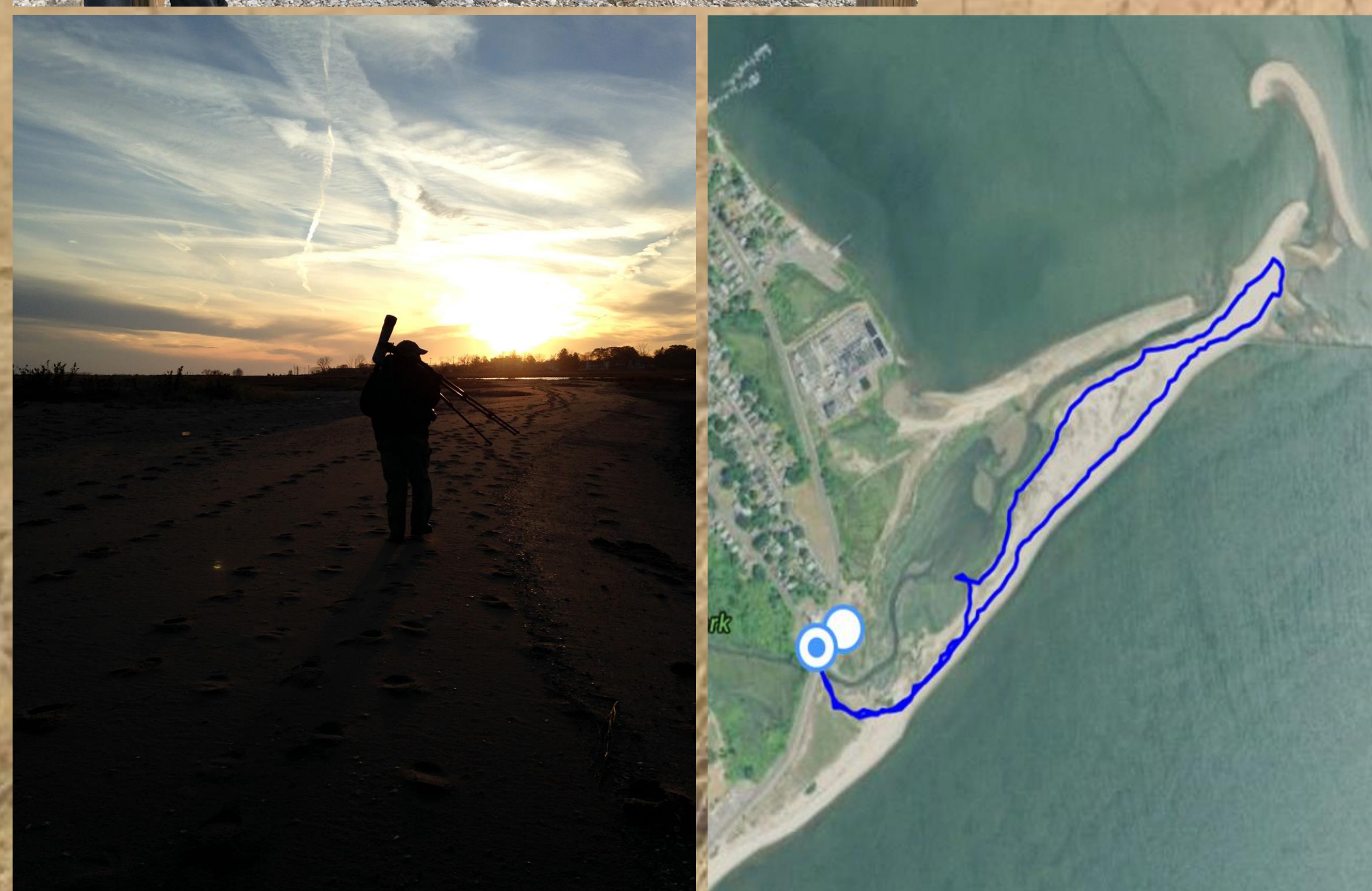
With the land frequently being used for fishing, hunting, and walking, there has been expressed concern on the safety of the birds. Therefore, the purpose of this project was to provide baseline data on the bird species that use the sanctuary during the wintertime to inform future scientific studies and conservation use.



Ring-billed Gulls (left) are very common winter species that were observed in every checklist like the Brants (right). Brants came all the way from the Arctic Circle to flock in the hundreds and forage together for seaweed in low tide. We also saw a Palm Warbler (middle) who was eating seeds in the sanctuary before continuing its journey south to the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Islands. Photos by G. Ulsamer.



Gale Ulsamer (top left) in front of the sanctuary sign along with his binoculars. Larry Bausher (bottom left) is leading the way back after a long walk to the far end of the point. The map (below) was recorded using the GPS in the eBird app by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. The approximated round trip was 1.5 miles.



Gathering Species Data

- At least once a week, from October 8 to January 27, Larry and I would go out to Sandy Point
 - If he was unavailable, I'd go out myself
 - We attempted to be as frequent as possible and tried to visit every one to two weeks
- We'd either take the north or south side of the sanctuary
- On average, we'd spend 1 hour and a half
- We'd create a checklist of all the birds which we see while we're there

Species Observed

Passerine

- Rock Pigeon
- Belted Kingfisher
- American Crow
- Fish Crow
- Horned Lark
- American Robin
- Northern Mockingbird
- European Starling
- American Pipit
- Snow Bunting
- Palm Warbler
- Yellow-rumped Warbler
- Nelson's Sparrow
- Dark-eyed Junco
- Savannah Sparrow
- Song Sparrow
- House Finch
- House Sparrow

Waterfowl

- Brant
- Canada Goose
- Mute Swan
- Gadwall
- American Wigeon
- Mallard
- American Black Duck
- Greater Scaup
- Lesser Scaup
- Long-tailed Duck
- Bufflehead
- Common Goldeneye
- Common Merganser
- Red Breasted Merganser

Waterbirds

- Red-throated Loon
- Common Loon
- Double-crested Cormorant
- Laughing Gull
- Ring-billed Gull
- Herring Gull
- Lesser Black-backed Gull
- Great Black-backed Gull

Shorebird + Wader

- Great Blue Heron
- Great Egret
- Yellow-crowned Night-Heron
- Black-bellied Plover
- Sanderling
- Dunlin
- Greater Yellowlegs

Bird of Prey

- Bald Eagle
- Peregrine Falcon

Sightings Analysis

As winter progressed, there was a notable increase in winter and all year species while the number of summer and migrant species decreased (Figure 1). The cause for this trend, even in the All Year species, is probably due to the fact that all birds move south for warmer temperatures. The reason there are few migrant species are that they are only passing through, like the Nelson's Sparrow who take a rest on the sanctuary on their journey from Canada to the Southern States. Furthermore, despite most of the winter species seen were waterfowl, passerines were the most abundant overall (Figure 2).

Despite no behavior being unique or odd, most birds we observed were eating, foraging, or dabbling, including the Bald Eagle which was eating either a dead bird or a fish on ice out in the harbor.

Other Observations

The sanctuary is open to waterfowl hunting as long as hunters stay below the tide line. Twice during our visits, we came across a hunter: one on a boat who was following all the rules and another who was shooting on the beach. The latter scared off every single bird, including hidden passerine species and the Peregrine Falcon we were observing. The hunting seems to not only endanger and disturb wildlife but also those who use the sanctuary for other recreation. In fact, neighbors were reporting the hunting for the same reasons.

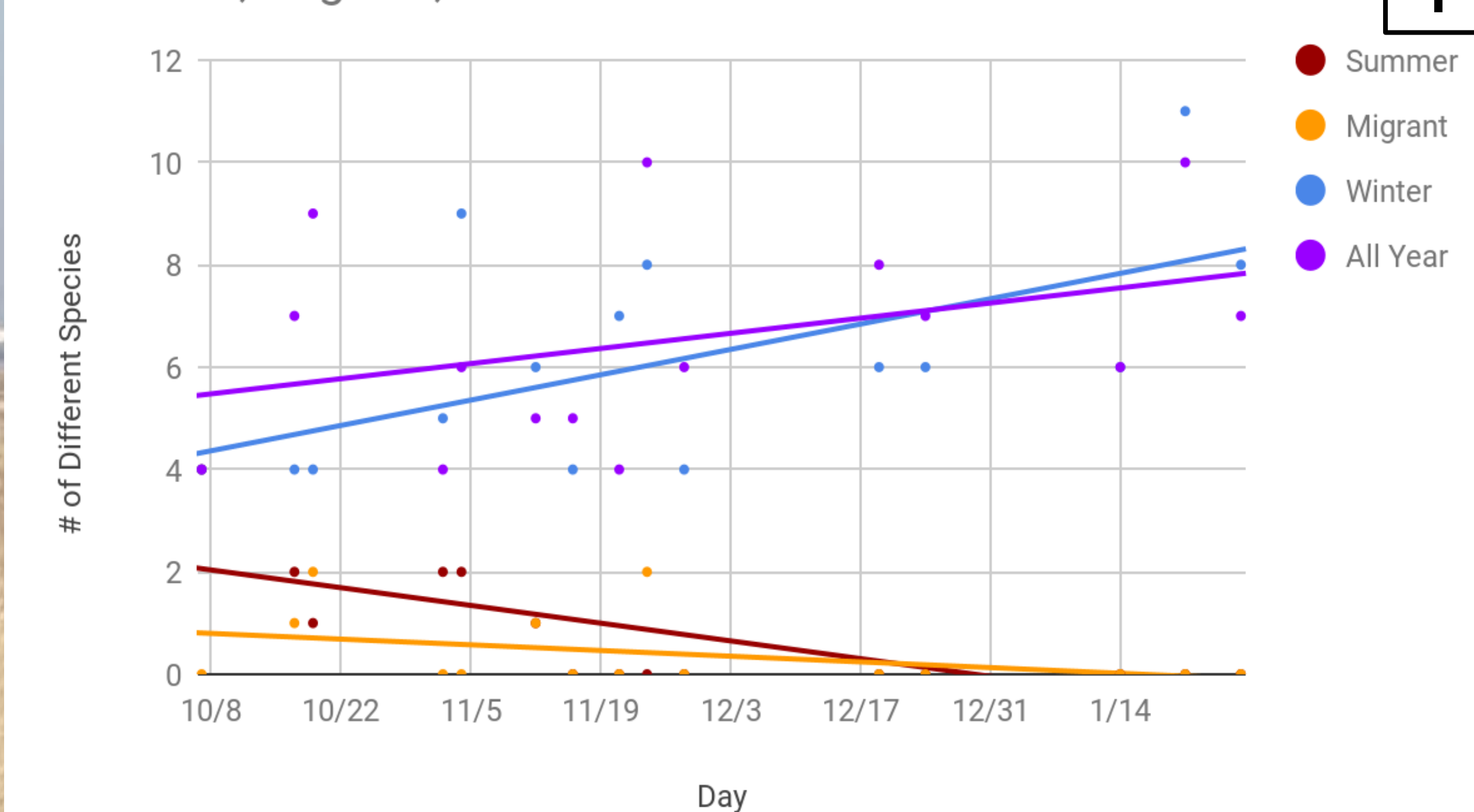
Furthermore, in the first few months, we frequently came across on shore fishermen and oystermen. Although they may not intentionally disturb wildlife and even told us about birds they saw recently, litter was inevitable. We picked up fishing line, lures, and other various trash that had been left or washed up on shore. Any litter can be harmful to wildlife.

Conclusion

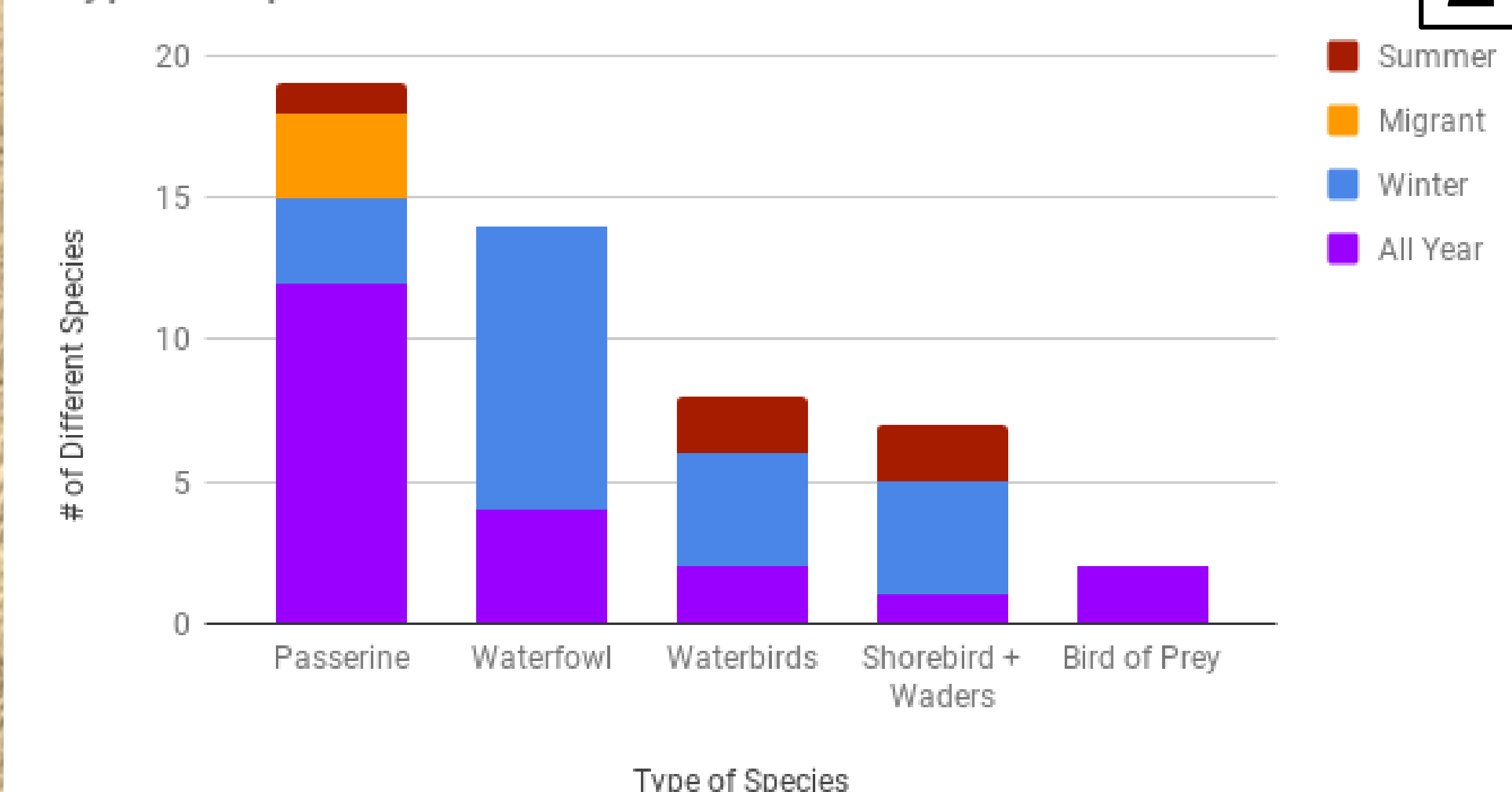
Our observations show that the sanctuary is used by many winter and all year species. It provides food and shelter to those species, as well as migrants who are passing through before flying over the Long Island Sound. With loss of suitable habitat both on land and in water, the sanctuary is a great place for birds to stay during the winter.

The sightings help ornithologists and conservationists prioritize locations for conservation work and understand the distribution of species. In the future, the data can be used to show the importance of the sanctuary to birds if threats to the environment arise.

Summer, Migrant, Winter and All Year



Type of Species



Acknowledgements

Thank you Larry Bausher for going out to the sanctuary and helping me get around and identify birds. Also, thanks mom and dad for driving me to the sanctuary, help spot birds, and clean up trash.

Range maps from All About Birds by The Lab of Ornithology were used to determine the species' residential status.