

# Offshore and on, S. Amboy teems with revived wildlife

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With summer arriving, many locals are heading straight for the beaches of South Amboy -- not for surf and sun, but for birds and wildlife.

On a recent sunny morning, the South Amboy beach was lined with families of fishermen. The new bayfront promenade was a boulevard of joggers, parents pushing baby strollers and devoted birdwatchers with binoculars and scopes.

The setting in South Amboy is local, but Raritan Bay itself is cosmopolitan. Here the waters of the Raritan River and the Arthur Kill converge with the outflow of the Hudson and Passaic rivers draining through Lower New York Bay. Just across the bay loom Perth Amboy and Staten Island, and even Coney Island in Brooklyn is visible in the distance.

A visitor's first impression might be of a largely industrial shoreline, but for fish and birds, Raritan Bay is a far different place. Fishing boats line the waters in mid-summer. The bay is teeming with striped bass, bluefish and eels. The bay floor below is dotted with oysters, quahog clams, lobsters and blue crabs.

"Great Beds is one of the richest oyster beds in the nation," said Greg Remaud, conservation director for NY/NJ Baykeeper, which restores wildlife habitat in the Hudson-Raritan estuary. "Each oyster filters 50 gallons of water per day, vastly improving water quality. They re-create an ecosystem that's otherwise been lost, bringing back healthy populations of other shellfish and fish."

For the next week or so, Raritan Bay hosts an annual natural spectacle of global significance. Thousands of horseshoe crabs -- prehistoric creatures that look like large bronze helmets propelled by menacing, jagged tails -- breed in the bay each June, lending an archaic look to beaches and sand bars next to modern industrial buildings and townhouses.

"I've seen 50 or more horseshoe crabs spawning on the South Amboy beach near the public boat launch," said Scott Barnes, senior naturalist for the New Jersey Audubon Society. "With its naturally sloping sand going into the bay, it's perfect for horseshoe crabs."

Between Delaware Bay and Raritan Bay, New Jersey hosts the largest population of American horseshoe crabs in the world. Horseshoe crabs, which are more closely related to spiders and scorpions than true crabs, attract vast numbers of birds, such as the threatened red knot, which feast on the crab eggs left buried in the sand. The abundance of marine life in Raritan Bay is a big contributor to more than 200 species of birds being sighted in South Amboy.

"The South Amboy bayfront is a big funnel for birds coming from the ocean, following the waters along the coast to find what habitat is left," said Remaud. "We don't have a lot of habitat remaining -- so whatever is there, the birds find it."

South Amboy and the Raritan Bay Waterfront Park offer a tremendous diversity of habitats, from beaches and mudflats to hardwood forest and freshwater wetlands. Since 1992, New Jersey Audubon has conducted a monitoring census of waterbirds in Raritan Bay, and the results have been encouraging.

Up to 10,000 greater scaup, a species of duck, gather in Raritan Bay each winter, and the bayfront's saltwater marshes are among the few places in Middlesex County where the American oystercatcher, clapper rail, willets and seaside sparrow all nest.

A wholly different natural world exists on the other side of the tracks -- in this case, NJ Transit's North Jersey Coast Line. A dirt parking lot filled with transit workers on lunch break hardly seems the place for a wildlife oasis. Yet just beyond is Broadway Pond, a hidden gem offering a matinee show worth a wait in line.

On a recent day, at least 30 turtles basked in the sun's rays on logs and rocks in the large freshwater pond, and a muskrat plied towards its lodge, its tail leaving a triangular wake behind it. A snowy egret stalked the shallows, and farther in the distance a great blue heron flapped its mighty wings and ascended above the hardwood forest lining the forested bluffs across the pond.

"The pond has lots of swallows in migration, and I've seen up to a dozen wood ducks here, along with shorebirds and snipe," said Barnes. "And when the pond fills with pickerelweed, with its nice purple flowers, lots of butterflies can be found here feeding on its nectar."

South Amboy Mayor John O'Leary is working with Middlesex County and Baykeeper to expand both habitat protection along the bayfront and the public's recreational options. As wildlife and fishing have bounced back, South Amboy has seen another benefit.

"Over the last 10 years, this beautiful waterfront park has helped us reinvigorate our downtown business district," said O'Leary. "We're seeing the fruits of our labor with new opportunities for young and old to enjoy the waterfront, for local children to study wildlife like birds and snapping turtles in a healthy environment."

Months from now, Raritan Bay will receive another kind of visitor--one with whiskers, flippers and an insatiable appetite for seafood.

"From December to early April, harbor seals haul out off of Cliffwood Beach," said Barnes. "You can see their heads peeking out of the water when they come up to breathe, or munching on a fish they just caught."

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