

From busy beach to uninhabited island, expansive marsh to urban river

By Erica Casper

Exploring four Long Island Sound Stewardship Areas, longing to see more

In 2003, the Long Island Sound Partnership launched a stewardship initiative to identify the most ecologically and recreationally significant places on coastal Long Island Sound. Experts and community members worked together to highlight 33 areas across Connecticut and New York that deserved special recognition and investment.

These places protect rare habitats, support threatened species, offer public access to the water and provide opportunities for research and education. Since then, the Long Island Sound Partnership has invested millions of dollars in protecting, restoring, and improving these areas.

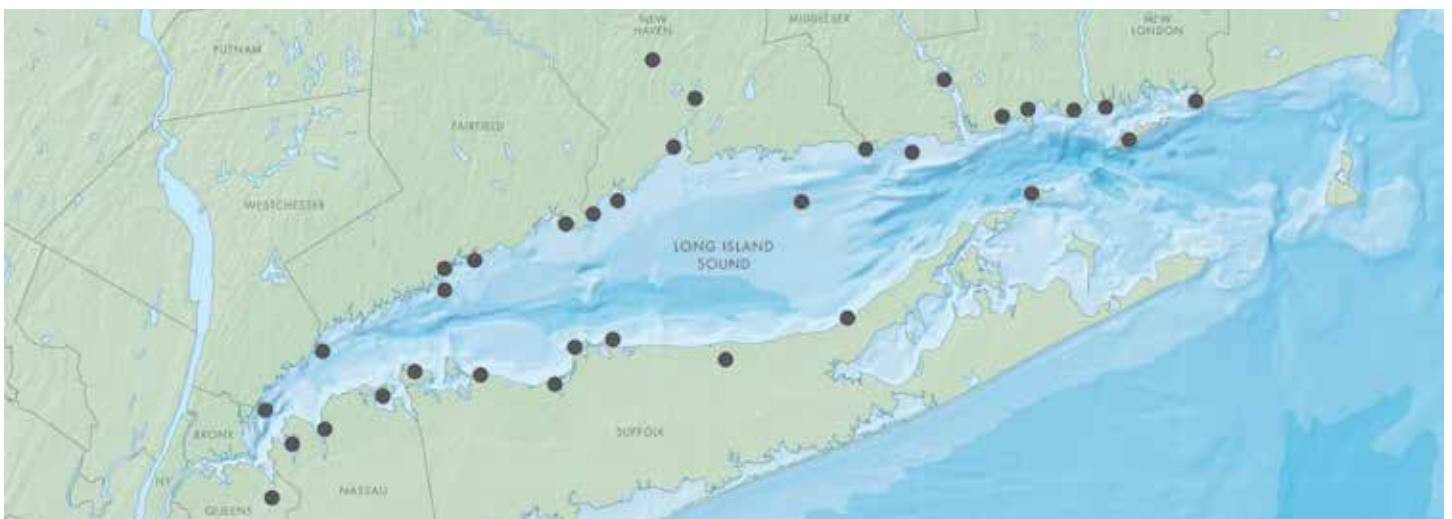
I've been learning about the stewardship initiative since I started working for the Long Island Sound Partnership and Connecticut Sea Grant earlier this

year. Each of the Stewardship Areas tells part of the story of Long Island Sound: how it supports both people and wildlife, how it has been shaped by history, and how it continues to change. Some areas I already knew well, such as Bluff Point, Harkness, and Rocky Neck state parks, longtime favorites of mine for spending time outdoors. I was unfamiliar with many others, however, and learning about them on paper sparked my curiosity to experience them firsthand.

With that in mind, I recently visited four new-to-me Stewardship Areas in Connecticut: Norwalk Harbor, Charles Island, Barn Island and the Quinnipiac River. They all offered something different—some bustling, some remote, some surprising in their setting. Together, these areas showed me how diverse the Sound's landscapes are and why they matter, while



Tiffany Adams, counselor for The Maritime Aquarium summer camp, shows campers the sea life captured in a seine net at Calf Pasture Beach. Photo: Judy Benson



Thirty-three sites in Connecticut and New York have been designated as Long Island Sound Stewardship Areas. Illustration by Lucy Reading-Ikkanda for LIS Partnership

highlighting unique ways to explore and appreciate what makes Long Island Sound special.

Norwalk Harbor: Where the City Meets the Sea



Maritime Aquarium campers explore the area at Calf Pasture Beach exposed at low tide. Photos: Judy Benson

Norwalk Harbor is a hub of activity, where recreation, industry, and conservation come together. Veterans Memorial Park and nearby Calf Pasture Beach provide easy access to the water and lots of options for spending time outside. Whether you're launching a kayak, watching the boats, fishing from the pier, or just walking along the shore, the harbor invites people in.

Veterans Memorial Park spans 35 acres, with sports fields, paths and a boat launch. It's open year-round from dawn to dusk. Calf Pasture Beach, one of the area's most popular spots, offers sandy beach access, lifeguard-supervised swimming, and views of the Norwalk Islands. There's also a skate park, concessions, and a small boat ramp for kayaks and canoes.

One of the harbor's most notable features is its oyster industry. Norwalk has been a major source of oysters for generations. If you've eaten oysters in New England, there's a good chance they came from here. That history is still alive in the working waterfront and the educational programs nearby. Oyster boats can often be seen from the beach, and there's even a recreational shellfishing area there where people can harvest their own.

When I visited, the beach was buzzing with energy. Walkers and joggers were enjoying the paved paths. Sailboats glided past in the water. Two summer camp groups from The Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk were exploring the shore and combing

through treasures captured by seine net pulls in the shallows. The excitement was contagious as the kids discovered pipefish, pufferfish, crabs, shrimp, and even a horseshoe crab. It was a great reminder that Norwalk Harbor isn't just a place for recreation, it's also a living classroom where people of all ages can learn about the Sound.

Charles Island: A Natural Gem with a Tidal Secret



Visitors venture out on the sand bar towards Charles Island.

Charles Island sits just offshore from Silver Sands State Park in Milford. This 14-acre island is home to one of Connecticut's largest breeding colonies of herons and egrets and has been designated a Natural Area Preserve and a National Audubon Society Important Bird Area. Its dense woods and rocky shoreline offer vital nesting habitat for great egrets, snowy egrets, and other coastal birds.

Geologically, Charles Island is a tied island. It is connected to the mainland by a natural gravel bar that's only exposed at low tide. It's a striking feature that draws visitors out along the sandbar, creating a temporary bridge between land and island. But timing is everything. When I visited, I missed my window. The tide had already come in, and the sandbar was submerged. I hadn't checked the tide chart ahead of time, so I couldn't cross.

That said, the shoreline and boardwalk at Silver Sands State Park were still worth the trip. The beach is wide, with shallow water and lifeguards on duty during the summer. It's an accessible place to walk, relax and watch birds overhead. If you're planning to visit the island itself, though, planning ahead is important. The tides make all the difference, and visiting during nesting season (typically May through August) is discouraged to protect the birds.

With a history that includes a tobacco farm, a failed hotel, and a 20th-century retreat center, Charles

Island has seen its share of stories. Today, it's a reminder that some of the Sound's most interesting places are those that let nature take the lead.

Barn Island: A Living Laboratory for Coastal Change

Barn Island, located in Stonington, is the largest coastal Wildlife Management Area in Connecticut and one of the most ecologically diverse. Spanning over 1,000 acres, it includes salt and brackish marshes, intertidal flats, upland forests, a sandy beach, and even a rare sea-level fen. It's a place where you can experience the full range of coastal habitats, all in one visit.

But Barn Island isn't just a beautiful landscape. It's also a vital research site. For more than 60 years, scientists have been studying its wetlands to better understand how marshes respond to sea-level rise and human activity. After misguided efforts in the 1930s to control mosquitoes by digging ditches to drain the marsh, restoration work began and continues to the present. That history has made Barn Island a rich case study for long-term ecological change.

When I walked the trails, I passed from shaded forest into open marsh, with the landscape shifting dramatically from one moment to the next. Dragonflies buzzed around, bees moved from flower to flower, and birds called in the distance. If I could use one word to describe it, I would say "peaceful." Outside the trailhead is a parking lot and boat launch, offering access for paddling and fishing.

Barn Island offers something for everyone: scientists, birders, hikers, and anyone looking to spend quiet time in nature. It's also a reminder that conservation takes time, and that places like this can teach us a lot about both change and resilience.



The marshes at Barn Island Wildlife Management Area are surrounded by a coastal forest. Photo: Judy Benson

Quinnipiac River: A Green Corridor in the City



The main trail at the Quinnipiac River takes visitors into the upland forest and along the river. Photo: Erica Casper

The Quinnipiac River Marsh Wildlife Management Area and State Park in New Haven anchor the Quinnipiac River Stewardship Area, offering nearly 900 acres of tidal marsh, floodplain forest, and upland habitat within an urban setting. Designated an Important Bird Area by the National Audubon Society, the marshes attract migratory waterfowl and provide habitat for threatened species such as the northern harrier and least bittern. The four-mile Banton Quinnipiac Trail winds through the floodplain, giving visitors a chance to hike, birdwatch, or simply experience one of the rare stretches of green space along the lower river.

When I visited, I followed part of the trail that began in New Haven. At times it hugged the river's bends; at others it meandered upland. The sounds of birds and insects mixed with the constant hum of the nearby Merritt Parkway, nature and city pressed close together, separated in places only by a strip of forest and guardrails. Along the trail, I passed a woman with a fishing pole, hinting at quiet fishing spots tucked farther along the river.

This section of the Quinnipiac may not feel as remote as some other Stewardship Areas, but it highlights why urban access to nature matters. For local residents, the river provides habitat for wildlife and a daily reminder that green corridors and healthy waterways can exist even in the middle of a city.

These four visits, along with others I've explored, are just the beginning. There are still plenty of Stewardship Areas to discover, and each season brings new sights, wildlife and perspectives. Spending time at them is an easy way to connect with the Sound. Grab a trail map, pick a site, and see for yourself why these places matter. 