

Washburn Island

Washburn Island is a treasure: 330 acres of beautiful, protected, island land open to the public, a haven of natural environments and natural quiet and dark in this increasingly thickly-settled town. Washburn Island is owned by the Commonwealth, and managed by the Waquoit Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve (WBNERR) which has its headquarters off Route 28 at the head of Waquoit Bay. Comparing the island to the development that might have occurred had it not been protected is enough to make the entire town grateful: natural shorelines, woodlands, and marshes, all open to the public instead of perhaps a hundred big houses adding to the already-considerable pollution problems in Waquoit Bay. Today the island continues to do its natural job of filtering the water and cleaning the air, and providing habitat for native plants and animals that are crowded out of other parts of town. And we can go there to enjoy it.

One of the charms of Washburn Island is that it can only be reached by boat; going there is a special event. Whether you visit to walk the pine woods looking for spring migrating warblers, to camp, picnic, or hike there in summer, or to look across Vineyard Sound from an empty beach in late fall, you will have to go by boat.

Although any shallow-draft boat will get you there, a canoe, rowboat, or kayak provides distinct advantages: you go anywhere in this shallow bay—drifting across the flats, easing into the fringing marshes, or just paddling quietly along the shoreline. Human-powered craft let you hear what's going on around you: the breeze in the marshes, the call of a shorebird or the splash of a fish. In them you move at a speed that lets you look for the sources of those sounds and sneak up on many elusive creatures that hide from more obvious craft. And you can slip ashore from very shallow water anywhere on the island shore that your curiosity takes you without damaging things.

So what will you see? Shorebirds probing along the water's edge for clams or worms, the huge sky that comes from being out on the water, undisturbed marshes, salt ponds behind barrier beaches with twisting outlet channels through the marsh, pine and oak woods with no telephone poles or rooftops sticking out of them. Maybe you'll see the print of a Raccoon's paw, the dunes behind an expanse of beach, gulls riding or fighting the current in Waquoit Bay's entrance channel, wind on the water (sometimes a lot of it), maybe a Native American shell midden, or a scallop shell in the shallows. And you may see a thousand other sights, familiar and unfamiliar to us today, but common to these shores for thousands of years. Yes, of course there are houses along the far shore, boats by the dozen moored here in summer, planes overhead, if you look, but this is one place where they are not central, and you don't have to look for them if you don't want to. Enjoy.

The best access point is White's Landing, the town landing on the south side of Route 28 just west of Child's River. It has a ramp and a substantial parking lot. For more information, and to find out about camping, contact WBNERR at their headquarters or at www.waquoitbayreserve.org. You can also launch from the town landing on the west side of Waquoit Bay at Waquoit Landing Road, though the parking is much tighter here.

The 300 Committee does not yet have a trail map available, but we're working on changing that. But if you go to the website: www.300committee you'll find other 25 trail maps for Falmouth, and lots of information about open space in town.