

Morse Mountain Focus Area

Phippsburg

This focus area extends from Popham Beach westward through Small Point and includes several ecologically important areas, including Meetinghouse Pond and Parker Head Swamp, Popham Beach, Morse Mountain/Seawall Beach/Sprague River, and Cape Small. Each of these areas is described briefly below.

Meetinghouse Pond and Parker Head Swamp

A large undeveloped area north of Route 209 and northeast of Meetinghouse Pond supports a variety of small but intact wetland and upland habitats, including patches of **pitch pine woodland**, forested and shrub swamps, and a small pocket peatland, within a matrix of an oak-pine forest. The entire block covers nearly 2,000 acres, is largely unfragmented by roads, and has isolated patches of recent logging activity.

The extensive pitch pine woodland occurs as patches of various sizes within a ~150-acre area. The shrub layer, which includes large patches of broom crowberry (*Corema conradii*), is more extensive than at nearby Pasture Ridge. A few dead pitch pines were found scattered in areas where white pine (*Pinus strobus*) was a canopy-dominant, suggesting a successional trend to more mesic forest in the continued absence of fire. Approximately 50 clumps of the rare **smooth sandwort** (*Minuartia glabra*) were found on a small open ridge with *Cladina* spp. and *Cladonia* spp. lichens.



Pitch pine woodland near Meetinghouse Pond



Acidic fen, part of Parker Head Swamp

Parker Head Swamp is a ~200-acre wetland identified by MDIFW as a high value waterfowl and wadingbird habitat. It is dominated by highbush blueberry (*Vaccinium corymbosum*), winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*), and speckled alder (*Alnus incana* ssp. *rugosa*). A small acidic fen with sweet gale (*Myrica gale*), bog aster (*Aster nemoralis*) and beaked sedge (*Carex utriculata*) occurs in the southeastern portion of the swamp.

Popham Beach Area

At over 400 acres, Popham Beach State Park and the adjacent Hunnewell Beach (private) serve as nesting habitat for **piping plovers** (*Charadrius melodus*) and **least terns** (*Sterna antillarum*), and nearby Pond Island (protected by USFWS) has served as a restoration site for **roseate terns** (*Sterna dougallii*). Popham Beach State Park also supports small remnant **pitch pine woodlands** and a **coastal dune/marsh ecosystem** that includes a dune grassland.

Morse Mountain/Seawall Beach/Sprague River

Transected by the Morse River to the east and bounded by the Sprague River to the west, the Morse Mountain and Seawall Beach area also support several uncommon and high quality habitats, including most of those listed above for the Popham Beach area. In addition, the interior of the Morse Mountain area supports a small but intact **maritime spruce – fir larch forest**.

The area serves as an important feeding and staging area for the roseate terns that nest on nearby Pond Island. The ~300 acre salt marsh along the Sprague River was visited in 1998 by MDIFW bird surveyors, who found both **salt-marsh sharp-tail sparrow** (*Ammodramus caudacutus*) and Nelson's sharp-tail sparrows (*Ammodramus nelsoni*).

Cape Small, Phippsburg

Cape Small covers approximately 200 acres and supports a variety of small but uncommon plant communities. The interior is largely post-agricultural oak-pine forest interspersed with patches of spruce-fir forest and at least one several-acre **pitch pine woodland** with broom crowberry (*Corema conradii*). The interior of Cape Small contains an undeveloped pond fringed with a boggy edge. A rocky, shrub headland along the perimeter of the peninsula is interrupted by seven pocket beaches and associated dunes, a few of which support the rare **sea-beach sedge** (*Carex silicea*). The rocky headland of Cape Small supports black crowberry (*Empetrum nigrum*), golden heather (*Hudsonia ericoides*), huckleberry (*Gaylussacia baccata*), juniper (*Juniperus communis*), large cranberry (*Vaccinium macrocarpon*), and bracken fern (*Pteridium aquilinum*). Closer to the ocean, the rocky headland supports clumps of the rare **smooth sandwort** (*Minuartia glabra*) in small cracks and depressions of the exposed bedrock. The dune community behind the south-facing beach is small, undisturbed, and dominated by rugosa rose (*Rosa rugosa*), poison ivy (*Toxicodendron radicans*), and bayberry (*Myrica pensylvanica*). Clumps of **sea-beach sedge** occur in swales within the dune system.



Pocket Beaches and Headlands, Cape Small MNAP file photo, Hank Tyler

Rare Species/Natural Communities Summary Table for the Morse Mountain Focus Area:

Common Name	Latin Name	State Status	S-Rank	G-Rank
Exemplary Natural Communities				
Coastal Dune Marsh Ecosystem		n/a	S3	not ranked
Dune Grassland		n/a	S2	not ranked
Maritime Spruce – Fir – Larch Forest		n/a	S4	not ranked
Pitch Pine Dune Woodland		n/a	S1	G2
Pitch Pine Woodland		n/a	S3	not ranked
Rose – Bayberry Maritime Shrubland		n/a	S4	not ranked
Spartina Saltmarsh		n/a	S3	not ranked
Rare Plants				
Beach Plum	<i>Prunus maritima</i>	E	S1	G4
Saltmarsh false-foxglove	<i>Agalinis maritima</i>	SC	S3	G5
Sea-beach sedge	<i>Carex silicea</i>	SC	S3	G5
Smooth sandwort	<i>Minuartia glabra</i>	SC	S2	G4
Rare Animals				
Arctic tern	<i>Sterna paradisaea</i>	T	S2B	G5
Common tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>	SC	S4B	G5
Least tern	<i>Sterna antillarum</i>	E	S1B	G4
Northern myotis	<i>Myotis septentrionalis</i>	SC	S4	G4
Piping plover	<i>Charadrius melodus</i>	E	S2B	G3
Roseate tern	<i>Sterna dougallii</i>	E	S2B	G4
Salt-marsh sharp-tail sparrow	<i>Ammodramus caudacutus</i>	not listed	S3B	G4

Other Resources Mapped by MDIFW:

Other MDIFW resources mapped in this focus area include Deer Wintering Areas, Shorebird Feeding Areas, Inland Wading Bird and Waterfowl Habitats, and extensive areas of Coastal Wading Bird and Waterfowl Habitat.

Protection Status:

At the southeastern end of Phippsburg, Popham Beach State Park (~590 ac.) and the Morse Mountain Preserve (~630 ac) form the core of over 1,200 acres of protected land. (The Morse Mountain Preserve is protected by a cooperative agreement between Bates College and The Nature Conservancy). The town of Phippsburg owns an additional ~350 acres and the Phippsburg Land Trust has protected nearly 300 acres within this focus area. Thus, the total acreage of protected land within this area is over 1,850.

The Maine Wetlands Protection Coalition, a consortium of groups including the Friends of Merrymeeting Bay, Lower Kennebec Land Trust, Nature Conservancy, Maine Coast Heritage Trust, and MDIFW, is actively pursuing land protection in the area.

Conservation Considerations:

- Although much of the important tidal wetlands have been protected, remaining priority areas include the west side of the Sprague River and the east side of the Morse River. Some of the shoreline within these privately owned lands has been developed, but most of it is low-density residential. Nonetheless, continued residential development in the area, and further shoreline development may reduce buffers needed for wildlife, fragment wildlife habitat, influence water quality, and serve as a pathway for invasive species.
- Most of the Cape Small area is undeveloped; only four lots cover the two peninsulas and much of the interior.
- Further development of the Meetinghouse Pond/Parker Head Swamp block may diminish the quality of the pitch pine woodlands. In addition, pitch pine woodlands require periodic fire or a similar disturbance. Use of fire as a conservation tool has not occurred in these areas, and it may be difficult because of the proximity to residential areas.
- Hunnewell Beach is the largest remaining privately owned beach in the area. Public and private beaches receive moderate to heavy recreational use in the summer.
- Invasive species, such as common reed (*Phragmites australis*), have expanded rapidly in salt and brackish marshes in other parts of New England. While invasive plants do not seem to be a major threat currently, their distribution and abundance should be monitored.