

Beaches and Sand Trails of Southern Rhode Island

Regulations and Information Pamphlet



This publication is the joint effort of the **Rhode Island Coastal Resources Management Council** and the **Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management**. The information contained herein is provided as a service to broadly inform those wishing to access remote areas of the Rhode Island shoreline, and should only be used as such.

The following information is a consolidation of existing laws, rules, and regulations belonging to both agencies, and should there be any questions as to their presentation, any inquiries or comments should be submitted to the applicable agency or hosting municipality.

Beach Vehicle Permits

Beach Vehicle Permits are issued by the CRMC primarily to ensure that vehicles can safely travel off road and are equipped with safety equipment in the event that they get stuck in the sand. Access to beach areas is controlled by municipal or RI Department of Environmental Management (RIDEM) regulations only. A CRMC Beach Vehicle Permit does not guarantee access anywhere; it only ensures that vehicles which have such a permit can safely travel off road. The original intent of these permits was to allow fishermen access to fisheries resources.

General Driving Restrictions:

- Vehicles are prohibited on dunes or within 75 feet of the dune crest except on trails marked expressly for vehicle use. Prohibited areas may or may not be vegetated.
- Vehicles are prohibited in vegetated areas anywhere on the barrier.
- Parking on the dunes or other vegetated areas at any time shall result in revocation of the Beach Vehicle Pass.
- Vehicle access to the beach shall only be through authorized trails.
- During the summer beach season (Memorial Day through Labor Day) driving on beach areas is generally prohibited throughout the State in accordance with municipal regulations. Currently there are two exceptions to this: on Block Island beaches and then only in accordance with the Town of New Shoreham regulations; and, at the RIDEM owned and operated East Beach Sand Trail in Charlestown in accordance with RIDEM regulations.

The Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management's East Beach Sand Trail (Charlestown)

During the summer beach season (Memorial Day to Labor Day), daytime off-road driving is restricted at the majority of public-controlled beaches in Rhode Island due to the sheer volume of beachgoers and the safety issues that presents. An exception to this is the East Beach Sand Trail in Charlestown, RI, which is only accessible through the RI Department of Environmental Management (RIDEM) Parks and Recreation owned East Beach site and is regulated and managed by the RIDEM Division of Parks and Recreation.

Due to the congestion and crowding issues occurring during this summer season, RIDEM institutes and enforces a 30-car parking limitation on the RIDEM East Beach Sand Trail. We understand that this causes frustration; however, RIDEM is managing this activity for safety purposes. **Therefore purchasing a Beach Vehicle Permit does not guarantee access to the East Beach Sand Trail.**

The RIDEM East Beach Sand Trail has parking for 30 vehicles in four parking areas (see maps on pages 11 - 13). RI Department of Environmental Management closes their East Beach Sand Trail when the 30 vehicle limit has been reached.

Parking anywhere other than the designated lots or pull-off spots on the RIDEM East Beach Sand Trail between April 1 and September 15 shall result in revocation of the Beach Vehicle Permit.

Parking on East Beach is on a first come first served basis. A Beach Vehicle Pass does not guarantee access to the RIDEM East Beach Sand Trail.

After the busy Labor Day holiday weekend, most of these locally-controlled access areas remain open for use, but also re-open to the traditional use for which a beach vehicle permit was designed: **fishing**.

Why Regulate Vehicular Traffic on Beaches and Sand Trails?

Rhode Island's coastal barriers, their associated beaches, sand dunes, washover fans, wetlands and salt ponds are limited and valuable natural resources in need of protection and careful management.

Coastal barriers are constantly shifting landforms that shield the salt ponds, wetlands and the low lying mainland from the ravages of coastal storms by absorbing and dissipating the energy of storm driven waves. These features are built from sand, gravel and cobbles that have been transported over time by waves and wind to form spits of land that separate the salt ponds from the ocean. Barriers typically contain a beach, sand dunes, and sometimes washover fans and wetlands. During storms large waves move sand from the beach and dunes offshore to form sand bars and across the barrier to form washover fans on the back side of the barrier. After a storm, fair weather waves transport sand from the nearshore sand bars back to the beach berm. Dunes rebuild over time when windblown sand particles accumulate.

- **Beaches** – dynamic, flexible features that alter their volume and shape in response to storms and storm recovery in fair weather. The Rhode Island beaches are important recreational resources that are used by tens of thousands of people on hot summer days, and during fish runs.
- **Sand dunes** - provide both important habitat for many species of animals and a sand reservoir that is redistributed during severe storms. Beach grass, a plant that is typically seen on the Rhode Island barriers, can thrive in the harsh winds and blowing sands. The grasses develop rhizomes (roots) that grow as sand accumulates so that the plants trap and anchor windblown sand. Beach grass is easily destroyed by foot or vehicular traffic.
- **Washover fans** - help to increase the elevation of the barrier and saltmarshes, making these coastal features more resilient to sea level rise. The unvegetated washover fans are important habitat for the Piping Plover, a bird protected by the Federal Endangered Species Act.
- **Coastal wetlands** –are among the most productive ecosystems on Earth, providing spawning grounds, nurseries, shelter, and food for finfish, shellfish, birds, and other wildlife.



Beaches



Dunes



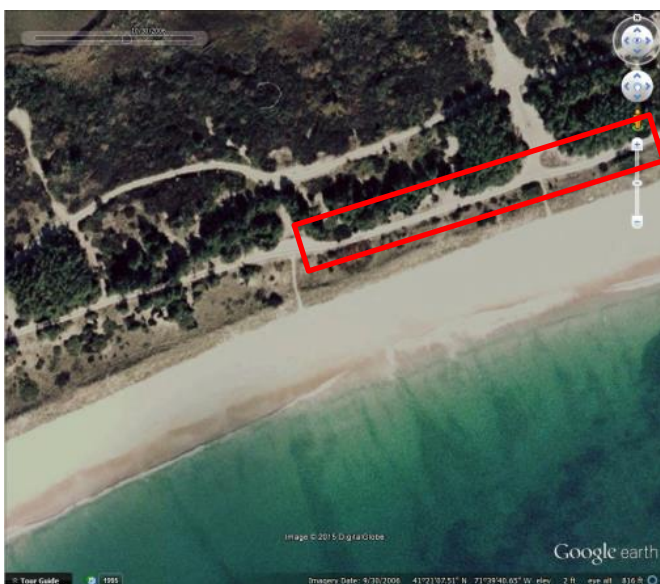
Washover fans and wetlands

Potential Disruptions to Beach and Sand Trail Driving

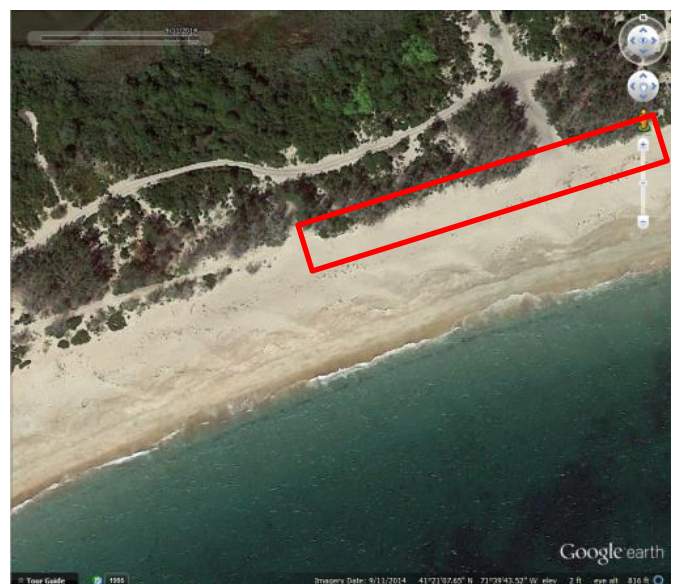
Erosion – The Rhode Island shorelines are always in a state of change. Most of the south shore beaches are eroding. Shoreline change maps show that the shoreline has receded more than 200 feet between 1939 and 2014 in many places. One consequence of this trend is that the roads laid out in the backdune areas many years ago have transitioned into beach. These sections of the sand trail become very attractive nesting areas to some of the bird species protected under the Endangered Species Act.

Protected Species – The Piping Plover and other species can cause disruptions to traffic and beach travel. Vehicles are prohibited from entering areas which have been closed through signage and/or roped-off for the protection of beach nesting bird species including Federally protected Piping Plover and State listed Least Tern. Piping Plovers lay their eggs on the sandy areas of the beach and washover fans, usually surrounded by pebbles which resemble the eggs themselves. This behavior along with the birds small size make it an easy target of unwanted problems. Enclosed zones can be expected during the months of April to September. In addition, the sand trail itself may be rerouted or closed entirely if the Piping Plovers nest in or near the trail. The closures will be in effect until the chicks fledge.

Sand Trail **closures** may occur on a temporary basis from **April through August** and are established on an as-needed basis by the US Fish and Wildlife Service based on nesting activity in the area. Information regarding such closures may be obtained by calling the US Fish and Wildlife Service at (401) 364-9124, RI Department of Environmental Management (401) 667-6200, or the CRMC at (401) 783-3370.



Segment of the sand trail running behind the fore dunes in 2006



Same segment of the sand trail on the eroded beach in 2015

Regulations pertaining to Beach and Sand Trail Driving

[Reference: Coastal Resources Management Plan, Section 210.1](#)

Vehicular use of beaches, where not otherwise prohibited or restricted by property owners or by private or public management programs, is permitted only under the following conditions:

- (a) Motorcycles, minibikes, snowmobiles, all-terrain motorized cycles and tricycles are prohibited except for authorized management-related vehicles; and
- (b) A Coastal Resources Management Council annually renewable use permit is required for all vehicles. Such permits may be obtained for a fee subject to the following requirements and conditions. In the event these requirements and conditions are not met, the use permit shall be subject to revocation by the Council or its agents.
 - (1) Vehicles shall have all documentation and registration necessary for operation on the public highways of this state.
 - (2) All permit applicants shall exhibit proof of current liability insurance coverage.
 - (3) All persons operating said vehicles shall have valid operator licenses.
 - (4) Maximum speed on all beaches shall not exceed 10 mph. Maximum speed on beaches shall not exceed 5 mph when approaching pedestrians.
 - (5) Ruts or holes caused by vehicles shall be filled and debris removed.
 - (6) Headlights shall be used by all vehicles while in motion between sunset and sunrise.
 - (7) Riding on or driving from any position outside the vehicles is prohibited.
 - (8) Vehicles are prohibited on swimming beaches during the period they are protected by lifeguards and in operation.
 - (9) Vehicles shall be at all times subject to town ordinances and all regulations restricting the use of private, state and federal properties.
 - (10) Vehicles are prohibited from entering areas which have been closed through signage and/or roped-off for the protection of beach nesting bird species including Federally protected Piping Plover and State listed Least Tern. Such closures may occur on a temporary basis from April through August and are established on an as-needed basis by the US Fish and Wildlife Service based on nesting activity in the area. Information regarding such closures may be obtained by calling the US Fish and Wildlife Service at (401) 364-9124 or the CRMC at (401) 783-3370. Vehicles are also prohibited from entering areas closed through signage and/or roped-off to promote dune restoration, invasive species control and dune or beach re-vegetation efforts.

The Council requires, for the operator's safety and benefit, that every vehicle operated on a beach carry the following equipment (in good working order):

- (a) shovel (heavy-duty or military entrenching tool);
- (b) tow rope or chain (15 feet, load strength of 1,800 lbs., chain size 5/16");
- (c) jack and support stand (minimum 18" x 18" x 5/8", plywood);
- (d) street legal tires (4-ply tread, 2-ply sidewalls) - snow or mud tires are not recommended;
- (e) spare tire;
- (f) low-pressure tire gauge (0-20 lbs.);
- (g) first aid kit;
- (h) fire extinguisher;
- (i) appropriate emergency signal devices and/or two way radio; and
- (j) flashlight.

Additional Rules pertaining to Beach and Sand Trail Driving

Vehicle traffic across the sand dunes shall be prohibited except along marked and stabilized trails.

This regulation shall not be construed as establishing any right of trespass on or across private property or where it is otherwise prohibited or restricted by public or private agencies.

- Vehicles are prohibited on dunes or within 75 feet of the dune crest except on trails marked expressly for vehicle use. Prohibited areas may or may not be vegetated.
- Vehicles are prohibited in vegetated areas anywhere on the barrier.
- Vehicle access to the Salt Pond is prohibited. Access to the pond shall be by foot only.
- Vehicle access to the beach shall only be through authorized trails.
- The vehicle must be a “4 Wheel Drive” (4x4) **All wheel drive (AWD) is not allowed.**
- The vehicle must be present at the time the pass is purchased
- The purchaser must have a valid driver’s license
- The purchaser must have current liability insurance
- The vehicle must have current registration
- The vehicle must have a current registration sticker
- **Passes cannot be purchased for rental vehicles or vehicles with dealer plates (CRMC is investigating the issuance of short term permits for rental vehicles)**
- A check or money order is required. No cash or credit cards are accepted
- The annual fee is currently \$100 for a RI resident and \$200 for an out of state resident (2016). Three day passes are also available. Residence is determined by the vehicle registration.

Please note: A beach parking fee will also be required for any vehicles using the RIDEM owned and operated East Beach Sand Trail during the summer beach season unless registered for a camp site on East Beach. For RIDEM regulations and current fees go to www.riparks.com

Beach Vehicle Permits must be applied for online. Permit is not valid until the vehicle has a confirmed inspection appointment with staff to pick up their sticker. Applications are booked for inspection in the order in which they are received, please keep this in mind if renewing permit in July.

Please visit: ri-crmc.viewpointcloud.com to apply for your Beach Vehicle Permit.

Beach Vehicle Access – Local Regulations

Currently beach driving is allowed in four Rhode Island coastal communities; Westerly, Charlestown, South Kingstown and Block Island. The local regulations for driving on the beaches and sand trails are listed below. The following regulations were compiled as of January 2016. Subsequent changes to these local ordinances may have occurred and therefore would not be reflected in this list. Please contact each municipality for their current regulations regarding vehicle use on beaches, as a Beach Vehicle Permit does not guarantee access.

The possession of a valid CRMC Beach Vehicle permit and sticker **DOES NOT** supersede a municipality's regulations for the allowance of such vehicles on public beach areas under their jurisdiction. If a municipality restricts vehicular access, then that **local regulation is controlling**.

BLOCK ISLAND

Vehicles are allowed year round on State, Scotch, and Mansion Beaches (i.e. "East Beach") via Corn Neck Road, but are restricted in the summer season to 6pm to 8am. Access to the North Light is available year round via Sachem Pond. It is not advisable to drive on Charlestown Beach due to sand hazards. **All or portions of the beaches may be closed if Piping Plovers nest.**

CHARLESTOWN

After September 15, three beach access points are accessible, via Ninigret Conservation Area. The beach on the east side of the breachway may be accessed through the Charlestown Breachway Camping Area at the west end of Charlestown Beach Road. Note that vehicles are not allowed on the South Kingstown beaches at any time. Driving is allowed only from the Charlestown Breachway to the Charlestown Town Beach.

SOUTH KINGSTOWN

Vehicles are prohibited from driving on the South Kingstown beaches at any time under South Kingstown Town Code Chapter 10, Section 10.4. The Charlestown Beach Road Sand Trail is a public road with three CRMC pedestrian access points to the beach. Please be aware that there may be no opportunity to turn around or park if using the sand trail.

WESTERLY

Vehicles are prohibited on the beach from the first day of May of each year to the Saturday after Labor Day or during the period when beaches are in operation and protected by lifeguards. **Vehicles are NOT allowed on Quonochontaug Beach at any time.** Vehicles are only allowed on the Quonochontaug Sand Trail between September 15 and June 15. Vehicles may not leave the sand trail to drive on the beach at any time. Both sides of the sand trail are private property and parking is prohibited along the sand trail. **Sections of the sand trail may be closed due to Piping Plover nesting.**

The Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management's East Beach Sand Trail - Beach and Sand Trail Driving

During the summer beach season daytime off-road driving is limited to the RIDEM East Beach Sand Trail in Charlestown, RI, which is only accessible through the RIDEM East Beach Parks and Recreation camp site. The following are some of the things that the beach vehicle permit holder should know about East Beach before heading out.

Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management Rules & Regulations:

- Driving on the beach is allowed from September 15th to April 1st. Access to the beach from the sand trail is through designated access points. **Between April 1st and September 15th off-road driving is limited to designated sand trails only, as per RIDEM regulations.**
- Vehicle operators must be aware and mindful of protected species such as the Piping Plover that may inhabit the area. **The trail and camping areas may be closed if protected species such as the Piping Plover nest on or near the sand trail.** Violations to state and federal law regarding protected species can result in substantial fines.
- **Any vehicle entering the trail during normal beach operating hours will also pay the appropriate entrance fee at the East Beach entrance booth per RIDEM regulations** (see www.riparks.com for current fee schedule). The only exceptions are campers with a valid camping permit from RIDEM.
- Camping is only allowed in designated areas (see camping information for details or visit www.riparks.com).
- Driving, parking or walking is prohibited in the dunes or vegetated areas of the barrier.
- Driving and parking in the designated camping areas requires a valid camping permit.
- Maximum speed is 10 miles per hour.
- Ruts and holes caused by stuck vehicles must be filled and debris removed by the responsible party.
- Riding in any position from the outside of the vehicle is prohibited.
- All day use vehicles must exit by sunset and cannot arrive before sunrise. The only exception is for those actively fishing with a valid recreational salt water fishing license.
- Fires are prohibited.



Things to Know about East Beach Camping

Specialty camping at East Beach is offered in two areas which contain ten sites each on three miles of undeveloped beach frontage.

- All camping units must be self-contained AND equipped with 4 wheel drive. A self contained unit is defined as “A camping unit which contains permanent holding tanks for potable water, grey water and black water. The bathroom unit must be permanently fixed to the unit”.
- All campers must obtain a beach and barrier off-road driving permit prior to their stay.
- No trailer campers or 5th wheels.
- No tent camping.
- No pets allowed.
- No alcohol allowed.
- Quite hours: 10:00 PM – 7:00 AM
- Generator quiet hours: 8:00 PM – 8:00 AM
- **Closure of part or all of East Beach may occur during the camping season due to the nesting of Piping Plover.** The Piping Plover is listed as threatened under the Federal Endangered Species Act. If a closure should occur, camping reservations will be cancelled and refunded in full.

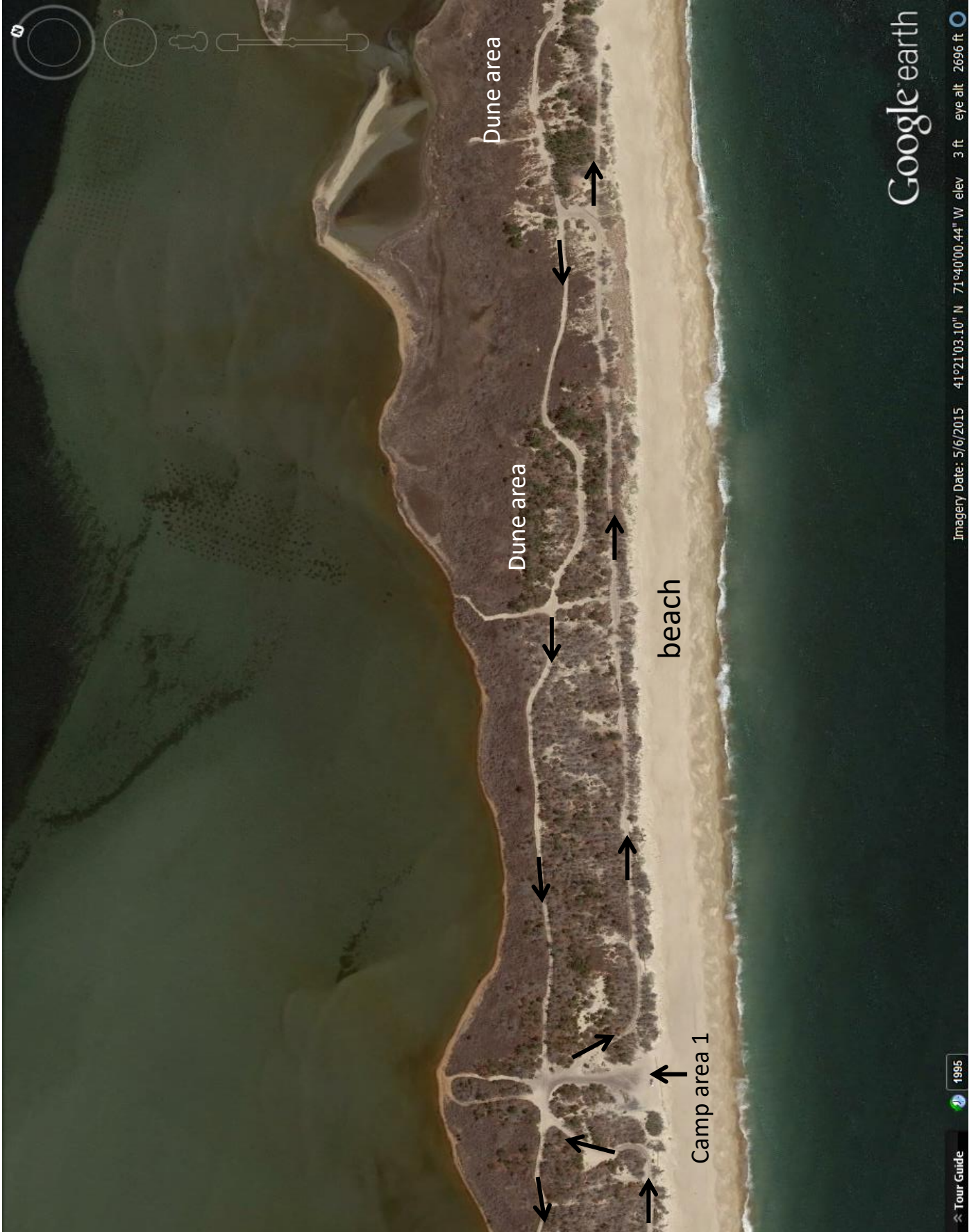
To obtain a camping permit or for more information, contact Burlingame State Park at 401-322-8910 or visit www.riparks.com.



East Beach Sand Trail - Detail



East Beach Sand Trail - Detail



East Beach Sand Trail - Detail

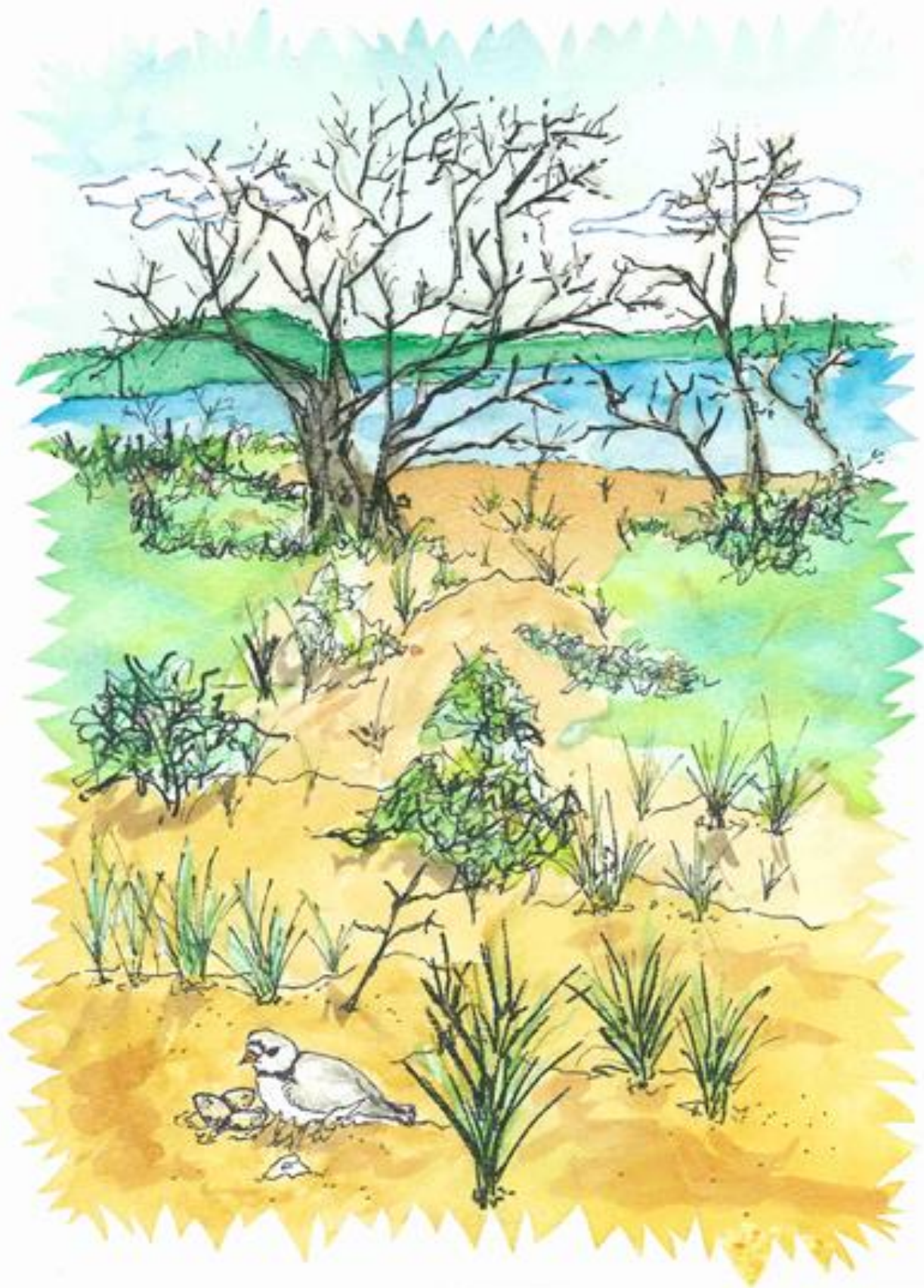


Google earth

Imagery Date: 5/6/2015 41°21'09.22" N 71°39'23.84" W elev. 13 ft eye alt. 2835 ft

1995

Tour Guide



Cover art by Jordan Chabot