

How to see Beach Vole

Vladimir Dinets

Beach Vole is a large, distinctive race of Meadow Vole, considered by many to be a separate species. It is endemic to Muskeget Island, a speck of flat, sandy land west of Nantucket Island in Massachusetts. These islands are the remains of the terminal moraine of the last ice shield to cover New England, so the vole is no more than 22,000 years old. Muskeget Island constantly changes shape, and might some day disappear or merge with Nantucket.

Three Nantucket-based companies used to run tours to Muskeget, but two are bankrupt and one doesn't do it anymore. However, you can kayak from Nantucket to the medium-size island of Tuckernuck and then to Muskeget. The legality of this is unclear. I asked three local tour operators about it, and got three different answers (all land on both islands is private; all land except beaches is private; all land except the intertidal zone is private). You can try to get better intel, or just ignore the issue.

The crossing should not be attempted on windy days, especially when the wind is from NE (it can carry you into the open ocean). Make sure you have a cell phone in a sealed bag in your inside pocket at all times. The best wind direction is from NW, making the return easy. Don't make this your first sea kayaking experience! The sea is usually pretty rough, and the distance is long. The voles are more diurnal in late fall and winter, but summer is much safer and easier.

The island is a gray seal breeding area, so landing there in spring probably isn't a good idea (the seals are sensitive to disturbance). In winter, harbor seal is said to be more common. There are no other mammals on Muskeget.

Here's what you have to do.

1. Take a ferry to Nantucket. It's a cute island. Most of its permanent residents only work during the tourist season (June-August). Most of the houses you see belong to rich summer visitors, locally called "hedgies" (most of them are believed to work or have worked for hedge funds).

2. Take a taxi or bike to the far end of Massachusetts Ave in Madaket (five miles from the ferry terminal). If using a taxi, take the driver's phone number so you can have a ride back. If visiting outside the tourist season, when most ferry passengers are Nantucket residents, you can talk one of them into giving you a ride.

3. Walk west to the tip of the island, called Smith Point (about half a mile walk), launch the kayak and cross to Tuckernuck. This is an easy crossing, about half a mile.

4. Walk to the other end of Tuckernuck along the southern side. That's about three miles. There is a long sandy spit pointing towards Muskeget; at low tide it makes the boat crossing much shorter. Tuckernuck has a few houses in the interior, but I didn't approach them.

5. Make sure the weather doesn't look like it might change. Call your next of kin, ask them for the most recent marine forecast, and tell them you love them. Ask them to keep checking the forecast regularly and to alert you if something changes. Cell phones work on all three islands.

6. Paddle to Muskeget (one-two miles, depending on the tide). Don't forget your compass in case fog moves in or you have to return after nightfall.

7. Walk around looking for the voles. Their main predators are seagulls, so when a vole shows up on the surface, it's usually pretty fast. I was lucky to see one in daylight within the first half an hour, but you should be prepared to stay overnight. The preferred habitat is said to be "overgrown beach-like low ground", but that pretty much describes all of Muskeget.

8. Repeat 1-6 in reverse order. Don't sleep during the ferry ride! A ferry crew member told me that they sometimes see whales and occasionally dolphins in summer and early fall. In winter there are lots of sea ducks and other waterbirds.

A full species or not, Beach Vole is an interesting mammal to see. I think it was worth the effort, besides, it was a nice little adventure.