



The Flyin' Solo VanLife on the Highways and Byways of North America

RICK'S ROADS

Ride Along and Enjoy the People, Places, and Who Knows What



BLOG POST: 2024.06.13

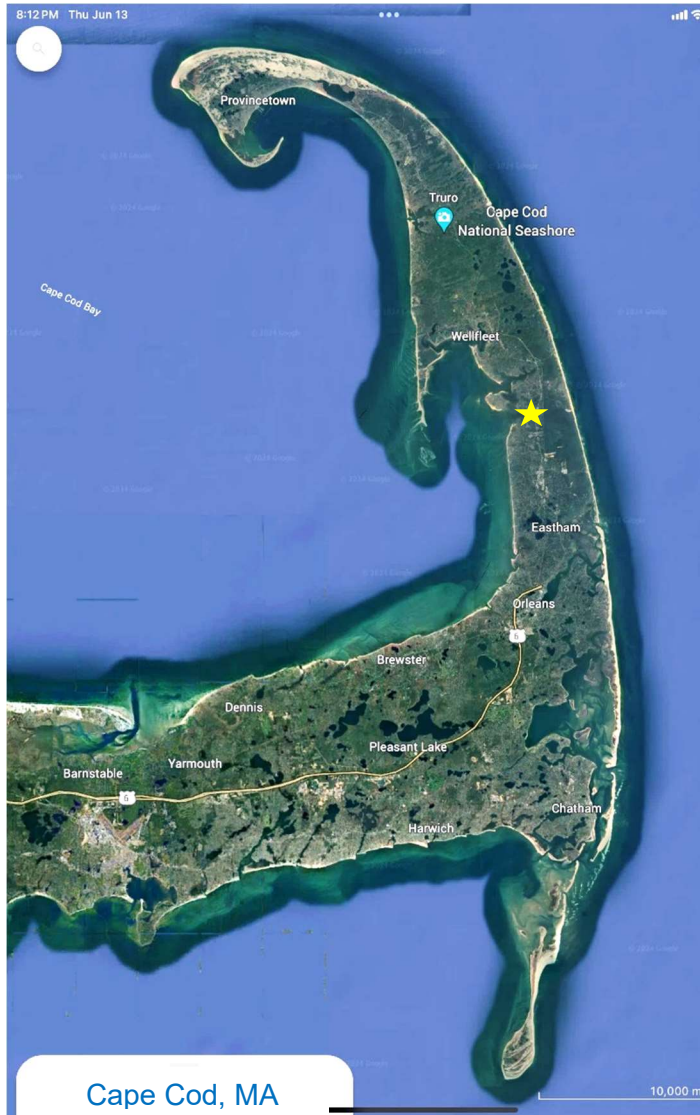
Cape Cod National Seashore, Massachusetts



I got lucky and Friday the 13th fell on a Thursday this month. The old comic strip *Pogo*, I think it was, used to use that joke several times a year.

But I got *extra* lucky because it was a gorgeous morning with light breezes. Forecasts for the afternoon showed clouds sliding over Cape Cod, pushed by strong east winds, but the morning was primo. It was especially primo for flying a drone, and the outer Cape was an area I dearly wanted aerial photos of.

To make it happen, I could approach it either of two ways: drive down the night before, find someplace (probably illegal, definitely stealthy) to stay and get up at about 8:00 or 9:00 to find my launch zones; or sleep at my carefree base camp at Big Bro's house here in Walpole MA and get up at 6:26 for a two-hour ride to Wellfleet.



Now, I have *always* been a night person, so I would have *always* chosen the former plan, but, for some reason, I did not like my chances of stealth camping on the Outer Cape.

There are precious few hotels out there, and what ones exist are usually well patrolled to keep us boondockers out. For some reason, if you are on their property, they want you to *pay* to stay *inside*. Go figure.

Guesthouses abound, but you cannot (and should not try to) pull off a stealth stay at one of those. It's just wrong.

Over the years, I have done nights in Provincetown hotel lots, but (a) I think I was lucky to not have my door knocked on, and (b) P-town was well beyond the wetlands, dunes and beaches of Wellfleet where I wanted to start flying.

State Parks are well patrolled, but maybe I *could* have pulled in at 1:30 AM, parked by the gatehouse and snoozed for a few hours, and

then zipped back out at 5:30 AM before the morning shift arrived, but that was not a very appealing plan. I did that kind of thing at Jacob Lake Campground on my way to the North Rim of the Grand Canyon in 2000, and that four-hour night of sleep haunted me all day.

And you absolutely cannot count on Massachusetts rest areas. I have been booted out of those before, even though all I wanted was a snooze so I wouldn't fall asleep driving and end up in a ditch. I told the Statie that (we Massholes call our State Troopers "staties", though not to their faces), and he bluntly said he did not care.

So, with all those negative waves swimming around the night-before plan, I grudgingly decided to get up early and take the ride into the rising sun.

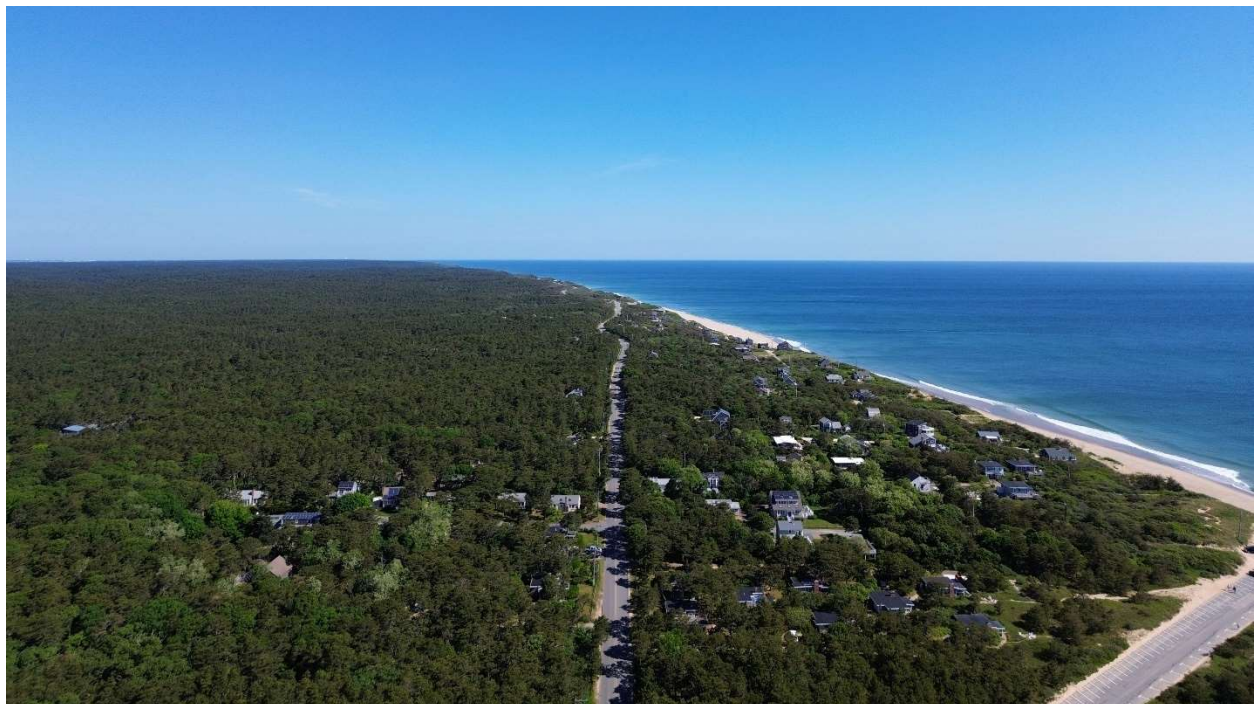
It needs to be pointed out that, yes, I would be flying over territory operated by the National Park Service, who forbids drone operation within their borders. That last preposition (“within”) is key, though. My drone app, called Air Control (made by Aloft, In conjunction with the FAA), showed the area in great detail, so I could tell where the NPS had laid their borders for the Cape Cod National Seashore (CCNS). This way, I could find a launching spot as close as possible to the CCNS without actually operating my drone from within its borders.

The FAA (Federal Aviation Administration) controls that air space, not the NPS. This is true for most other properties as well. The US Government is an obvious exception, since they control the FAA.

When I reached Wellfleet, it was about 9:00 AM. I had staked out the Post Office in South Wellfleet, marked by a yellow star on the Google Earth photo (previous page). It’s just off US-6, the main vein of the Cape, and about $\frac{3}{4}$ -mile from White Crest Beach on the Atlantic Ocean.

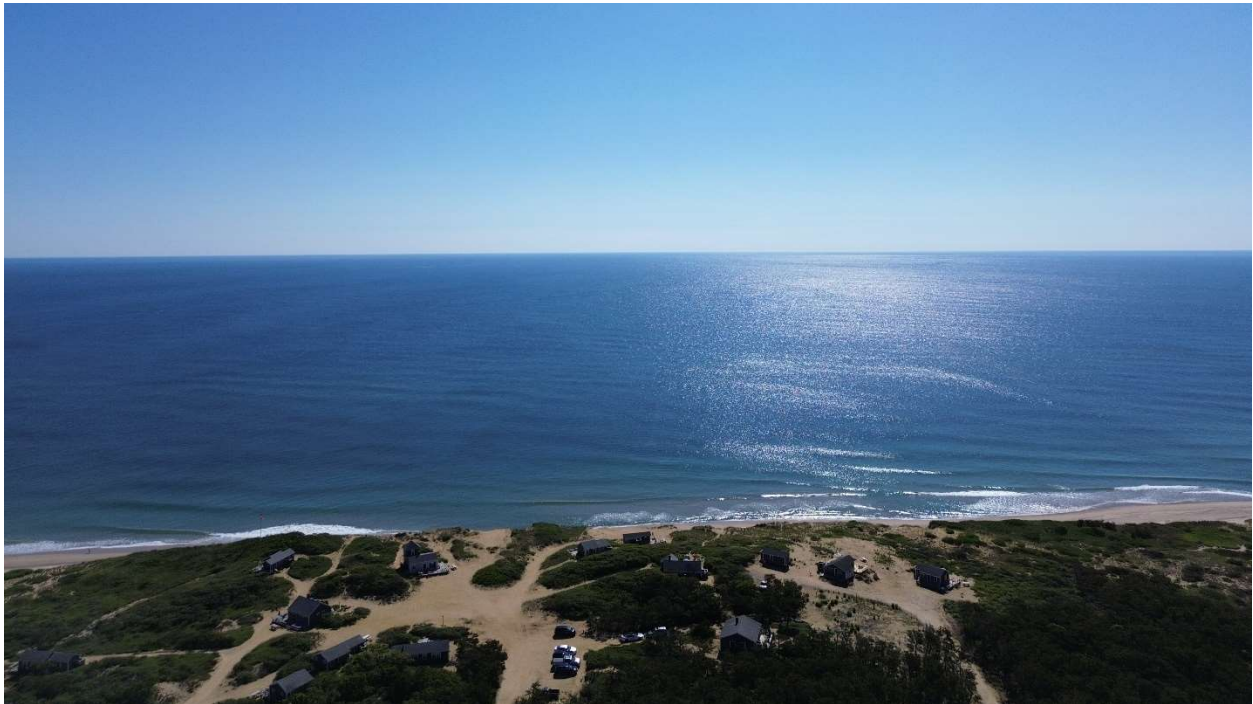
From here, I figured, I could launch Little Bird eastward, fly him over the wooded area to the ocean, spin him around, and get some great shots of the morning sunshine on the tall, east-facing dunes.

There was a road (photo below) that led all the way out to that beach, and I easily could have driven out there, but if I went beyond this parking lot, I’d be inside the CCNS borders, and, hence, illegal as a drone pilot.



So, I pulled into the far side of the empty parking lot and launched my bird. He soared up to his 400' allowable max, and zoomed off towards the ocean at about 20 MPH. I watched his progress on the viewscreen and started recording video as he got within reach of the dunes. I was just scoping out the best angle to shoot when my screen image froze (below). Uh-oh. It came back on for a moment, then froze again.

Then a red box appeared on my screen: "SIGNAL LOST". Uh-ohhhh. My bird was out there all by himself. I hoped he was still aloft and had not been swallowed by an albatross or something.



We droners are taught that signals can sometimes be blocked by intervening buildings or trees, so when that message appears, we should try to walk to a clearer spot. Trouble was, I was already in the clearest spot.

But when DJI manufactured Little Bird, they included a Return To Home (RTH) feature that would use the GPS coordinates stored within its memory to bring the drone directly above the place it took off from, and then straight down to land. Nice job, DJI.

So, LB made his way back, gently settled down, then sat there looking at me, his props whirring, as if asking, "Nice plan, Captain. What now??"

Well, I had noticed some cool-looking wetlands on the west side of US-6 as I had pulled in here, so how about you go check those out, LB?



He grinned and zoomed up and off in that direction. Turns out the views were outstanding. It was a tidal inlet off of Drummer Cove. LB flew out towards Old Wharf Point, with Lieutenant Island in the distance. The greens of the trees and grasses were in vivid contrast, as were the blues of the water and sky.

The flowing water of Blackfish Creek cut an erratic swirling course and muddy channels through the soft green grasses, and the water glistened under the low morning sun as Little Bird turned about and journeyed back.

This was not officially CCNS land, but I thought they were great shots. Mission #1 accomplished!





LB and I stayed in Wellfleet for Launch Point #2. This time, we drove away from the ocean and inwards towards the harbor. CCNS wraps around the inner harbor and preserves the islands, dunes and sandbars to west that border Cape Cod Bay.

My destination was Mayo Beach (the yellow star on satellite photo, right). It was long and hopefully empty at this hour. Most importantly, it was within flight range of what looked like some prime CCNS space.



GooGirl had a little burp in getting me there, though, and I ended up at the narrow terminus of a residential dead-end road. The road itself was dirt, with a sand shoulder, and a much steeper pitch than I would have liked.

Turning around was a bloated bitch, but it seemed more possible than backing up for a half-mile. I had to shove Maxx's nose into the bushes and then shift him into reverse and cut the wheel hard without getting the front-wheel-drive spinning in the soft sand. My vast experience with snow banks helped enormously. It was touch-and-go for a while, though, but finally, Maxx dug into the dirt and hauled us out to safety.

Given a second chance – but more closely monitored on the map this time – GG got us to the *perfect* spot. Kendrick Avenue bent about 60° left when it reached Mayo Beach, and there was a wide, paved turnout on the right at that point. Jackpot. I'm on public property, so nobody can bitch about "you can't fly that thing here."

Also, Maxx's body served as a formidable screen so I could set up and launch LB without anyone seeing it. This location was just 40 yards from the water, with no people around, and nothing at all standing between us and the coveted CCNS land. It was the closest possible point to where I wanted to fly. Could not have worked out better.



The two wooded areas in the above photo are on Great Island. The array of sandbars is named The Old Saw. It was just under a mile southwest from the launch point. This was a good bit farther than the failed attempt at White Crest Beach, but here there was nothing to interrupt the signal; Little Bird was just flying free over wide open water.



The small hill on the far end of Great Island is just over *two* miles away. LB got out that far before the signal began to glitch. When the beam locked in again, I rotated him and started bringing him back. I hugged the coast, getting impressive video of the long, towering bluff along the big section of the island. Some of those dunes are over 100 feet tall.

LB did a flyover of The Old Saw, looking directly downward. *Very* cool view.

The bird still had decent battery life when he got back, so I did a low-altitude buzz along the empty beach to my right. (Great Island is on the left, in the distance.)

But now it was time to go find me some prime Cape Cod dunes.

When I was in my twenties, some runner (and partier) friends and I used to come out here to romp on the big dunes in Truro, the penultimate town on the long outer arm of the cape. These things were *huge*. It took some serious legwork to get to the top from the beach, yet we used to race up them, carrying several Frisbees. Then one of us would stand on top and fire the 'bees as far as he could and everyone else would go absolutely mental sprinting down the sandy slope trying to make a catch.



And we would do that several times! We were insane. When we finally tired of that, we'd dive into the 60° ocean water, thrash about, then drive into Provincetown to get good and hammered at the Happy Hours on a Commercial Street bar hopping spree.

We'd find our way out to Herring Cove Beach to get baked and watch the sunset, then, well ... things were a blur by then. They just got blurrier as the night went on. Ahh, Cape Cod.

But, anyway (back to present), eventually the Powers That Be (PTB) decided that the dunes were taking too much of a beating and the sawgrass that anchored them was deteriorating too quickly, so they closed them to the public. Guided Jeep tours and some hiking tours still follow set trails through the dune field, but individuals are no longer welcome to free-lance their way around.

As a further deterrent, the PTB chained off the only public parking lot. This was a bummer to those of us who loved frolicking on those steep and high slopes, but for me, today, looking to fly my drone, it was not a bummer, but a boon.



That parking lot now lies within the boundaries of CCNS. However...the small turnout at the intersection of US-6 and the lot's entrance – just outside the chain – is just *outside* that line. There was enough room for me to pull off the road, use Maxx as a shield, and send LB up and over that excellent dune field.





Though the distance was about the same as my failed first flight, LB's signal stayed strong enough to go well out beyond the dunes, a good 100 yards or more over the Atlantic.

I buzzed him out to look back at the shore and dunes, then scan north-to-south, then across the narrow neck of land to Cape Cod bay and P-town beyond. He did a loop around the interior of the dunes, swinging south towards the large pond known as



East Harbor, which is an odd name for land-locked body of water. I suspect that it was originally open to the bay, but when US-6 was built, East harbor was cut off by the new causeway. Just a guess, though.

Then we did what I call an “Up Periscope”, one of the simplest of all drone moves: fly straight up to maximum altitude, then do a slow 360° rotation to survey the entire landscape.



The battery was low by then – 20 minutes is about all I get out of those small “249g” batteries -- so I brought him home. I had one more flight in mind and wanted to be sure I had some gas in the tank to do it.

So, from the Truro Dunes, it was off to Provincetown. P-town is like the northern sibling of Key West, Florida. Both are end-of-the-road destinations. KW is the southern end of US-1, which is 2390 miles long, with the northern extremity being Fort Kent, Maine.

P-town is the eastern end of US-6, which is 3652 miles long, with the western extremity being Long Beach, California.



Both cities are identified as gay meccas. Sometimes people get pushed and excluded until all that's left is the end of the road. As such, the LGBTQ+ communities in both places are welcoming and accepted. Rainbow flags are ubiquitous, and an overall freedom-to-be-me vibe pervades the area. Shop, galleries, restaurants, and bars all have that extra edginess that comes from knowing you can push the envelope that much farther.



KW and P-town are also destinations. You cannot just pass through on your way to someplace else, unless it's in the sea. Hence, the tourists who do come here (and there) are generally aware of the vibe they will encounter, and in most cases, revel in it.

Provincetown was one of the first places in North America visited by British explorers and settlers. The Mayflower, in fact, made her first landfall here before proceeding across Cape Cod Bay to the famous landing point in Plymouth, MA.

An iconic monument commemorates that five-week exploratory stay, as well as the signing of the famous Mayflower Compact in Provincetown Harbor.

A single square tower with a wide head, known architecturally as a *campanile*, the Pilgrim Monument rises to a height of 252 feet; it is the tallest all-granite structure in the US. President Theodore Roosevelt laid the cornerstone in 1907, and his successor, William H. Taft, dedicated it upon its completion in 1910.

Tourists can climb to the top balcony to get impressive views of the Upper Cape and Provincetown Harbor.



OR, all that climbing can be avoided, I decided, by sending my Little Bird up and around the top of the campanile.

Though almost all of this outer limb of the cape is CCNS, the city of P-town itself is not. So, fly, Little Bird, fly!

I had hoped to fly first at the western end of P-town, at Pilgrims' First Landing Park, and go soaring over the Long Point Marshes and the curled peninsula out to Long Point Light. It would have been just over 1.25 miles, over open water, so it seemed doable, but the wind out here had really picked up, and the risk of a flyaway seemed to outweigh the rewards. Maybe some other time.

The Monument was what I *really* wanted: a cool video starting in the park at the bottom of the hill below it, then lifting Little

Bird up beside the tall trees, eventually bringing the hilltop base of the tower into view and continuing to climb vertically till he was level with the top.

The wind was still a consideration, but LB would never be far away. He'd go straight up, do a compact loop around the top, and come back down. And I wanted this shot much more than the other, so this was a **go**.

Though the Air Control app gave the area a green light to fly (with two cautions for CCNS and the small Provincetown Municipal Airport two miles away at Race Point), my launch point – on the brick sidewalk of that park -- was still going to be awkward. If a lot of people were there, the mission would be in jeopardy.



Happily, though, *nobody* was there. I set up beside/behind a six-foot-tall head-stone type of thing, and launched. The climb went exactly as planned. I got a great video and some unique stills. The wind was rowdy, though, so I aborted by plan to circle the monument. I got about halfway around then deferred to the “High Wind Warning” messages that kept flashing on my screen.



But I was more than happy with the shots I got. So, with the mission completed to my satisfaction, and a full afternoon at my disposal, I ... decided to return to base camp.



What? You're in party-town Provincetown at 1:30 on a warm summer day, with no other obligations, and you decide to *leave*???

Yeah, I was kinda surprised about that too. But money is to blame. If I stayed, I would have ended up spending too much of it.

My tight monthly budget was about to get ravaged by the repair of the woes in Blue Maxx that had cancelled my week-long Canadian tour. This had become the new strategy for the summer. No more free-wheeling about the country, at least not for a month or two, depending how much those repairs ended up costing. And I had to pull the leash a bit tighter on social entertainments.

Staying in New England would save a small fortune on gasoline, and the Boston area is, after all, my native land. But I still hope I'll get to a break-even point in time for some late-season meanderings. I do miss the open road, and, once he is fixed, I know Maxx will be itching to roll.



US Coast Guard Museum, Race Point Beach, Provincetown, Cape Cod, Massachusetts