

THE TRIUMPHANT

Re-Tern

With human help,
terns rediscover their
Isles of Shoals home

BY DAN HAYWARD AND LIZA POINIER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAN HAYWARD

Summer visitors to the Isles of Shoals today notice first the beauty of this lonely outpost, ocean waves slamming against the stark, rocky, sun-drenched terrain. They hear the relentless foghorn booming from White Island. They are surrounded by the shrill cries and dive-bomb attacks of seemingly vast numbers of common terns, wheeling in the stiff, salty breeze.

Getting your head pecked by angry terns is not most people's idea of a good time — but then, most people aren't wildlife biologists. A small, dedicated band of staff and volunteer "tern monitors" have been living and working on tiny, isolated White and Seavey Islands for four months each summer to ensure that those terns will have a chance to rest and reproduce unmolested by their top competitors: gulls.

For a half-century, this historic breeding ground for state-endangered common terns, nationally endangered roseate terns and the occasional state-threatened arctic tern was taken over by large, prolific, predatory herring gulls and great black-backed gulls. The gulls outcompeted the terns for nesting sites and preyed upon the much-smaller birds, making it impossible for the tern colony to survive.

Enter the tern restoration program. It began in 1997, when the Audubon Society of New Hampshire and Fish and Game's Nongame and Endangered Wildlife Program, with seed funding from the Office of State Planning's New Hampshire Coastal Grant program, devised a strategy to restore balance in coastal nesting bird populations by reestablishing a tern nesting colony

on White and Seavey Islands. The plan was to invite terns back to the islands; and, perhaps more importantly, to keep the gulls away to make the habitat safe for terns again.

Human presence on the islands was an essential first step in deterring the gulls. Tern monitors shot off pyrotechnics — “screamers” and “bangers” — to dissuade gulls from nesting or loafing, and walked the island at sunrise and sunset to disrupt nesting activity by gulls. When monitors discovered gull nests, they disposed of eggs and placed rocks in the nests to discourage repeated use.

Meanwhile, monitors used attraction techniques to make the island appealing to terns that might be looking for a place to nest. Tern decoys were set up, to make it look as though a thriving colony already existed. Recordings of tern calls were blasted through loudspeakers. When terns flew overhead, these familiar sights and sounds piqued their interest, and many came down to investigate — and stayed to nest.

Diane DeLuca, senior biologist with the Audubon Society of New Hampshire, applied her years of seabird restoration experience in Maine to the Isles of Shoals project. DeLuca took

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May 7, 2007

What an incredible morning! The wind had completely died and the seas diminished. The sunrise was brilliant in shades of auburn. The morning was serene only to have that calm broken by sheer elation as two pairs of common terns ended their migration in an aerial dance celebration.

The terns did not stick around long, it seems as though they just wanted to make sure the island was still there and then they headed off to the coast. An hour later, three more terns arrived and went through the same ritual. It is very comforting that the terns are arriving, and on schedule for that matter.

May 9, 2007

Things went well today, as the rain never came until after dark and the winds stayed away. At noon there was a group of 38 terns that mobbed and chased off a female merrin. The colony is showing incredible signs of unity after being here for just a few days.

The blinds are almost set up. We are looking forward to the first time we can sit in them and watch as the courtship process is well under way. If this keeps up we may even have early nesting.





May 28, 2002

The gulls this morning were a bit frustrating. I chased them around but it finally became too much and I fired off a couple of screamers at 0515. The screamers dispersed 15 great black-backed gulls and 22 herring gulls, many of which were immature.

The terns are doing incredibly well. There are birds on eggs all over and we are starting to see some full clutches. While we sat in the Camo blind a single Arctic tern and four roseate terns were seen down in the vegetation. Not 20 feet away was an Arctic tern down near the mostly vegetated parts of Section 3. I hope it finds a mate!

June 15, 2002

The waves have been pounding Seavey all day but it looks as though the terns are determined to stick it out. The spray from some of the waves puts the perimeter nesting terns up but they seem to come right back and get on the eggs. The Arctic has been trying to determine if it is better to let the spray wash over it or if it should fly. Mostly it flies. Hopefully it will not tire of the abuse and take off. The usual crowd of ~100 terns loafing on the western shore has vacated. I am assuming to the coast for the duration of this weather event.

June 24, 2002

What a day! New nests are springing up all over and I have again raised the grand total of common terns to 2800 individuals. It will start to climb again rapidly as the chicks start to fledge. I can't wait!

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the lead in hiring, training and overseeing the work of seasonal staff, including biologist Dan Hayward. Hayward, whose photographs and journal writings appear on these pages, was a full-time tern monitor for Audubon during the summers from 1998 to 2002. Now, in his position with the Nongame and Endangered Wildlife Program, Hayward visits Seavey Island only occasionally; but he remembers well the small triumphs that marked the terns' return, like the successful fledging, two summers ago, of a roseate tern chick — the first since the mid-1950s.


The changeable weather and spartan living conditions make the tern monitors' job difficult, but their field journals help us understand the fascination and commitment that keeps them at work around the clock for weeks at a time. After her first week on the island, tern monitor Kirsten Bixler wrote, "I am completely enthralled with the Isles of Shoals. The smell and sound of the ocean, the color and texture of the rocks, the sturdy, weathered buildings, and most of all, the fabulous birds, have all created a complete sensory overload... Since arriving, I have felt shameless satisfaction. I have seen (or just identified) several species for the first time. We have had almost constant birding action and too many magical moments to recount."

Since its inception, with continuous funding from Audubon, the Coastal Grant program and Conservation License Plate funds through the Nongame program, the tern restoration project has more than met its goal. The first summer, only six pairs of common terns nested on Seavey



Island, producing six chicks. In 1999, about 300 chicks fledged from 140 nests. The summer of 2002 saw an amazing 2,500 common tern chicks fledged from Seavey Island, and 26 pairs of roseate terns and one pair of arctic terns nesting. "Seavey now has consistent, good tern productivity," Hayward says. "It shows the importance of the islands as habitat for these birds."

Now that the monitors' techniques have proven successful, and the terns have re-discovered and become comfortable in their historic breeding grounds, wildlife managers will need to continue their efforts to keep terns in and gulls out. Unfortunately, Hayward says, the new balance won't sustain itself; the gulls are nearby, and will come back in force if given the opportunity.

For now, the monitors keep vigilant watch. And increasing numbers of terns — apparently satisfied with the human efforts being made to protect them and their turf — contentedly visit, breed and raise their young in the rocky crevices of Seavey Island, as they did for centuries before. 



June 24, 2007 (cont.)

The highlight of the day came this afternoon as I was going through the colony and positioning rocks for the Roseate blind and Becky Swombs, of the Audubon Society of NH, was recording the info. After the nests were documented and the eight new nests were numbered, I broke off and went to inspect the group of roseates up near the Cleat. At first I was breathless as I saw a smashed egg sitting in the nest cup and no chick nearby. I took a deep breath and started telling Becky the status of the nests over the radio. I went back to nest No. 3 and searched a bit harder and voila! A chick!

July 7, 2007

The terns seem happy as the chicks grow and the gull numbers continue to remain fairly low.

The banding is going well and yesterday we processed around 30 chicks. Most of them seem really healthy, but there are a few every day that feel as if they could eat an entire can of tuna and still be skinny.


July 11, 2007

It looks as though the end is near for the "A Wave" of nesters. The juveniles that have taken to the air are very wobbly and lack the grace of their parents, but to see them in the air just puts a smile on my face. All that we do out here is rewarded as these young terns are able to take flight with little to fear from avian predators. As the days pass we will start seeing more and more of them out there on the rocks and it will be a scary and exciting day when they all seem to have disappeared.

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