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GREAT GULL ISLAND 2010 – PART II

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In the remaining parts of this report I give a chronological account of the 2010 season on Great Gull. On April 23, 2010 Melissa McClure led groups of hard working volunteers for the first of two work weekends.



Mike Sorensen, Andrew Lamprecht, Jeanne Sargent, Jack Nelson, Jim Sorensen, Bob Kane, Rich Dufort, Lottie Prushinski, Melissa McClure, Sara Avallone, John Avallone.

Upon arrival they christened the new dock, rolled up their sleeves and began to work. During the weekend Jack Nelson gave everyone a good start in the morning by cooking and serving oatmeal and providing maple syrup. Bob Kane worked on the roof of Paight, making it waterproof. John and Sara Avallone, Rich Dufort, Andrew Lamprecht, Melissa McClure, Jack Nelson, Lottie Prushinski, Jeanne Sargent, Jim Sorensen, Mike Sorensen, Huston Stebbins II, and Lydia Thomas, set up the blinds and cleared areas of vegetation, particularly bittersweet. By weeding, Sara freed the peonies

which had been covered by vegetation. By the end of the first work weekend volunteers packed and removed twenty-three bags of garbage. This accumulation resulted from an ill advised “fill and fling” the preceding August when there were sometimes not enough hands to get luggage, jerry cans and garbage to the South Beach and from there to Captain Matt’s boat to be taken to the mainland. Throughout the weekend John Avallone treated everyone to fantastic lunches and dinners.

Matthew Male disc harrowed and raked the overgrown open sections of the island from April 26 – April 30. He saw one tern flying over the island April 27, but none came in. Melissa brought volunteers for the second work weekend April 30 – May 2 passing Matthew on the dock as he left the island.



The first terns landed the morning of May 1 and within 24 hours individual adults were coming in to sites all over the island. Occupation of sites often takes three to five days, but this was a very synchronized dispersal as birds landed all over the island May 2. It was an exciting and unusual 24 hours with many pictures taken. The terns held the dock until mid-August when their numbers dropped and Laughing Gulls landed and took over the railings.



Once pictures of the newly arrived terns were taken everyone set to work. Jon Fuller, with his daughter Rhea, installed three windows on the south side of my room. It is great to have windows that do not leak. Again Melissa and Lottie Prushinski inspired volunteers to clear, pushing back the bittersweet in a number of areas. Joe DiCostanzo oversaw the dismantling of the collapsed blind above the “Big Gun” emplacement while Gretta Lee and John Walsh mended the wire fence around the emplacement as well as “upstairs” above the headquarters (HQ) building at the center of the island.

On May 17 Lottie Prushinski and I arrived on the island, Lottie for the week and I for the summer. Bob and Sue Kane and Jon Lincoln rode out with us to help offload our gear. Bob Kane brought two carts for loading and unloading luggage and groceries. They were just the right size to roll down the dock. He contributed these carts and they work perfectly. I asked him to order two



more which the Project purchased. With four carts we are able to load and unload quickly even during the busiest times of year. In 2008 the grocery store we used in Niantic went out of business. Since then we’ve ordered from Peapod via the Internet. Stop&Shop packs their Peapod boxes with our weekly order and delivers the groceries to Captain John’s dock. The carts are big enough so that up to four boxes can be carried at once. It is so much easier to use the carts than to try to carry the large boxes by hand or to load them on a hand truck, as we did in 2008 and 2009. The carts were also very useful during the season, particularly on fall work weekends, for moving traps and chick houses to storage areas.

During the week Lottie was on the island, she cleaned all the rooms in HQ. To be ready for the big nest marking weekends over Memorial Day and the first weekend in June, we numbered 5,000 tongue depressors we use as nest markers.



Birds around HQ during the week included the yellow-banded Gray Catbird first seen May 18 and still on the island August 22. Carolina Wrens occupy all the buildings. The HQ wren nested in a cubby hole. It salvaged scraps from the dishes and regularly checked the table inside after breakfast. It particularly enjoyed finding butter! It also checked the book shelves. I haven't seen it find anything to read, but I have seen it



removing flies from spider webs.



On May 21 Bob Kane returned to the island with the two new carts loaded with buckets, a flame thrower and a blind that Jon Fuller had left at Captain John's to be sent to the island. When Bob put the carts together he found small trays to go in the top of each cart. We

did not need these, so Bob mounted them in wooden shelves which he put in the kitchen and they are perfect for holding vegetables and fruit.

By mid-May the adult Common Terns were so well fed that when I stepped out of my room in the morning I was immediately covered with a rain of droppings before the day even started. On May 25 I began using an umbrella when I came down from my room in the morning. Fortunately, one of the Argentineans, Laura Mauco, had left the umbrella on the island. I then called Loretta and asked her to bring out eight umbrellas so anyone who wanted to could use them when walking between the buildings throughout the season.



On Memorial Day weekend beginning May 28, Ned Barnard, Melinda Billings, John Danskin and Stirling Danskin, Beth and Jerry Platt, Huston Stebbins II, Loretta Stillman, and John Vincius marked about 6500 nests. In addition to marking nests that weekend John Vincius and Stirling Danskin carried 2 x 12's to the dock to make a path from end of the dock to the creosote road to HQ. Jerry Platt helped nail the planks together. I was worried about disturbing the terns and so they did not finish the path.

On May 31 Jackie Bruskin arrived and she and Huston Stebbins II stayed on the island with me the following week.

On June 4 Talvi Ansel, Joe DiCostanzo, Bear Fox, Charley Fox, John and Margie Haggerty, Doug Kopsco, Melissa McClure, Lottie Prushinski, Ryan Prushinski and Muriel Schwinn arrived. After everyone chose a room and settled their gear Doug Kopsco started a fire and cooked the chicken, Talvi cooked asparagus and we ate Margie's brownies for dessert.

On the morning of June 5 Margie made English muffins from scratch and we ate them for breakfast as well as tea cake she brought. We were now well fortified for marking off as well as marking new nests at the eastern end of the island. During check it became apparent that, because most of the nests had been marked over the Memorial Day weekend, there were few new nests we needed to mark. Therefore there would be time on June 6 to mark and dowel nests at the western end of the island.

For dinner Doug cooked hamburger, Talvi made salad and Melissa cooked rice. When John and Margie Haggerty arrived on the island June 4 they brought and had set up a Coleman camp oven and stove next to our old stove. For the last few years we have needed an oven because the oven in our stove no longer worked. For dessert on June 5 Margie made ginger cookies, baked in the new oven – batch after batch after batch. There were none left over.

On Sunday, June 6, Margie, after washing the dishes, made biscuits for breakfast, I cooked Spam and Doug cooked eggs. We then opened Bob Kane's boxes of orange, plastic dowels and "dowelled" most of the western end before lunch. After lunch we finished putting in the last dowels at the western end by 2:00 pm. We had dowelled over 1500 nests and found the first Common Tern chicks of the season.



We banded the two hatched chicks and then later trapped their parents. During the period we have worked on the island the first Common Tern nests have usually hatched during the first two weeks of June. Between 1979 and 1984 we found the first chicks June 1-3, between 2002 and 2009 we banded the first chicks June 11-15. In 2010, June 6 for the first chick is early, but not as early as in some years. We are all very pleased with the dowels, which are a big improvement over the wooden ones we used in the past. It is important the dowels be as obvious as possible so that as the vegetation grows around the nests we can still find the nests to band the chicks and trap the adults.

The orange, plastic dowels are easy to see and to put into the ground; they do not rot, are cheaper than the wooden dowels and last longer! What could be better? Thank you Bob Kane.

Captain Matt arrived at 3:30 pm in windy conditions. He tied the boat further west on the dock than usual and asked everyone to come down the tall ladder to the boat from the main dock, rather than the lower landing platform. Everyone did very well. Joe, John and Muriel handed gear from the loading dock to people on the boat and Matt took off. In throwing the bowline to us it ended up in the water at the base of the ladder. Joe retrieved it using the push broom and later made a boat hook for future such occasions.

On June 7 Hamilton College student, Muriel Schwinn, trapped the first adult Common Terns wearing geolocators.

On June 9 Smidgie Macphail picked up seventeen boxes of mixed doughnuts, and sent them to the island, an important preparation for the "Peak Hatch". I was very glad Smidgie could do this because, even though I ordered doughnuts regularly, Stop&Shop had not been sending them in our Peapod orders and peak without doughnuts would be very depressing. Actually, we have been very lucky. Stacy Hanks always makes quantities of delicious breads and cookies which she brings when

she comes to work on the island. In 2009 she came for peak and brought: brown bread, banana walnut bread, strawberry bread, matzos covered with chocolate and caramel and two kinds of cookies. We devoured these and didn't miss the doughnuts that did not arrive. However, in 2010 I wanted to be sure we had doughnuts and was very pleased Smidgie could find so many.

June 11 Seventeen people arrived for peak and Huston Stebbins, Sr. joined us June 14.



Back Row: Esteban Bremer, Alvin Wu, Nehuen Bremer, Muriel Schwinn, Alyssa Womer, Maribeth Johnson, Stacy Hanks, Helen Hays, Gabriel Lugo, Fernando "Cache" Rubini.
Front Row: Helen French, Dick Young, Pablo Osvel Rojas, John Vincius, Houston Stebbins, Loretta Stillman

Throughout the summer, the workday begins at 6:00 am – and every day without rain or heavy fog is a workday. Coffee/tea/maté and doughnuts are on the table before trapping; then everyone leaves to trap in a particular area. Trappers leave the traps set for ten minutes then pick up the birds in the traps and reset in an attempt to capture the other member of the pair. The adults are brought to HQ for processing. The trapped birds are held ten minutes to give mates a chance to go into the trap. After trapping, Joe DiCostanzo runs "Bingo", then everyone has breakfast which is followed

by a "chick check" of the island to find and band newly hatched chicks. Once chicks are banded, checkers tie a bright, pink ribbon around the dowel or vegetation near the nest to mark the nest for trapping. Later, trappers look for the pink ribbons and set traps over the nests.

On the cement areas of the gun emplacements, we put out "chick houses" as hiding places for chicks hatching in these open sections.



On June 12, as a project for a day when the weather prevented work in the colony, Fernando Rubini and John Vincius covered the table in the kitchen with the handsome blue-checked contact paper Lydia Thomas sent to the island. John brought a staple gun with him so he could put the paper on.

June 14, nine days after the first Common Tern nest hatched, the peak hatch was over.

The nests at the western end, having been dowelled, were well checked by Esteban Bremer, Nehuen Bremer, Manual Paina, Pablo Rojas, and Fernando Rubini from Argentina, Gabriel Lugo from Puerto Rico and Helen French, Stacy Hanks, Loretta Stillman, and Alvin Wu from the United States. On check during the peak hatch as well as during trapping, the western end crew weeded paths to the dowelled nests to band the chicks and later trap the adults.

At the eastern end the nests in the meadow sections had not been dowelled. The overgrown areas, therefore, could not be checked during the peak hatch, because it was too easy to step on chicks. Eastern end checkers Helen Hays, Muriel Schwinn, Huston Stebbins, Sr., John Vincius, Alyssa Womer, and Dick Young only checked the open sections, roads, building platforms, and gun emplacements during the peak hatch. Between June 26 and July 3 checkers Helen Hays, Georgia Male, Beth Platt, Donna Saterlee, Dena Steele, Loretta Stillman, John Walsh, and Dick Young weeded paths in the vegetation at the eastern end of the island, so we could see where we were stepping and find the juvenal birds we had not banded as chicks during the peak hatch.



We wanted to finish the paths before the juvenals began flying. We saw the first young flying July 4. On July 4 and 5 we banded 500 young Common Terns in the areas we had weeded. The paths worked very well. Not only did they make it easier for us to move through the nesting areas because we could see where we were stepping, but the adult Common Terns fed their young in the paths we made and the young hid under the grass we pulled and piled along the edges of the paths. By July 11 almost all young hatched during peak were in the air twenty-seven days after the last day of peak hatch.

Each year, late in the season, I try to get repeat weights and measurements on as many of the late hatched chicks as I can find. I was very glad this year when on July 8, as well as July 15, reinforcements arrived for check including Jillian Danskin, Jay Grimm, Clair Quinn, Elizabeth Scholz, Ben Walker, Danny Williams, and Alyssa Womer. It was great all of these students could come in July to help check in different parts of the island. Jillian is an old hand and brought teacake and helped with cooking in addition to working in the colony. She also polished some of the darker pots to a point where they are blindingly shiny. Alyssa worked on the island during peak and brought Elizabeth for the later period. Danny came out in earlier years and recently worked in South America. It was interesting to hear about his experiences there. Jay came out to work with his nephew, Ben during Ben's second week. As part of their project Jay and Dick Young began clearing bittersweet. Jay has signed up to come out and clear more this spring.

On July 22 Jay Grimm, Elizabeth Schultz, Loretta Stillman, Ben Walker, Danny Williams, Alyssa Womer, and Dick Young left as Andrea Blood, Sandra Kaponen, Georgia Male, and Melissa McClure arrived. The new arrivals banded the late hatching chicks and trapped adults on these nests during the last week in July. In addition, Melissa washed all the windows in the kitchen of HQ inside and out and filled the bird feeder which the goldfinches were emptying very quickly. She also cleared brush from under the pines with help from Sandra. Also that week a Carolina Wren nest in a box of screws in the fourth room of HQ hatched their eggs and started feeding their young.

The remaining volunteers left August 3 and Melinda Billings arrived, joining me to hold the fort. In addition to banding the few chicks that hatched and trapping adults, Melinda began clearing the cement west of Paight. She uncovered the old water pumps and made a good start on clearing the cement, not to mention cooking and making wonderful coffee each morning. She brought the coffee with her as well as other surprise foods that added welcome variety to our meals.



August 8 Melinda spotted a red-and-white Sea Ray foundering in the waves off the South Beach. We later found out the Coast Guard had taken people off the boat July 3. When I called the Coast Guard as well as salvage people neither were interested in towing the boat. By August 9 waves had beached the boat and shortly after that it broke in two. We are hoping a high tide during the winter will take the boat away. Melinda filled the bird feeder, goldfinches still devouring the seed.

By August 10 we were banding the last young terns and trapping the last adults of the season.

Melinda left on August 12 and Elaine Hodges, Doug Kopsco, and Nancy Stevens arrived. Elaine caught several porgies her second day on the island which she, Nancy, and Doug cleaned and cooked for dinner. Nancy and Doug began packing up gear for the end of the season and Doug cleared some of bittersweet from the bayberry next to the burning barrel. Vegetation was waist-high in the meadow sections of the island by this date.



On August 20 Elaine, Nancy and Doug passed John Walsh on the dock as he came out for the last week in August. John was full of energy and picked up most of the orange, plastic dowels at the western end of the island.

During the time John checked the western end, he found a juvenal tern just north of the Little Argentina sign at the Western end of the island which had not been banded. We banded, weighed and measured it, adding to the weights and measurements of young hatched late in the season. John washed dishes and produced some very good meals. Lika Levy arrived on the boat



August 26 to see the dock, bringing Sunday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday copies of the New York Times as well as some excellent chocolate cookie and candies. She and John left when the boat returned to the mainland and Lika was able to drive John partway back to NYC.

August 29 an estimated 800-1,500 Common Terns roosted on Great Gull at night. The first of Melissa's sunflowers just came out. They were in full bloom when photographed on September 19.

On August 30 Smidgie Macphail met Joe DiCostanzo and Melissa McClure in New London and drove them to Niantic. They picked up packing boxes, groceries and the mail on the way to the boat and arrived on Great Gull at 3:00 pm. Between August 30 and September 7 we finished up odds and ends from the summer and packed. There were two spots on the island where I thought there might be unbanded young still being fed. One was living in the small gun emplacement NW of HQ. On August 31, Joe and Melissa found the young above HQ and we banded, weighed and measured it. Melissa painted a number of kitchen windows with sealant. In addition she caulked the northeast window in the kitchen and painted the floor by the front door of Paight.



[TO BE CONTINUED]