


THE LINNAEAN
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LETTER

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GREAT GULL ISLAND 2012

Helen Hays

First, I want to thank everyone who contributed to the Great Gull Island Project in 2012. Your generous support made it possible for us to monitor the colony through September 4 when we left the island. Great Gull with its populations of Common and Roseate Terns is the flag ship colony for New York State. In addition numbers of both species of terns nesting on Great Gull are representative of coastal colonies. Changes in these numbers over time alert us as to whether or not the coastal populations are expanding, contracting, or holding their own, information critical for management measures for both species. This is just one aspect of the work we do on the island. I will touch on other aspects in the following report.

The 2012 season presented us with a number of firsts! For the first time since we began working on Great Gull in 1969 we have begun a program for controlling invasive plants which I think will work and will result in increases in nesting by both Common and Roseate Terns. Thanks to funding obtained from the Long Island Sound Future's fund by Juliana Barrett, UConn Sea grant program, to manage invasive plants on Great Gull, we began a multi-year program of spraying and search for species of plants which will hold the soil in some areas, but not spread at a rapid rate.

Suzanne Paton of the USFWS is licensed to oversee spraying and was on Gull Island

April 19, 2012 to supervise the operation undertaken by David Roach, general manager of All Habitats Services. In 2011 Suzanne contributed ground cover and funded students from the University of Rhode Island to come to Gull to put the ground cover down. The ground cover worked well and was still in place in 2012 helping to keep areas open for terns.

In 2012 the peak hatch on Great Gull was the earliest, June 16 – 19, and the most synchronized (four days), we have experienced since we began working on the island. During the four days of peak we banded 5,701 chicks, a good start for the final total of 10,852 hatchlings banded during the season. We were fortunate again that the Argentinean team headed by Esteban Bremer came to Gull to help with banding and trapping during the period most chicks hatched. The Argentines trapped most of the 625 adults captured during the four days of peak and contributed before and after this period to the total of 1800 adults trapped during the season.

During the time the Argentineans are on the island they usually have construction projects which improve our facilities considerably. This year they painted the stairs to the tower with wood preservative, the rungs of the ladder in the tower with Rust-Oleum; Pablo Rojas and Marcelo Sanchez Paressi built housing for the generators and stoves. The roof of the housing for the generators



Museum of Natural History, his daughter Claire, and friend Sean Murtha with his son Brendan came to Great Gull Island to help. At the time they arrived they easily trapped the few nests that hatched during the first two days of their stay, and then, since the work dropped off dramatically, they sketched the terns and painted views of the island from blinds overlooking the fort and the nesting areas. Sean wrote a little about their stay on his blog. During this period many of the student interns on the island worked on trap repair and some

was particularly colorful with shingles made from cans.

Dick Young and Loretta Stillman trapped in the area behind the headquarters building. Their area was representative of the hatch in the colony, providing excellent data on the beginning and end of the peak hatch as well as subsequent hatching during the season.

From the last week in June through the last week in July we had different crews of volunteers to help each week, many of whom were recruited by Suzanne Paton from students at URI and interns in the USFWS. All were great workers and we would not have been able to accomplish what we did during July without their help. In mid-July, student-intern Anya Auerbach took this excellent picture of a Carolina Hawk Moth feeding.

At the end of July I was very pleased that Steve Quinn, Senior Project Manager in the Department of Exhibition at the American

took very good pictures of the terns. Ian Putnam, a student from New Jersey, spotted a Harbor Seal at the eastern end of the island that was tagged. He asked Anya to go to the eastern end of the island to try to get a picture of the tag and the number on it. Anya's picture was very clear.

I learned from Keith Macassa of the University of New England's Marine Animal Rescue and Preservation Center in Maine, the seal pictured above was found on July 7, 2011



in Two Lights State Park, Maine. At the time it was underweight, weighing 8.6 Kg. The animal had lacerations on its flippers and was 80 cm. in length. They placed the seal in rehab and estimated it was four to five weeks old. In the wild, seals are independent when they are three weeks old. Rehabilitators released this seal January 18, 2012 in Bracy Cove, Bar Harbor, Maine. By this time it measured 91 cm and weighed 21.35 kg. On July 21, 2012 Ian Putnam resighted the rehabilitated tagged seal on Great Gull Island, New York and both Anya and Ian took pictures



Four tour groups visited Gull Island July/August: one from the American Museum of Natural History, another from the Quebec Labrador Foundation, a third included a number of members from different Connecticut Audubon Societies; members of the Fishers Island Museum joined us the second week in August.

On August 7 Bob Kane had triple bypass surgery and I am happy to say he is doing very

center in Hartford. Bob began volunteering on Great Gull Island in 1990. He has been very active, keeping an eye on the roofs and patching them when needed, building small blinds (16) and two tall blinds, contributing two carts which were perfect for unloading and carrying groceries on the new dock, finding bright orange dowels which were wonderful for marking nests and doubled for protective sticks which people landing on the island could hold over their heads as they walked from the dock to HQ during a visit. Bob, we look forward to seeing you in the spring and think it was a good call on your part not to try to do any of the fall work weekends!



well. He sounds in good shape and is walking four to eight miles a day, walking a mile at a time and is working out in the cardiac rehab

At the end of the season there are fewer adult terns in the Great Gull Island colony to guard it and predation by gulls increases. Melinda Billings, a volunteer, was in the right place at the right time to document a Great Black-backed Gull take a young tern the third week in August. Later in the week Melinda took pictures of Harbor and Gray seals on the rocks near the island. A few years ago we began to see perhaps one Harbor seal near the island throughout the summer and in 2010 heard the haunting call of the Gray Seals, a



Roseate Tern work went well this year. Grace Cormons, working with her assistant, Catherine Neal, estimated the colony included 1596 nests. Grace worked with Catherine for a week and then returned home to help her son and daughter-in-law take care of their two new twins. Catherine continued the daily checks of the rocks to band Roseate chicks through July 5, checking about 1,000 young. Below is Catherine's choice of foot gear for the Roseate check. During the last week in June and the first week in July Catherine found an unusual number of dead chicks. Field

call that was sometimes hard to distinguish from the fog horn on Little Gull. In 2012 it was not unusual to see nine Gray Seals at the eastern end of the island throughout the summer as well as at least two Harbor Seals on the north side of the island. We tried calling the Gray Seals by imitating the sounds they made and it seemed to work. They would approach us, rise out of the water to have a better look and then slip away. On the evening Melinda took her pictures one of the Harbor Seals on the rocks was not a bit camera shy and assumed a number of poses the evening she photographed.



assistants checking Common Tern nests found high mortality also during this period. It appeared that the bait fish "went out" but came back after the two week period. The summer continued with good productivity for both Roseate and Common Terns.



In addition to Roseate check Catherine planned and cooked most of the meals during her time on the island. At the end of the season the cooking mantle was passed to Melissa McClure during the last week in July and again for a week August 16-23, which was very nice for everyone.





Last summer Dick Young, one of our field assistants on Great Gull Island, took these pictures near a nest in front of the headquarters building. The second chick in this nest died, so this was the “only chick” in the nest. At about two weeks of age it still wanted to be brooded and its mother, difficult as it was, was not averse to trying to cover the chick!





I was very pleased Dale Dancis, Nancy Stevens, Doug Kopsco and Melinda Billings were willing and able to come to the island and help with the field work, packing and cleaning at the end of the season. It meant that we were able to follow the terns on Great Gull Island through Labor Day. Since there were still young on the island that could not

fly late in the season and over 1500 adults and young were still coming in to the island on a daily basis I was glad we were able to do this. During the last days we were on the island 200-300 Common and Roseate Terns gathered on the new dock throughout the day. On September 1 a Forster's Tern and nine Black Terns joined the terns and a Herring Gull gathered on the dock. A young Roseate Tern was still being fed in the rocks near the dock when we left on September 4. People



often ask if these late hatchlings survive. We will be able to answer this question in more detail shortly, but a quick look at banding dates of young that have returned to Great Gull Island to nest shows that some young banded late in the season have returned.

Finally, I am happy to report that Joe DiCostanzo, who has been in charge of computerizing the Common Tern data collected over forty four years, gave a copy of the data to population biologist, Robert Rockwell, who works across the hall from us in the museum. There are many questions to be answered and I am delighted that we will be

[Photo credits: Anya Auerbach – p. 2 bottom, p. 3 both; Melinda Billings – p. 4 top and bottom, p. 5 all; Dale Dancis – p. 8; Joe DiCostanzo – p. 2 top, p. 4 middle; Nancy Stevens – p. 7 all; Dick Young – p. 6 all.]

[EDITOR'S NOTE: A version of this article appeared in *FOGGI*, The Great Gull Island Project newsletter.]



working with Rocky on analysis of banding and recovery data for the Great Gull Island colony during the winter of 2012-2013.

Monarch butterflies roosted in the pines in late August and early September on their way south.



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