

NEWS



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For immediate release: June 28, 1996

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Variety of Birds Nest on South Monomoy Island Outlook Hopeful for Nesting Habitat Restoration Success

In the first comprehensive survey of nesting birds on the north end of South Monomoy Island since a nesting habitat restoration program began there in mid-May, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologists have identified 19 bird species nesting in approximately 175 acres previously dominated by herring and great black-backed gulls.

Roseate terns and piping plovers, both protected by the Endangered Species Act, are nesting in the project area off Cape Cod, Massachusetts. Three species -- roseate terns, laughing gulls and black skimmers -- have not nested on Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge for several years. Service biologists also noted substantial increases in other, already established, species.

"We see the beginning of a healthy diversity of bird species that we hope will be maintained on Monomoy refuge," said Northeast Regional Director Ronald E. Lambertson of the Service, which manages the refuge. "We're optimistic that Monomoy will eventually again become a premier bird nesting area off Cape Cod.

"However," Lambertson cautioned, "bird populations on islands such as those that comprise Monomoy refuge will naturally fluctuate. The truest test of success for the project will be productivity of the nests and long-term nesting population increases.

MORE

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"It's not enough for birds to nest and lay eggs," he said. "We hope to see young birds develop into adults in order to prove that Monomoy refuge has become productive habitat for a variety of species."

In what Lambertson emphasized is a preliminary count in the project area, Service biologists identified three roseate tern nests, the first found on the refuge since 1990. Roseate numbers recorded in 1966 show 900 nesting pairs for the entire refuge, but they have declined precipitously since then.

Six piping plover pairs and five nests were found in the project area. The preliminary count of plovers for the entire refuge is 21 pairs, an increase over the 14 pairs counted last year. An estimated 94 pairs could thrive on the refuge, but the plover population remained in single digits until 1995 due in large part to gulls dominating virtually all suitable nesting habitat.

Few piping plovers nest in areas where the larger, aggressive and territorial gulls nest, while larger numbers of plovers nest in comparable, gull-free habitat. In nearby areas off the refuge, such as the barrier island of South Beach, plovers nest in greater abundance despite non-gull disturbance (28 nesting pairs in 1995).

The four-year habitat restoration program on Monomoy refuge began this year with two applications of a gull toxicant to 2,832 nests of herring and great black-backed gulls. Gulls comprised 95 percent of the refuge's nesting bird population. The effort sought to remove gulls from a portion of the refuge to provide nesting habitat for a diversity of bird species.

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Nesting habitat restoration using a gull toxicant has been used successfully on a number of islands off the coast of Maine to remove gulls and restore tern colonies and Atlantic puffins. It has also been used to restore terns on Ram Island in Buzzards Bay in Massachusetts. Other techniques, such as harassment, shooting, and egg and nest destruction used both on Monomoy refuge and in other areas, have proven to be largely ineffective in permanently removing large numbers of gulls from an area.

Service staff have destroyed gull nests remaining in the project area after application of the gull toxicant as outlined in the Service's environmental assessment. Approximately 680 gulls remain in the project area.

This year less than 20 percent of the refuge's herring gull population and 25 percent of the refuge's great black-backed gull population were removed. Gulls on North Monomoy Island and the south end of South Monomoy Island, both part of the refuge, are not involved in the four-year habitat restoration project. Regionally, the project is estimated to remove only 1.6 percent of the herring gull population and 4.5 percent of the great black-backed gull population. This population reduction will not seriously impact the overall regional breeding gull population.

Selected Nesting Bird Species
 Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge

Species	<u>Nesting Pairs in Project Area, 1996</u>	<u>Nesting Pairs in Project Area, 1995</u>	<u>Nesting Pairs on Entire Refuge, 1995</u>	<u>Last Year Recorded Nesting on Entire Refuge</u>
Roseate Tern	3	0	0	1990 - 1 pair
Piping Plover	5 to 6	4	14	1995 - 14 pairs
Black Skimmer	3	0	0	1989 - 2 pairs
Laughing Gulls	5	0	0	1993 - 13 pairs
Least Tern	103	28	28	1995 - 28 pairs
Common Tern	1,219	63	289	1995 - 289 pairs

Also nesting in the project area:

- American Black Duck
- American Oystercatcher
- Black-Crowned Night Heron
- Canada Goose
- Common Yellowthroat
- Great Egret
- Northern Harrier
- Red-Winged Blackbird
- Savannah Sparrow
- Sharp-Tailed Sparrow
- Snowy Egret
- Song Sparrow
- Willet