Restored salt marsh becomes a birding hotspot in Rhode Island

Clean up efforts began in 2003 at the site of an old municipal landfill which had been transferred to the USFWS in 1970, becoming Sachuest Point NWR in Rhode Island. Initial clean up focused on removal of recyclable materials, consolidation and capping of the remaining trash and creation of a warm season grassland. The final stage was completed this spring when an undersized water control structures was replaced and a larger channel was completed, allowing tidal water to ebb and flow unrestricted into18 acres of marsh. This area had been excavated and returned to elevations that could support salt marsh during 2004, with the design including high marsh, low marsh, pannes, pools, channels, and mud flat habitats to support the variety of bird species that depend on this important habitat.

This area has quickly become a hotspot for birds and birders alike! By providing a diversity of habitats free of disturbance, this site has become one of the most important stop over sites for water birds during the fall migration in Rhode Island. In addition, the site is easily viewed by birders, making it one of the most often visited birding sites in Rhode Island, especially at this time of year.

Documenting this amazing transformation, refuge volunteer birders began monitoring the marsh weekly beginning in 2004 when the first mud flats were created, and have documented more than 55 different waterbird species throughout the year. This includes seven wading bird and seven tern species with peak numbers of both occurring in July. Shorebird species peak in August, with 25 species detected and maximum numbers approaching 300 individuals on any given day. This has also attracted seven different birds of prey to the area. As winter approaches the number of American black ducks will steadily increase, making them the most abundant species in the marsh until the other species return on their way north during the spring.

Refuge biologists are closely monitoring bird use, vegetation, and nekton in the newly restored marsh as well as abiotic conditions. We expect that as vegetation fills in the area will also be an important nesting site for saltmarsh sharp-tailed sparrows that currently forage in the area and nest in the adjacent refuge marsh. The whole project has been a huge success, and it has been a great feeling restoring a habitat to its former condition and giving a little something back to the wildlife that depends on it!

See photos below:

Mudflats with water control structure in the background (photo by Suzanne Paton/USFWS)

Salt marsh pool and low marsh vegetation (*Spartina alterniflora*) (photo by Suzanne Paton/USFWS)

SCA interns collecting vegetative data in newly restored marsh (photo Rhonda Smith/USFWS)