

For immediate release
Oct. 25, 2010

News media: for further information, contact
Sharon Marino, Project Manager
Southern New England-New York Bight Coastal Program
(401) 364-9124 x41, Sharon_Marino@fws.gov

Wendy Green, Wildlife Biologist
Southern New England - New York Bight Coastal Program
(401) 364-9124 x37, Wendy_Green@fws.gov

Partnership on Sandy Point Island Successfully Balances Recreation and Conservation

“People protect what they love,” declares Anne Roberts-Pierson, President of the Avalonia Land Conservancy, Inc. A uniquely successful land conservation partnership between Avalonia and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has protected Sandy Point Island, a well-loved barrier island in Little Narragansett Bay.

The Gildersleeve family of Stonington, Conn. donated this island in 1982 to Avalonia to be managed as a nature preserve. It is a favorite boating destination and picnic spot for locals, some of whom have been visiting this island for generations.

However, this island’s beauty and popularity have led to some misuse of the land, including beachgoers building campfires and letting their dogs run free. The island needed additional protection because it is “an amazing resource, and an incredible habitat for American oystercatchers, threatened piping plovers, and endangered roseate and least terns,” according to Sharon Marino, project leader for the Service’s Southern New England-New York Bight Coastal Program.

This year, a conservation partnership between Avalonia and the Service led to record-breaking numbers of nesting shorebirds, and a public education campaign allowed beachgoers to participate in the protection of the land that they love.

“One goal of this partnership was to balance public use and recreation with the conservation of shorebird habitat,” says Marino. “The partnership has clearly accomplished this goal.”

Management Strategy

The Service created a management plan balancing public use with habitat conservation. Biologists from the Coastal Program identified important nesting grounds for birds and roped off these areas to protect the parents and chicks until they fledged (lived until flight feathers grew in). Approximately one third of the island was roped off for solitary and colonial nesting birds, and the rest was open for compatible public access. Signs clearly explained why these areas were roped off so the public could learn about the conservation efforts. Nesting boxes were also put into the least tern nesting areas to provide cover for the chicks.

The next step of the management strategy involved reaching out to the public so they could help protect this important habitat. Beachgoers were asked to keep their dogs at home, refrain from lighting open fires or flying kites (which alarm nesting birds), respect roped-off areas, and to help spread awareness of this unique and important habitat.

Two interns from the Service's Coastal Program in Rhode Island, and two interns from the Service's Stewart B. McKinney National Wildlife Refuge in Connecticut provided valuable support to this project. They visited the island regularly, counted the birds and chicks, and interacted with people to answer questions or explain how the habitat was being protected.

This educational component was central to the Service's management strategy. Avalonia and the Service both view people as an important component of their conservation partnership. Wendy Green, Service biologist and expert on shorebird management, is encouraged by the public's response. "These birds are a natural resource," she said. "They're everyone's birds. People are learning how they can make a difference, and they are becoming stewards of the birds on this island."

Successful Nesting Season

Beach-goers are not alone in their adoration of this island. Sandy Point Island is an incredibly popular habitat for nesting shorebirds. This summer, the island hosted one of the largest least tern colonies in New England in the past 30 years. Biologists, interns and volunteers counted 443 nesting least tern pairs, which hatched more than 400 chicks. Despite predation from gulls and other threats, 91 of these chicks fledged, deeming this a successful nesting season. McKinney Refuge Manager Rick Potvin said, "Some projects spend thousands of dollars on trying to make a habitat look good for least terns, and we just had to rope these areas off to get 443 nesting pairs. The habitat is excellent for these birds. This is a short-term investment that gave us fantastic dividends."

While only two pairs of piping plover nested on the island in 2009, three times as many nested in 2010. These six pairs of piping plover successfully fledged six chicks. Additionally, one pair of common terns was observed nesting on the island for the first time in 20 years. Four pairs of American oystercatcher nested on the island and fledged seven chicks. The Service includes the American oystercatcher on its list of Birds of Conservation Concern, and Rhode Island lists it as a state species of concern.

After this year's successful nesting season, Wendy Green, Service Biologist, is already planning for next year. "Some people want to know where we'll be roping off next year, but it's too early to tell. We expect birds to come back in March or April, and as the birds nest we will rope off nesting areas. Just like last year, we'll take down the ropes to allow public access after the birds fledge."

Public Response

"What the Service brings to management is allowing public use and fish and wildlife to coexist," says Potvin. Public education and outreach was a critical part of managing the island. Avalonia held two

informational sessions in anticipation of the summer nesting season, and the Service prioritized reaching out to people on the island.

Connecticut resident Susan Coburn-Thibideau feels a strong sense of family heritage on the island, and is very supportive of this conservation partnership. “I’ve been coming to Sandy Point Island for 50 years, and I’m glad they roped some areas off instead of shutting down the entire beach,” she said. “I think it’s great that they’re promoting the growth of those birds. You have certain areas roped off, and it’s clearly marked. People should just abide by those rules.”

Coburn-Thibideau is a self-appointed steward of the island. “If I see a dog running around, I’ll say something! I have animals and I keep them at home. Some people don’t follow the rules, and it’s really upsetting to people like me who love this island.”

However, some beach goers would like some more information about which areas are closed. Connecticut resident Noelle Paradis visited Sandy Point Island as a child, and now takes her own young children to this island. “It’s a great place for the kids. We call it Adventure Island, and they find treasures like shells and rocks. This year, it’s been hard to know where we can go or not go. Parts of the island are closed off, but it isn’t clear. It should be advertised in the newspaper.” Because of such requests for more information, the Service recently erected an educational kiosk on the island, to explain and illustrate the importance of the roped-off areas.

Bruce and Donna Green of Pawcatuck, Conn. have heard dissent among other beach-goers. Bruce shared, “Some people weren’t happy. They said ‘Who cares about a bird?’ But we do, we respect the birds’ nesting. You come here, and you respect it.” Donna also takes this responsibility seriously, saying, “We’re sad that some people have ruined it for others, but people are learning to respect the island. I haven’t seen any open fires, or anyone in the roped-off area.”

When asked about the goals of the conservation partnership, Bruce said, “We love the balance of conservation and recreation, and want to share it, because this is a beautiful place to be. We hope the island stays open!”

Avalonia President Anne Roberts-Pierson notes that public attitudes about the conservation partnership have changed. “Changing public consciousness is hard, but people already love this place. We’re just educating people about why the birds are important. People love this place so much, they were afraid that this partnership would impinge on their use. We’re just asking them to tweak their behavior. People are very happy. They see their beach usage has not been impinged, and we’re getting good bird reproduction.”

Roberts-Pierson celebrates the public stewards who are helping to protect this important habitat. “The feeling on the island has changed. Avalonia has always tried to take care of the island, but now people see that biologists and people in conservation are watching the birds. This island is relevant in the environmental scheme of things, so they want to be a part of that. We have enough buy-in from regular beachgoers that they’ll very quickly enforce these rules, and protect their resource.”

The Partners

The Partners in Fish and Wildlife program works to efficiently achieve voluntary habitat restoration on private lands, through financial and technical assistance, for the benefit of federal trust species. Roberts-Pierson, president of Avalonia, gives the following piece of advice to other organizations seeking to protect habitat on their land; “If the opportunity arises to partner with the Fish and Wildlife Service, they should do it without hesitation!”

The Service provides the federal leadership to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitat for the continuing benefit of the American people. Avalonia Land Conservancy, Inc. is a land trust dedicated to the acquisition and conservation of natural areas for the benefit of wildlife, for present and future generations. Avalonia currently holds lands that represent a wide range of diverse habitats-- from salt marshes, swamps, and streams, to fields and forests.

The Southern New England-New York Bight Coastal Program is one of 21 coastal programs nationally within the Service that facilitates local conservation strategies and works collaboratively with their partners to identify, restore, and protect regionally important habitat. The coastal program office covers coastal watersheds in seven states, with habitats ranging from shorelines to forest.

The Stewart B. McKinney National Wildlife Refuge encompasses more than 800 acres of barrier beach, tidal wetland and fragile island habitats. As part of the Atlantic Flyway, the refuge provides important resting, feeding and nesting habitat for many species of wading birds, shorebirds, songbirds and terns, including the endangered roseate tern.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We are both a leader and a trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation. We are known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals and commitment to public service. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit <http://www.fws.gov>