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Maine Coastal Islands National Wildlife Refuge Uses Tiny Devices to Track Tern Migration

Seabird biologists at Maine Coastal Islands National Wildlife Refuge have longed to track Arctic tern migration for years, to better understand how to protect these birds when they are making their annual perilous and energy-intensive 25,000 mile annual round-trip. Since the birds weigh only what a cell phone weighs, they cannot carry much equipment, but finally, "geolocators" that weigh just 1.5 grams are available. In June, 15 Arctic terns were trapped on two islands and these devices, about the size of a fingernail, have been attached to their leg. Next year, the biologists hope to catch the same birds, download the data, and make maps of the migration route of each bird.

This is the first time geolocators have been placed on Arctic terns in North America and the information gained will provide valuable knowledge of the species' migration routes, especially regarding threats at wintering areas and stopovers. The average mileage of these travelers, the longest recorded bird migration, is known but identifying threats, such as habitat loss or destruction, at other locations that this species utilizes is very important.

The geolocators will provide data as to where these areas are in the world by collecting times of sunrise and sunset as well as length of daylight. Increased knowledge about specific wintering areas, migration paths, and migration stopover sites may lead to improved collaboration with other countries to protect and conserve the specific places so critical to these birds.

Refuge biologists and field technicians deployed 15 geolocators on Arctic terns nesting on Metinic Island in mid-June. The Refuge's partner in seabird management, the National Audubon Society, deployed an additional 15 geolocators on Arctic Terns from Eastern Egg Rock. Next summer in 2011, the Arctic terns will return to their previous nesting sites, enabling biologists to re-capture each individual and retrieve the data stored on each geolocator.

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