



Prescribed Fire Helps Terns Survive



Endangered Roseate tern (USFWS)



Vegetation on Petit Manan Island before starting burn program. (USFWS)

Prescribed burning is helping common terns and federally endangered Roseate terns survive, by expanding their nesting habitat across several islands along the east coast. Petit Manan Island, a part of the Maine Coastal Islands National Wildlife Refuge Complex, has been burning since 1996, setting a model for Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) in Massachusetts, and soon, Stewart B. McKinney NWR in Connecticut.

How Fire Helps

- Fire burns excess vegetation to maintain a sparse, open habitat preferred by terns for nesting.
- Fire reduces thick vegetation preferred by tern predators, such as gulls.
- Fire is an important tool for managing tern habitat in Wilderness Areas such as Monomoy NWR, where motorized equipment is prohibited.
- Skillfully executed prescribed burns yield a mosaic burn pattern that favor common, least and Roseate terns to nest in the same areas.
- Fire reduces the build-up of vegetation that poses a risk of wildfire to structures and other improvements on nesting islands.

Without Fire?

- If not burned on a regular basis, the islands will become choked with thick vegetation, reducing tern nesting habitat, increasing gull habitat, and increasing the risk of wildfire.
- Tern numbers will decline due to habitat loss and increased predation. Coastal refuges will have difficulty meeting goals of land management plans, such as increasing tern numbers.

Current Situation

- Annual burning on Petit Manan Island has created and maintained suitable nesting habitat for terns. The tern colony increased by 78% between 1999 and 2009.
- For Monomoy NWR, the tern colony fell from a peak of 9,310 nesting pairs of terns in 2006 to only 2,347 pairs in 2009. In the fall of 2009, the main tern colony location was burned and numbers rebounded to 6,450 pairs counted in 2010.
- Prescribed burns have proven to be the most cost-effective and ecologically sound tool for managing tern habitat at Petit Manan and Monomoy Islands. This program needs to continue to expand the amount of open, sparse habitat preferred by the terns.
- Federal funding for prescribed burning is now focusing almost exclusively on areas other than the Northeast, with minimal emphasis on maintaining and restoring watersheds, wildlife habitats, natural ecosystems, or recovery of threatened or endangered species.

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