

SUMMER WITH THE SEABIRDS

The life of a Maine Coastal Islands National Wildlife Refuge Island Researcher

Archive 2010 – August and July

Welcome!

Welcome to the Maine Coastal Islands National Wildlife Refuge Island Researcher blog! Here you'll find posts and multimedia projects created by island researchers spending the summer on the refuge's many islands. Please check back often for updates!

Archive for August, 2010

Terns

Posted in [Petit Manan 2010](#) on August 1, 2010



Photo credit: Kayla Pelletier



Photo credit: Kayla Pelletier

As the stronghold for nesting terns in the Gulf of Maine, 1600 pairs were considered a low number for Petit Manan this year. For the average tourist aboard the average whale watching boat, however, the presence of the terns is blatantly obvious. They are noisy, cranky, gossipy birds who nest all over the island: the tall grass, the rocks, and our lawn.

Despite the fact that other birds nest on this island, Petit Manan really belongs to the terns. Their tenacity and group work has earned them a reputation as being desirable neighbors for the alcids, the sandpipers, and the eider ducks. Although they are noisy (they chatter 24 hours a day), the terns know how to work together to mob and drive away predators that grossly outweigh them, providing a neighborhood crime watch service that keeps the other birds safer than they would have been otherwise.



Photo credit: Kirk Rogers



Photo credit: Kirk Rogers

Three species of terns nest on Petit Manan Island. There is the Common tern: conspicuous, irritable, and bolder than the other two species. The Common terns nest almost everywhere on the island (including the inconvenient places, like pathways and in front of the bathroom). They also seem to attack more heartily than anyone else.



Common Tern, photo credit: Kirk Rogers

Then there is the Arctic tern: more wary, but just as conspicuous. The Arctic tern nests primarily in the middle of the island in tall vegetation.



Arctic Tern, photo credit: Kirk Rogers

Finally there is the Roseate: the elusive, beautiful, federally endangered Roseate tern. This year we had one pair of Roseates attempt to nest on PMI, but the constant harassment from the Common terns may have been a driving force in the failure of their nest.



Roseate Tern, photo credit: Kirk Rogers

The terns take up the largest chunk of the crew's work here on PMI. At the beginning of the season we resighted bands, and as eggs were laid, we located, identified, and flagged all the nests we could find.

With terns still on eggs, we were able to trap, accomplished by placing a bow net over nests replaced with artificial eggs for safety. When the tern would come back to its nest, it would set off a trip wire, causing the net to spring over it. Throughout the first two weeks in July, we spent our mornings trapping and subsequently weighing, measuring, banding, and taking Avian Influenza samples of adult terns.



Photo credit: Amanda Boyd



Photo credit: Amanda Boyd

Fourteen plots were selected and fenced off to measure productivity of the terns. Chicks within the plots were weighed and monitored frequently, to give a general picture of survivorship and growth rate within the colony. As we got to know these chicks more personally, we began to mourn deaths and triumph

fledges. They grow so fast. Within a month a chick transforms from a ball of fuzz into a tern, from begging for food to flapping their wings. It's truly amazing.



Photo credit: Kayla Pelletier

Four additional unfenced plots are for provisioning studies. Each chick is marked based on hatch order, and we watch to see what kind of fish the adults are bringing back, how large the fish are, and which chick is being fed most often. You know nothing until you know how to identify tiny fish specimens as they hang from the beak of a 12 inch bird.



Photo credit: Amanda Boyd

Every second with these birds is a pleasure.





Archive for July, 2010

[A glimpse into living on a seabird island.](#)

Posted in [Petit Manan 2010](#) on July 29, 2010



Welcome to Petit Manan Island, 10 treeless acres of squawking terns, blue flag iris, and six-foot-tall meadow rue. It is a mini-paradise surrounded by ocean, with Acadia National Park to the southwest, Bois Bubert Island to the northwest, and birds everywhere else. From the perspective of a tour boat, Petit Manan is a quaint birding spot and sports Maine's second tallest lighthouse. From the perspective of the old lighthouse keeper's house, Petit Manan is a home, a paradise, and another day at the office.

We are a four man crew here on the island. We all came here from different places: Maine, Massachusetts, California, Idaho. We had never met before, and in early May, US Fish and Wildlife left us on this island with only each other for company, no running water, no internet, no television, no fast-food restaurants, and patchy cell phone service. We get asked all the time from friends, family, and curious whale-watchers who call us on walkie-talkies: What is life like out there?

We are fortunate to have the old lighthouse keeper's house to live in. A large solar panel in the lawn provides us with the energy we need for our lights, and our computers. We do not have a television, but we occasionally watch movies on our laptops. The internet was just a recent acquisition to PMI. Before last week, I had 230 unread emails in my inbox.

Food and potable water is brought to us every ten days or so by staff from the US Fish and Wildlife office in Milbridge. We call in our grocery lists, and someone from the office shops for us. Grocery shopping for ourselves is one of the biggest luxuries that we all miss. Luckily for us, we have 2 propane refrigerators, and a propane stove, so there is no "roughing it" when it comes to eating. Homemade pizzas, breads, and soups are a common occurrence here on the island. We have shepherd's pie, burritos, and baked chicken, and we always eat together. Cooking is on a rotation, as is dishwashing, and after a long day of working out in the colony, it's nice to have a sit-down meal. I could easily blame these dinners for transforming us from four strangers into the family that we've certainly become out here.

Whoever has to do dishes gets their water from cisterns in the basement that catch rainwater off of the roof. There is no faucet in the sink. This is the same water that we use to bathe in, which occurs about once a week. Our "shower" is a canister with a handle which you pump to create pressure. The water comes out of a little mini showerhead attached to the canister. There's enough water in that canister for a solid 5 or so minutes, which is all the time you really want to spend naked in the cold basement. Showering is more out of habit than anything else, no sooner are you clean than one of the birds poops on you on your way out to the bathroom.

It should come as no surprise that the "biffy," or bathroom, is an outhouse in the yard. The terns seem to like nesting right in front of it, and they do not appreciate being disturbed. The solution is a tinkerbell umbrella kept by the front door, to protect your head from the dive-bombs...and the poop bombs. When working in the colony, we typically wear hard hats for this reason. The terns dive bomb pretty hard some days.

So sometimes I have to just laugh when I get poop across the side of my face, and I have to suck it up when I'm really craving an ice cream or delivery Chinese food. And although I was skeptical at first, you really do stop hearing the foghorn after a while. But I'll tell you, the sunsets are stunning, the birds are fascinating, and my new Petit Manan family can't be beat.

Metinic Island – a glimpse into our nesting season

Posted in [Metinic 2010](#) on July 23, 2010



The blinds are coming down, flags pulled up, and the tern colony is increasingly moving from the nesting site into the intertidal as they prepare for their long and arduous venture south.

Though data is still being entered and processed we thought we'd give you a snippet of our season...

- Over [750 pairs](#) of Common (52%) and Arctic (48%) terns nested on Metinic this year!!!
- [1 Roseate Tern pair](#) established a nest yet then abandoned (probably, in part, due to constant common tern harassment)



Roseate tern pair being harassed at their nesting site by a common tern neighbor



Flying pair of common terns

- Feedings appeared to be slim pickings as many/many butterfish came in for a couple of week's straight. This rendered almost all the 2nd and 3rd hatched from a clutch helpless in getting enough food for survival. There were also many invertebrates, stickle back, and other very small fish coming in. Where were all the herring?



Young tern chick trying to get down a butterfish

The colony also experienced predation; regularly from a peregrine falcon, at least occasionally from an owl (determined by a few of her feathers left behind and the remnants of her meal), and, later in the season, by herring and great black-backed gulls.



Peregrine Falcon



Great black-backed gull eating a tern chick



Herring Gull Chick

- Though the actual fledge rates have yet to be determined there are many awkward crazy haired flyers about.



First flight of a common tern fledger

Other work, besides enjoying the terns, includes evaluating the productivity of Leach's Storm Petrels who nest within burrows on the island.



Leach's Storm Petrel

And monitoring black Guillemot reproductive rates/productivity. We are watching 40+ nests in which chicks are currently being measured, weighed, and banded.



Black Guillemot Adult



Field Technician Charlie Walsh measuring wing cord on a black guillemot chick

We could probably go on indefinitely about the happenings in the colony and the lives of those we've been watching since they first pipped out of their egg shells (we have spent way too much time in the presence of only birds!) However, we will leave it here...with the anticipation of a hot shower, washing machine and the ending of a great season.



Home and the tern colony at sunrise