

SUMMER WITH THE SEABIRDS

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

Archive 2012 – October - May

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 October, 2012

Petit Manan Point: Season's End

Posted in [Passerine Migration](#), [Petit Manan Point 2012](#) on October 18, 2012

Yesterday (October 17) marked our official last day of fall banding here at Petit Manan Point, and though we're sad to be done we're also happy to have had such a productive season, collecting data on over 2200 individual birds. As we mentioned in our first blog post, the data amassed each season helps shape management strategies and allows for a better understanding of bird population trends. As an example, the alarming decline in Rusty Blackbird numbers (approximately 90% since the mid-twentieth century) was discovered via formal survey techniques including breeding bird surveys and banding data.

It seems fitting to conclude this season's blog with a photo of a young male Rusty Blackbird caught here on October 13. Among other challenges, habitat loss has played a large role in the precipitous decline of this and many other species, underscoring the importance of public lands like wildlife refuges in maintaining and enhancing vital ecosystems across the country.





This season's banding crew (left to right): Jeff Moker, Lauren Morgan-Outhisack & Jordan Chalfant.

Petit Manan Point: October Variety

Posted in [Passerine Migration](#), [Petit Manan Point 2012](#) on October 11, 2012

Last Monday (October 8) we captured a total of 30 different species here at Petit Manan Point. This amounts to roughly 4% of the total number of breeding species in North America. It may not seem like a lot, but it is: it translates into vast numbers of individual birds utilizing refuge habitat on their migratory journey.

Below are some highlights from the past week:



White-eyed Vireo



Black-billed Cuckoo



Chestnut-sided Warbler



Gray Catbird



Pine Warbler



Savannah Sparrow



Tennessee Warbler



"Yellow" Palm Warbler



Yellow-breasted Chat

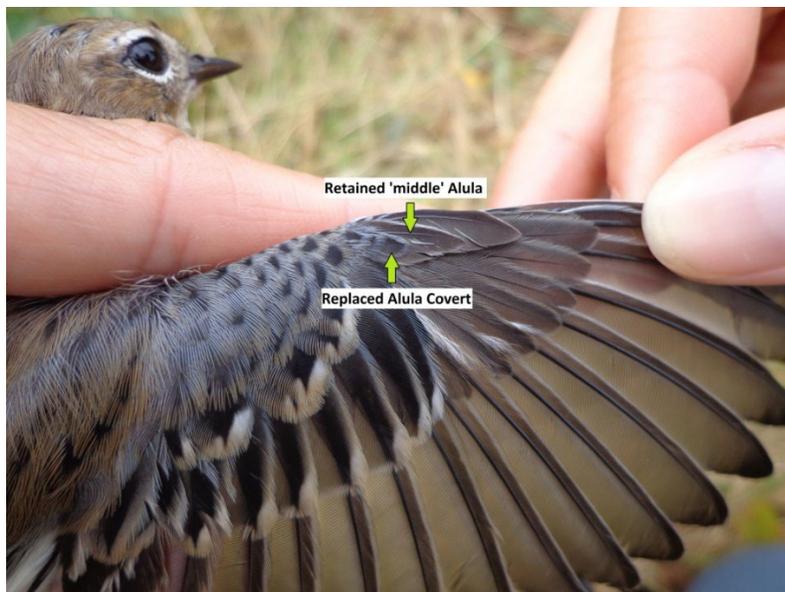
Petit Manan Point: Peak Passage

Posted in [Passerine Migration](#), [Petit Manan Point 2012](#) on October 3, 2012

It is hard to believe it's already October, but we might have guessed by the number of Myrtle Warblers moving through. Since the calendar flipped we have caught 142 Myrtles, making up over 55% of the total of newly banded birds in the last 3 days. As we noted in our last post, these birds can winter at fairly high latitudes owing to a specialized digestive tract that allows them to eat berries that are inedible to most other species. They are also interesting in that they are 1 of only 6 warblers that breed in North America that undergo marked changes in plumage aspect from season-to-season. Pictured below are a young female (L) and adult male, both in non-breeding or 'basic' plumage.



Fortunately for us, ageing Myrtle Warblers is fairly straightforward, as this species tends to show obvious molt-limits. Molt-limits are simply differences in the appearance and structure of feathers due to the different times at which they were grown. In the wing-spread of the Myrtle Warbler below, the difference between the recently molted, fresh alula covert versus the pale middle alula indicates that this is a young bird...



...and the lack of a difference between the same feathers on a different bird below indicates that this is an adult (this is the wingspread of the adult male pictured alongside the female in the first photo above).



Speaking of molt-limits, Red-eyed Vireos can show some pretty dramatic differences between feather generations as well. Below is a young bird that had a rather limited molt compared with most of the other vireos we have processed. Note the retained outer greater coverts – most of the hatch year individuals we have seen have molted these completely. The Red-eyed Vireo is noted for producing multiple clutches per season, so it may be that this individual hatched later in the summer and did not have time to molt as extensively as birds that hatched earlier.



In addition to the increasing numbers of Myrtle Warblers, we have seen more White-throated Sparrows on the move as well. Like Myrtle Warblers, these sparrows are relatively short-distance migrants. They abandon boreal breeding grounds in Canada to overwinter in coastal/southern U.S., as well as northeastern Mexico. Unlike Myrtle Warblers, there is limited dichromatism between males and females, and identifying the sex of an individual is generally impossible outside of the breeding season. Pictured below is a young bird making its first foray south.



We typically catch more Golden-crowned Kinglets here than their Ruby-crowned counterparts, so it was a treat to have been visited by this young male Ruby-crowned Kinglet. This is a species that shows marked dichromatism between the sexes, as males are characterized by the eponymous red crown that is sometimes used to intimidate rival males in territorial disputes.



And finally, a photo of Bear Cove, about 200 meters due west of our banding station.



Being stationed on a peninsula can result in some pretty 'birdy' days, as migrants funnel down its length in search of food. We've already banded 100 or more birds on a couple of days, and if previous years are any indication, we'll likely be in for more during this period of 'peak passage'.

Archive for September, 2012

[Warblers, seals, and PB&Js!](#)

Posted in [Cross Island 2012](#), [Passerine Migration](#) on September 27, 2012



The sun is shining and the weather is sweet, at least for today. The sun gives us energy to run our computer and acoustic devices. Since the acoustics get priority over the computer, we have had to wait a couple weeks for a good sunny day to fully charge our computer, thus post a blog. It keeps us in our toes!

The past few weeks have been spectacular. Only a few days ago, we had some surprise visitors to our banding site: 300 harbor seals! All of which were searching for food, floating around, and calling to each other. We are so lucky to be living on such an amazing island, seeing some beautiful scenery and working with some really cool birds. We have gone on epic adventures exploring the island and we have holed up in our sleeping bags eating PB&Js and reading novels from action adventure, to fantasy, to

hiking the Appalachian Trail and more. Of course we are also working, trying to catch as many birds as we can.



To date we have caught over 450 birds in 32 banding days. That's pretty good considering we are only running 14 nets and many days we have to close early because of wind and or rain. Over the past couple weeks we have been getting some late warbler migrants consisting mostly of Blackpoll Warblers (BLPW). Since we have been seeing so many BLPWs we have noticed some remarkable variations in their condition. To explain, one of the measurements that we record on all birds caught is the amount of fat they carry, fat score. Blowing to separate the feathers we rate the amount of fat filling their furculum, a hollow at the top of the breast. Fat appears yellow to orangish. Most birds we have caught have a fat score from 0-1, meaning they have no fat up to fat lining the furculum's sides. Recently, the majority of BLPWs we catch score from 2-5. A bird with a fat score of 5 has fat bulging from the furculum and pouring over the sides of the breast all the way down covering the abdomen! These birds are carrying up to 25% of their body weight in fat. The reason for so much fat is that they are gearing up for their nonstop flight to South America for the winter.

Some of the highlights that we have found in our nets are Gray Cheeked Thrush, Bicknell's Thrush, Blue-headed Vireo, Rusty Blackbird, and Palm Warblers. We have also been spotting Baltimore Orioles around the house. A Brown Thrasher stopped over at our banding site yesterday, pretty cool bird if you ask me! Cross Island is amidst the northern most portion of their range.

[Petit Manan Point: Migration Marches On](#)

Posted in [Passerine Migration](#), [Petit Manan Point 2012](#) on September 25, 2012

Since our last blog post 6 days ago we've seen some ups and downs in the daily capture rate, but things are picking up as more and more Myrtle Warblers move through. Our biggest day of the season thus far was last Friday (Sept. 21), when we processed 78 new birds, 57 of which were Myrtles! This is a widespread and abundant warbler that breeds in coniferous forests and winters as far north as Massachusetts.



Part of what enables this species to winter at such high latitudes is their ability to digest bayberry and other waxy fruits, though they still enjoy a tasty and nutritious invertebrate when available.



We've also seen a moderate swell in vireo numbers over the last few days, with a nice mix of both Red-eyed and Blue-headed Vireo (below) flocking-up with other migrants. Vireos are closely related to

Shrikes, and one of the characteristics they both share is a somewhat menacing hooked bill, which aids them when feeding on fruits, invertebrates or (in the case of shrikes), small vertebrates.



And we finally had our first Baltimore Orioles pass through this week...pictured below is a hatch-year female.



Many passerines show similar patterns of molt, and as with the hatch-year Black-throated Blue Warbler discussed in our September 5 post, this female had a good degree of contrast between older juvenal feathers and newer, recently replaced ones. More often than not, this indicates a young bird, as the adults undergo a complete molt and do not show marked differences in feather aspect. Below is a closer look at the wingspread of this young female oriole.



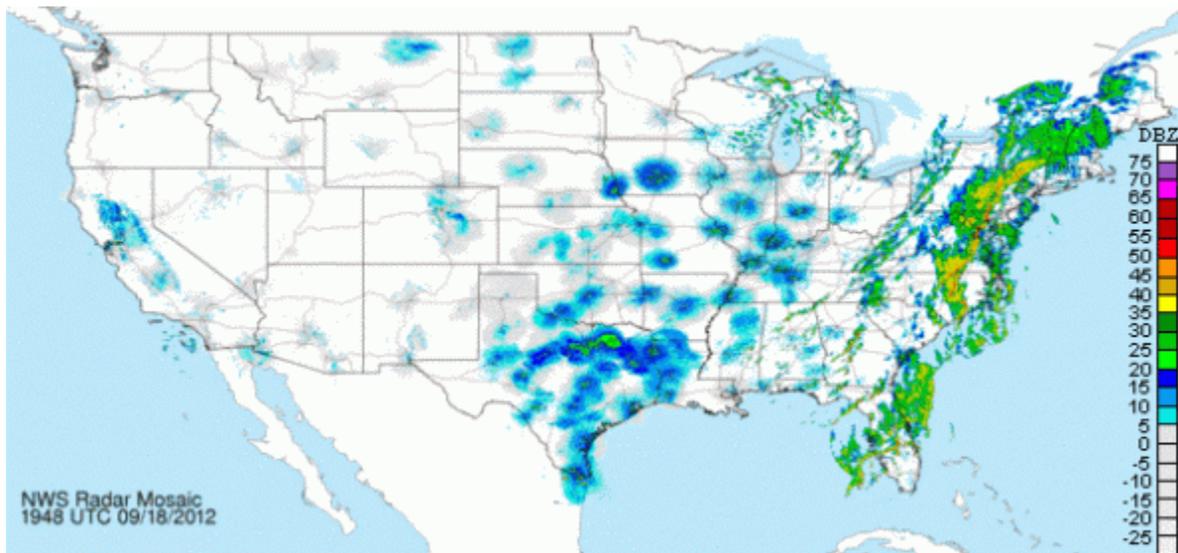
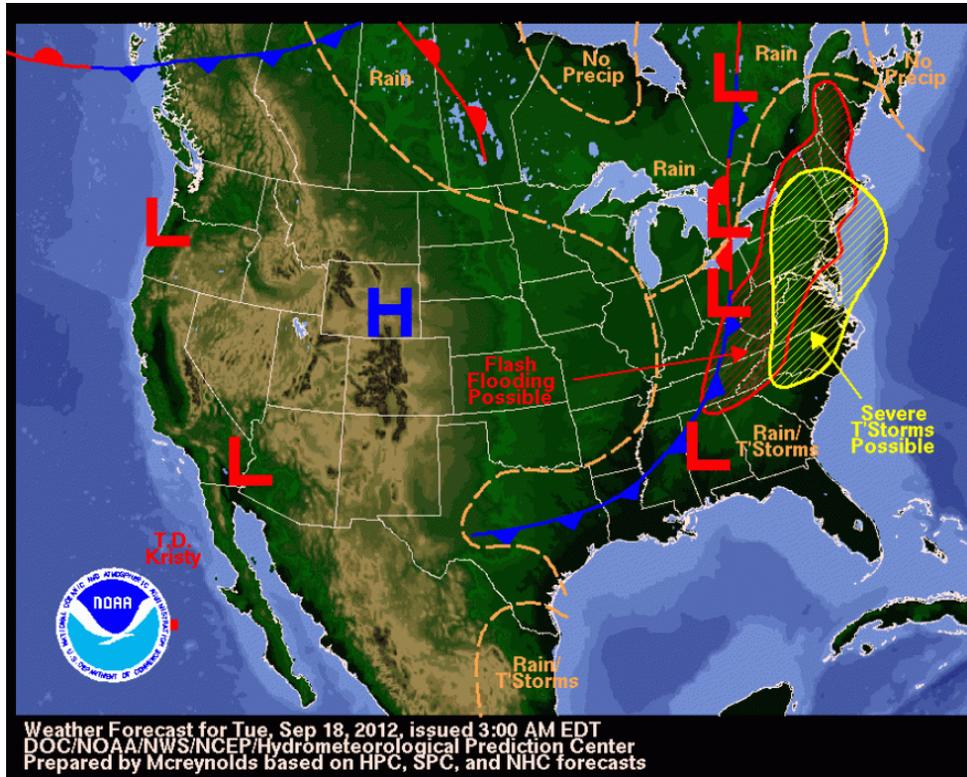
Known as 'molt-limits', these differences in feathers allow bird banders to accurately assign individuals to age-classes, and one of the leading figures in understanding this phenomena is Bob Mulvihill (below, with a 'Yellow' Palm Warbler). Bob's yeoman work on molt, as well as a devotion standards rarely matched has equipped a generation of North American banders with the tools necessary to collect accurate, robust data. It goes without saying that we were honored and delighted to have been visited by he and his wife Pam on Saturday (Sept. 22).



Petit Manan Point: Welcome Additions

Posted in Uncategorized on September 18, 2012

The forecast is not looking good for us tonight and tomorrow, as a strong low-pressure system approaches. Hopefully this will be followed by a large push of migrating birds...



...and as it likely will be, we are thrilled to welcome Jordan to the crew this week. Jordan has worked extensively on refuge islands, playing an integral role in re-establishing and protecting threatened and endangered seabird colonies, among other initiatives. Here she is extracting a Blackpoll Warbler, one of her favorite landbirds.



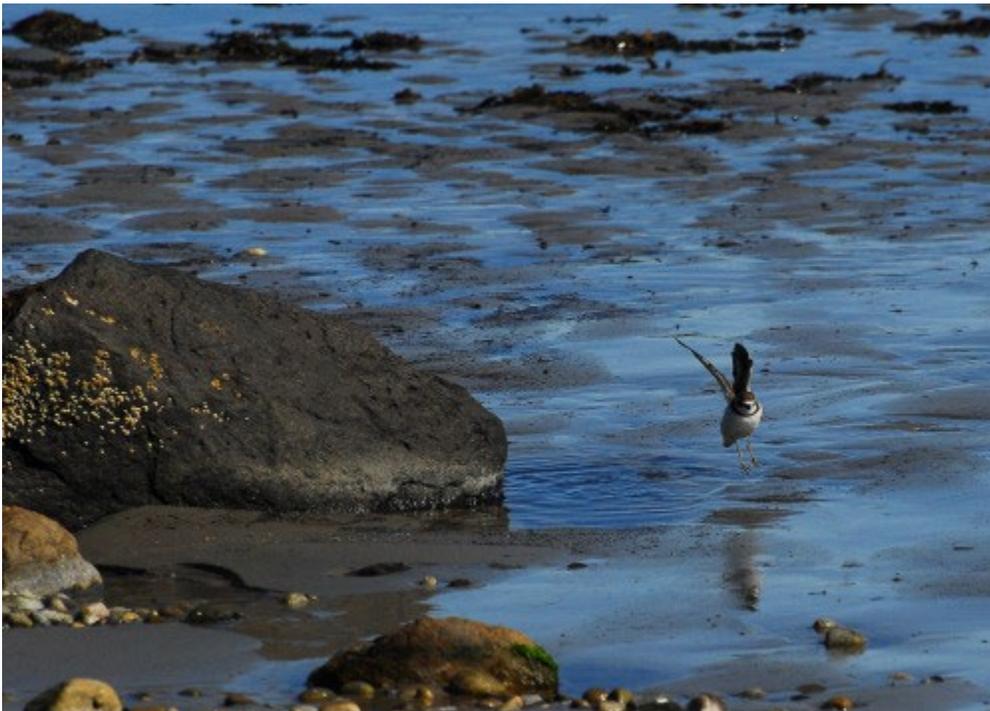
We were also ecstatic to be visited by a rarity for this region. On Sunday (Sept. 16) we processed this hatch-year Clay-colored Sparrow. These are birds that breed in the central portion of Canada and the U.S., and are infrequently encountered this far east.



Another rarely encountered species here, albeit of the shorebird variety, was this American Golden-Plover (bottom individual in photo below). These birds nest in Alaska and northern Canada, and following the breeding season they generally stage in eastern Canada before departing on a nonstop flight of roughly 4000 km to South America. Here it is pictured with the bigger (and more common for this area) Black-bellied Plover.



A fairly common shorebird encountered around the refuge during migration is the Semipalmated Plover, pictured here hopping from its saltwater bath.



Like the Semipalmated Plover above, the Semipalmated Sandpiper (below) is named for the partial webbing between the middle and outer toes. While both species forage along shorelines, and are thus colloquially termed 'shorebirds', they are taxonomically assigned to different families.



Another common sandpiper around the refuge this time of year is the Least Sandpiper. These birds are fattening-up on abundant invertebrates as they move to their wintering grounds that can be as far south as Chile.





Shorebird tracks

Switching gears back to our landbird friends, the Nashville Warbler has a rather protracted migration, with numbers thinning out by mid-October. This adult male is most likely on his way to Central America for the winter. Given that he is an adult, he has certainly made this trip at least once before, and hopefully he will have another successful voyage this year.



Petit Manan Point: September Surprises

Posted in [Uncategorized](#) on September 15, 2012

It goes without saying that birds are highly mobile creatures, and during migration this is doubly true. One of the biggest thrills for birders is finding a 'vagrant' species – a bird found outside of its normal range. For example, some North American species have shown up in places as unlikely as the United Kingdom, wayward travelers disoriented by storms or inexperience.

While perhaps not a true vagrant, this young female Prairie Warbler that was banded yesterday was certainly a surprise for us. Prairie Warblers are not typically found this far north in Maine, though they are known to breed in the southwest portion of the state. They are a bird of early successional habitats, such as pastures and clear-cuts, and this particular individual may have felt at home foraging in the grassy field near our banding station.



This past Thursday (September 13) was an exciting day as well, as we were visited by two Connecticut warblers. These warblers are typically very retiring, and are known to be a hard species for birdwatchers to find. They breed in the boreal region of Canada and portions of northern Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan. Though their wintering range is not well known, evidence suggests they engage in long transatlantic flights to Amazonian South America, similar to the Blackpoll Warbler we discussed previously. Pictured here is an adult female.



Less surprising, but just as delightful, was this sharp-looking hatch-year Swamp Sparrow. In one of our earlier posts we alluded to the fact that birds can often be aged by the appearance of their various feathers. Normally we look at the wing feathers to garner clues as to an individual's age, but for this species we can also look at the area between the eye and the upper bill (known as the lore). Hopefully you can see some yellowish or buffy tones on this bird, which is characteristic for a young bird at this time of year. Adult lores exhibit more of a steely-gray appearance.



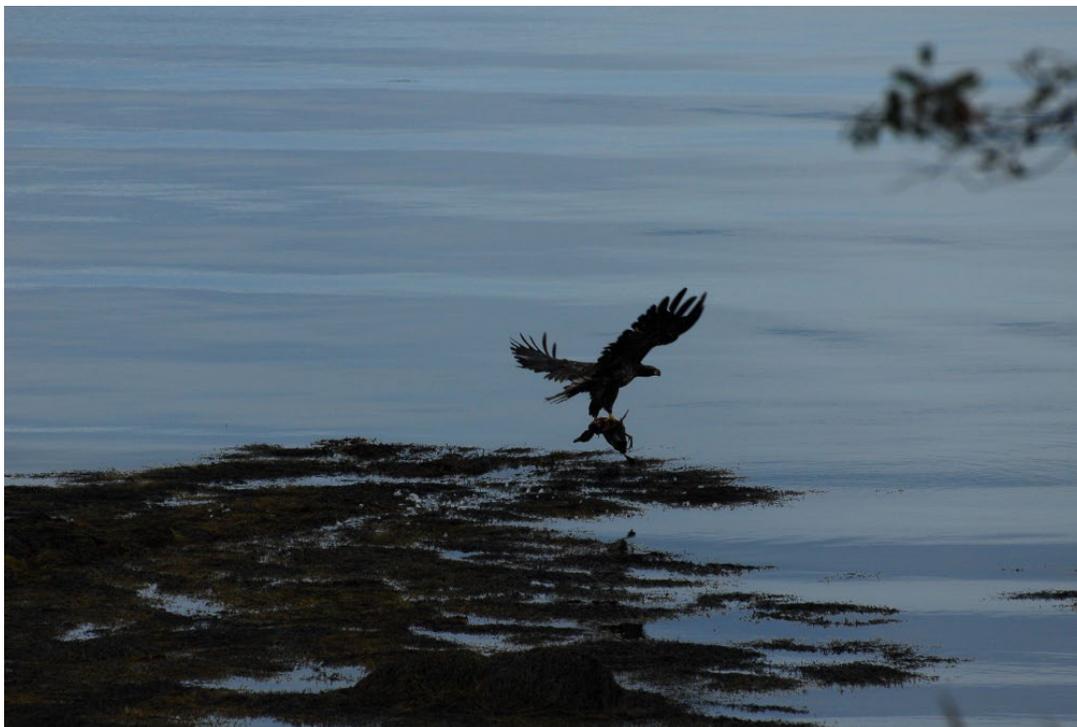
And of course, feather color can often tell us what gender an individual is. In the Red-breasted Nuthatches below, the black crown of the male is unmistakable when contrasted with the blue of the female below it.



Just as it does for us, color plays a pivotal role in the lives of birds, whether it be for mate attraction, territorial defense or camouflage. There are nearly 10,000 species of birds worldwide, and the myriad plumages found in this incredible group of animals is breathtaking. Pictured below are a Brown Creeper and a Black-throated Green Warbler, representing two extremes in the avian color spectrum. The cryptic plumage of the Brown Creeper helps keep it hidden from potential predators while it creeps along tree trunks in search of food.



Among the many benefits of working along the Maine Coast is having some great views of Bald Eagles. This was a species that up until 1995 was listed as endangered, so it is always a treat to see them – whether they are simply scavenging fish or making off with a Common Eider.



Petit Manan Point: Some New Arrivals

Posted in [Uncategorized](#) on September 11, 2012

The north winds that we were anticipating in our last post indeed arrived, and with them a moderate influx of migrating birds to our area. Particularly exciting was the arrival of a number of southbound thrush, fairly large birds related to robins. The top photo is a Swainson's Thrush, and below that is a

Gray-cheeked Thrush. Though superficially similar in body shape and plumage, note the warmer, buffy tones on the Swainson's face relative to the colder, grayer color of the Gray-cheeked.



The American Goldfinch is a common backyard bird, and if you've kept feeders you've likely had some good views of these beautiful birds. This male is currently molting out of his bright yellow breeding plumage and will soon be sporting a more subdued, grayish look.



Another common backyard bird, particularly at winter feeding stations, is the Black-capped Chickadee. These hardy little birds remain at some pretty high latitudes during winter, and can survive some incredibly harsh conditions. One of the ways they stay warm through cold winter nights is by huddling together in tree cavities.



A bird that cannot survive cold northern winters is the Ruby-throated Hummingbird, and this little female (who weighed 3.4 grams) is on her way to the tropics. It is hard to believe that some individuals of this species will fly across the Gulf of Mexico on their annual migration, a trip covering over 500 miles of open water! As we discussed previously, birds engaging in these marathon flights put on large reserves of fat, and we have seen some hummingbirds nearly double their bodyweight before heading south.



Not all of our encounters are of the avian variety, and we sometimes have to watch our step around the banding station so as not to disturb these graceful smooth-green snakes. They blend in well with their surroundings as you can see, and eat mainly spiders and insects.

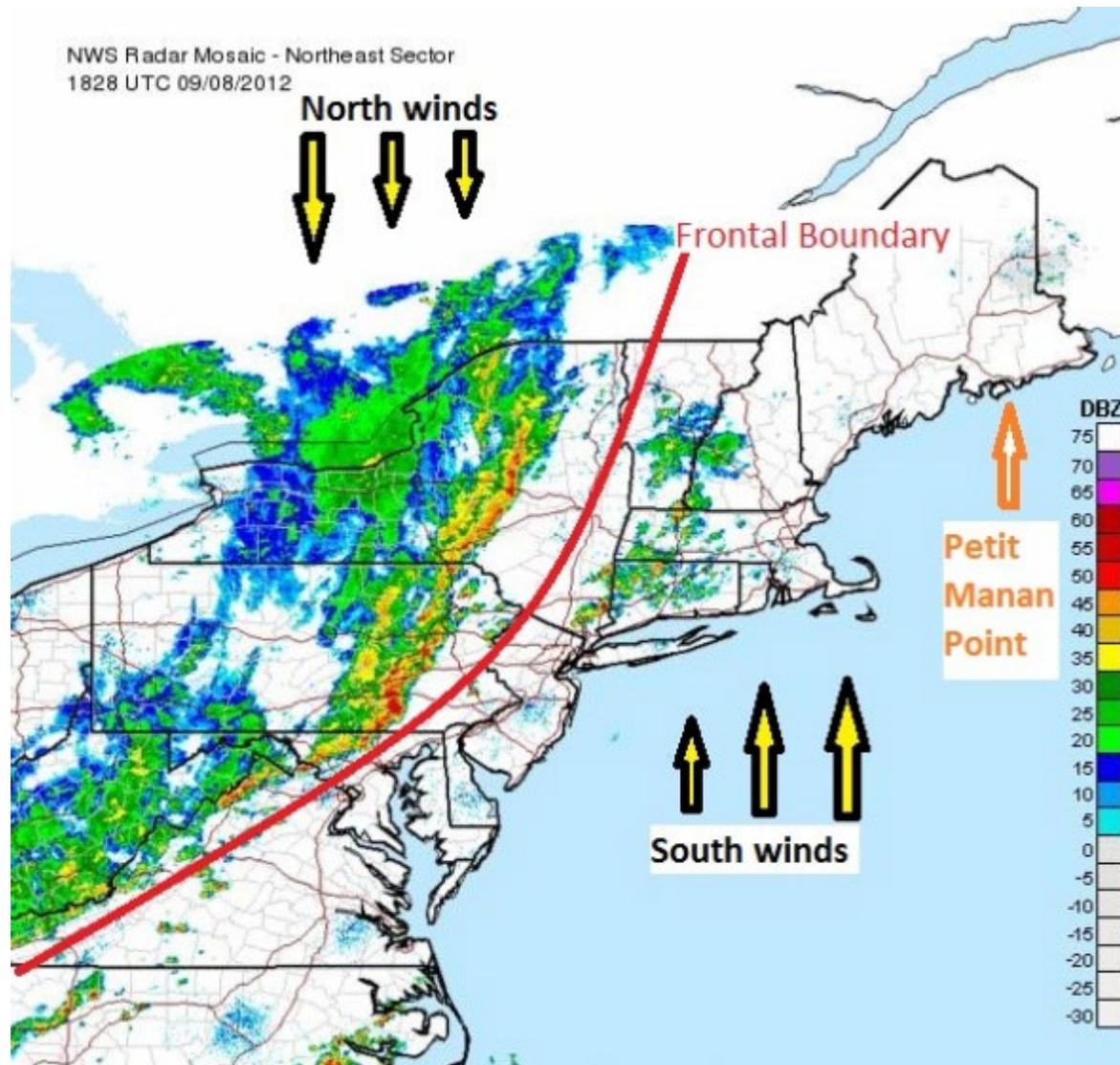


Thus far we have caught over 800 individual birds of 40 different species. Migration numbers typically peak here during mid-September through early October, so we expect our daily volume to increase dramatically in the upcoming days.

Petit Manan Point: Counting Calories and Cold Fronts

Posted in [Passerine Migration](#), [Petit Manan Point 2012](#) on September 8, 2012

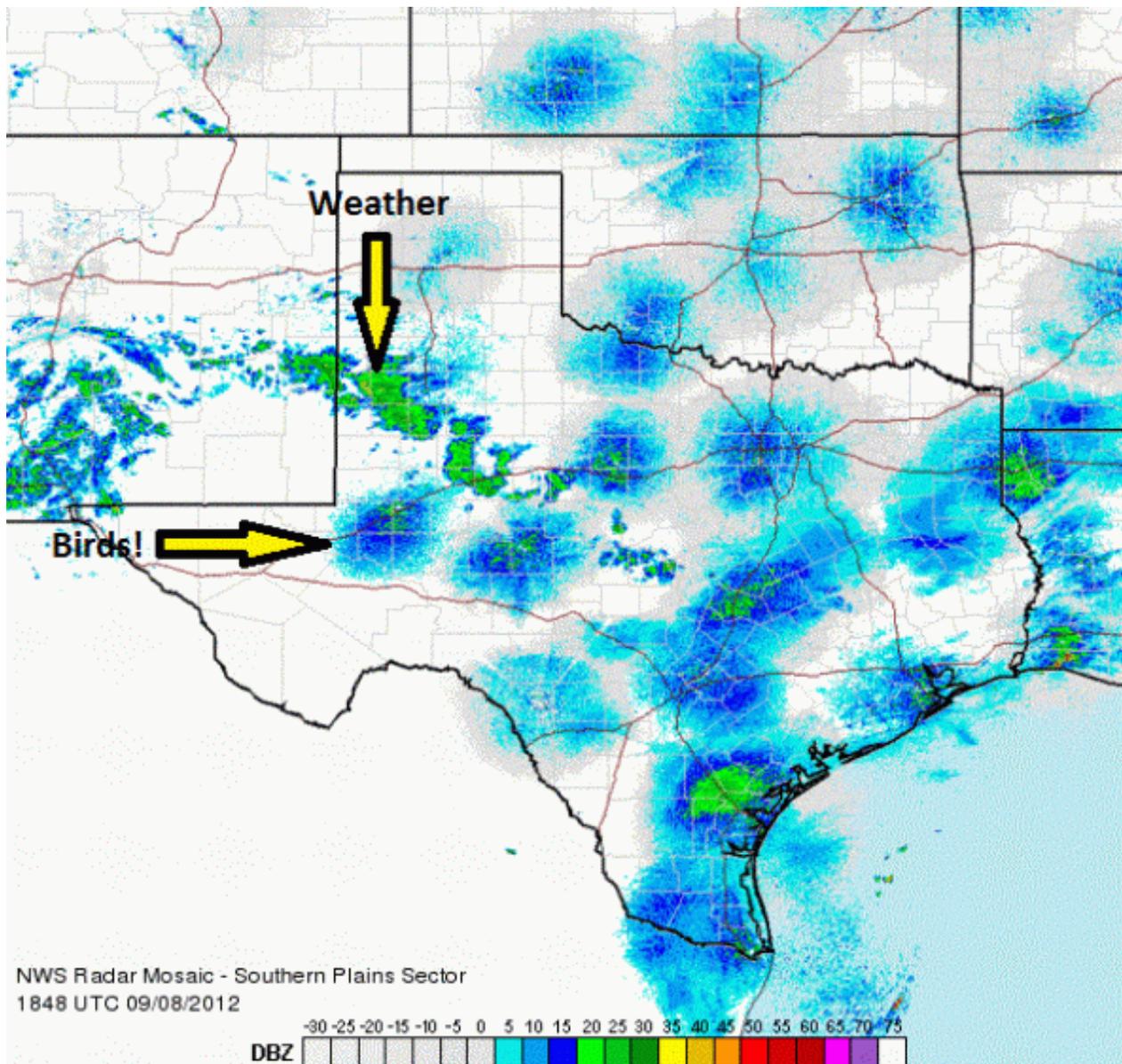
Weather plays a dominant role in bird migration, and to a great degree dictates when birds will move en masse to the south or north, depending upon the season. Since the last few days here at the refuge have been dominated by south winds and fog, we have not seen much migratory activity, given that birds moving south will tend to avoid these exhausting conditions. The promise of a fast approaching cold-front, however, gives us reason to be optimistic. Check out the radar signature for the northeast taken from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's website this afternoon:



No doubt you can make out the turbulent area in this image, but what isn't visible in this frame and what follows the frontal boundary are northern winds – perfect if you are a bird in need of a 'push' to the south! Hopefully this will translate in to some new arrivals over the next few days, as the front passes over us.

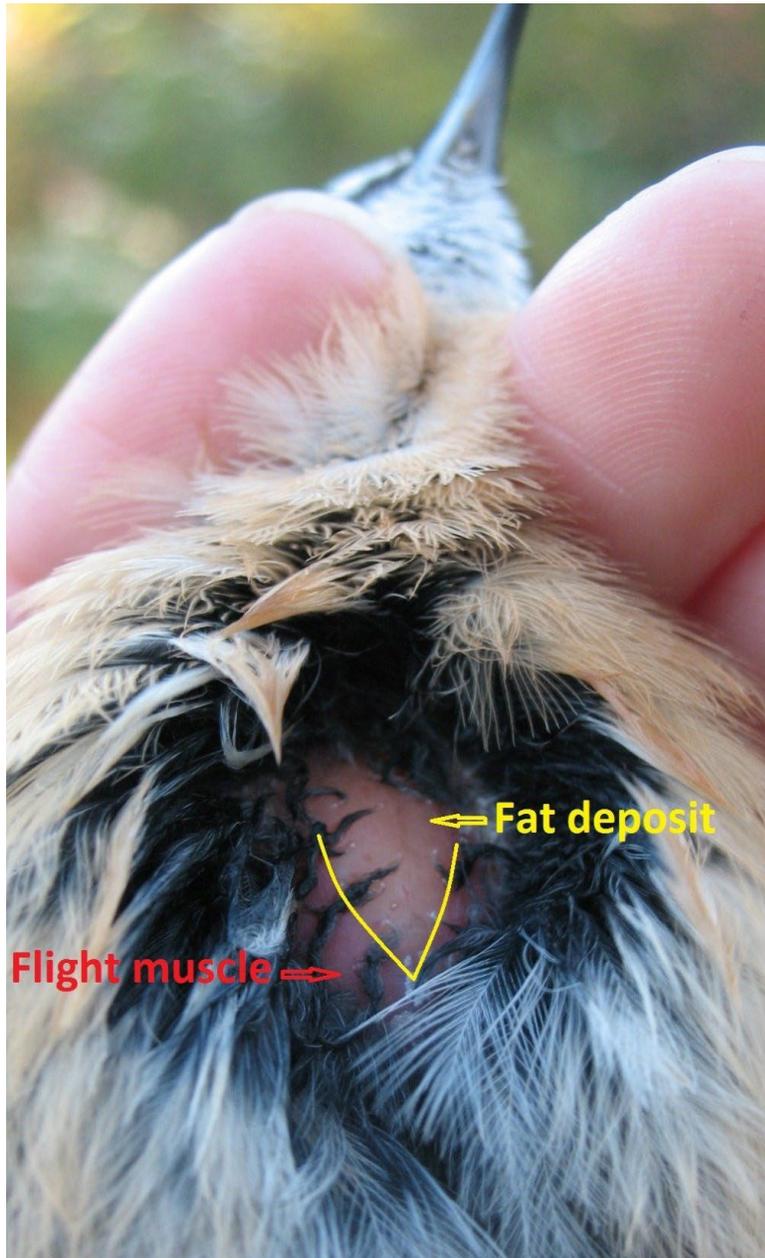
It is also worth noting that large-scale movements of birds show up on weather radar, so the next time you are checking your local weather have a look at the radar signature for your area. Where rain and

cloud regularly appear as haphazard or curvilinear signatures, bird movement shows up as pixelated circles:



See <http://virtual.clemson.edu/groups/birdrad/COMMENT.HTM> for a more thorough treatment of radar ornithology. Very interesting stuff!

In our previous post we discussed the amazing distances some birds cover during migration, which begs the question, just how do they do it? In large part (aside from favorable weather conditions) it comes down to burning fat. Birds moving great distances will become 'hyperphagic', which means they will eat like a superbowl fan on Sunday! But instead of sleeping off the largesse of calories on the couch, they utilize that energy to power their epic flights south. Here is a photo of a Red-breasted Nuthatch with a deposit of fat in the furcular hollow (basically the space between the collar bones on you and I). Hopefully you can see the contrast between the red flight muscles surrounding the yellow fat deposit.



Finding abundant resources are a migrating bird's stock-in-trade, and here at the refuge we are fortunate to have a large crop of blueberries at their peak, which a number of staging Whimbrels have been fattening-up on. Whimbrels are a large shorebird whose winter range includes both coasts from the southern U.S down through South America. Incredibly, this species has recently been found to successfully navigate their way through tropical storms and even hurricanes during their southbound flights over the Atlantic. Though we do not band these birds, we still maintain records of their presence as a corollary to the banding effort.





We never take for granted our beautiful surroundings. Petit Manan Point is part of the Maine Coastal Islands National Wildlife Refuge complex that includes more than 8,000 acres of coastline and offshore islands. Here Jeff samples a portion of this incredible area while scouting for Northern Gannets.



Petit Manan Point: Of Warblers and Porcupine

Posted in [Passerine Migration](#), [Petit Manan Point 2012](#) on September 5, 2012

Any day you find yourself working with birds is a good day, and what we learn from the birds we band can really help put life in perspective. Pictured below is the third Blackpoll Warbler we have banded thus far, and it is a particularly notable wood-warbler in that it engages in a mammoth fall migration that can find individuals traversing the open Atlantic on their way to South American wintering grounds. Keep in mind these are songbirds, and are unable to alight on the open ocean for a rest as are waterfowl, so they must travel nonstop on a flight that can be up to 3000 kilometres long. This has been likened to a human running 4-minute miles for 80 hours! The challenges these little songbirds surmount in their annual life-cycle are truly mind-boggling.





Map courtesy of www.borealbirds.org

The aptly named Yellow Warbler is an early fall migrant, with movement to the south typically peaking in early August, so we were pleasantly surprised to find this adult male in our nets on September 3rd.



Another warbler whose name needs no explanation is the Black-throated Blue Warbler. These gems of the eastern forests are on their way to the Bahamas and Greater Antilles for the winter. Pictured here is a young male who hatched-out from an egg this past summer.



We can tell he is a young bird due to the differences in the wing feathers denoted below. Adult birds will show no difference between these feathers since they undergo a more extensive molt than their hatch-year counterparts.



A warbler whose name does require some explanation is the Magnolia Warbler. These birds typically nest in dense coniferous forests, not magnolias, but the first specimen was collected from a magnolia tree and the name has remained. Pictured below is a male in non-breeding or 'basic' plumage.



We would be remiss if we did not include a photo of a very common denizen here at the refuge...we have seen quite a number of different individuals, typically out foraging at dawn and dusk. This large individual was spotted toward the south end of the point, and was given a wide berth!



Porcupine!

Cross Island: How to Catch Birds 101

Posted in [Cross Island 2012](#), [Passerine Migration](#) on September 2, 2012

People often ask us, how do you catch birds? Do you chase them with butterfly nets? Do you pounce on them? No, we catch them with using stationary nets called mist nets.



We keep our nets open 6 hrs, 7 days per week and are checked periodically. They are spread between three habitat types: forest, coastal scrub, and forest/scrub edge. During this time, we hope birds will fly into our nets which are hard to see when they're open. That's why they're called mist nets!

Once the birds fly into the nets, we are able to extract them (very carefully) and bring them back to the banding station. Birds are kept in fabric bags until they arrive at the banding station where we identify the species, band and age them, and take several morphological measurements. Then we say good luck and release them!



Kristina sizing a red-breasted nuthatch's leg before banding.

Our bird of the week is...the American Redstart!



Petit Manan Point Banding Update

Posted in [Passerine Migration](#), [Petit Manan Point 2012](#) on September 1, 2012

September welcomed us with sustained north winds as a cold-front passed through, and we saw a moderate spike in our capture rate today with 68 birds processed. The last few days of August were characterized by southwest winds which tend to suppress fall migration, so it was little surprise that we noticed more bird activity while opening nets this morning than we have in a number of days.

The third most common bird banded here at Petit Manan Point in the last two weeks has been the American Redstart (Common Yellowthroat & Trail's Flycatcher being the first and second, respectively), another of the wood warblers found throughout the U.S. and Canada. We caught a good number early on (70), and then noticed a drop in numbers over the past week until today when we caught 10 more – it appears as though this pulse of redstarts came in on the winds last night as none of them had previously been banded. Adult males are a striking black and orange, but they do not attain this plumage until they are about a year old. Pictured below are an adult male and first-year male.



Black-and-White Warblers are another striking warbler that breed throughout the boreal regions of Canada and much of the eastern United States. These warblers are somewhat unusual in that while foraging they often creep along tree trunks in a fashion similar to nuthatches.



Most of the birds we have banded thus far (of all species) have been hatch-year birds, and as noted in our previous blog post, the only way we can (usually) determine a bird's age is by having a close look at it in the hand. For example, below are two Red-eyed Vireos, an ubiquitous species found throughout eastern forests and urban areas. Can you tell which is the young bird and which is the adult? While it may be possible to do this in the field, it is certainly made easier by capturing the individual and taking as much information from it as we can. In this case the adult is – you guessed it – the red-eyed Red-eyed Vireo! As a young bird ages its eye will change from the brown you see in the top photo to the red of the adult below it.





The last week of August was notable for the influx of Monarch Butterfly around the banding station. It seems that the southwest winds also held them up, and we were lucky enough to have ample photo opportunities!





To date we have banded 667 individual birds of nearly 25 different species. Here Crew Supervisor Lauren (aka Lola) is banding a Gray Catbird.



Finally, we had noted a number of Sharp-shinned Hawks cruising around the refuge, and we were able to band this hatch-year female on August 27 as she landed in one of our nets. Most female raptors are

larger than their male counterparts, and this bird was identified as a female by her long wing which exceeded the length of that found in males.



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Archive for August, 2012

[Cross Island: Work, rest and play!](#)

Posted in [Cross Island 2012](#), [Passerine Migration](#) on August 28, 2012

Today was a rainy day. A rainy day is a day of rest...well sort of, we still had vegetation surveys to do. For today's post we just wanted to share some pictures. Enjoy!



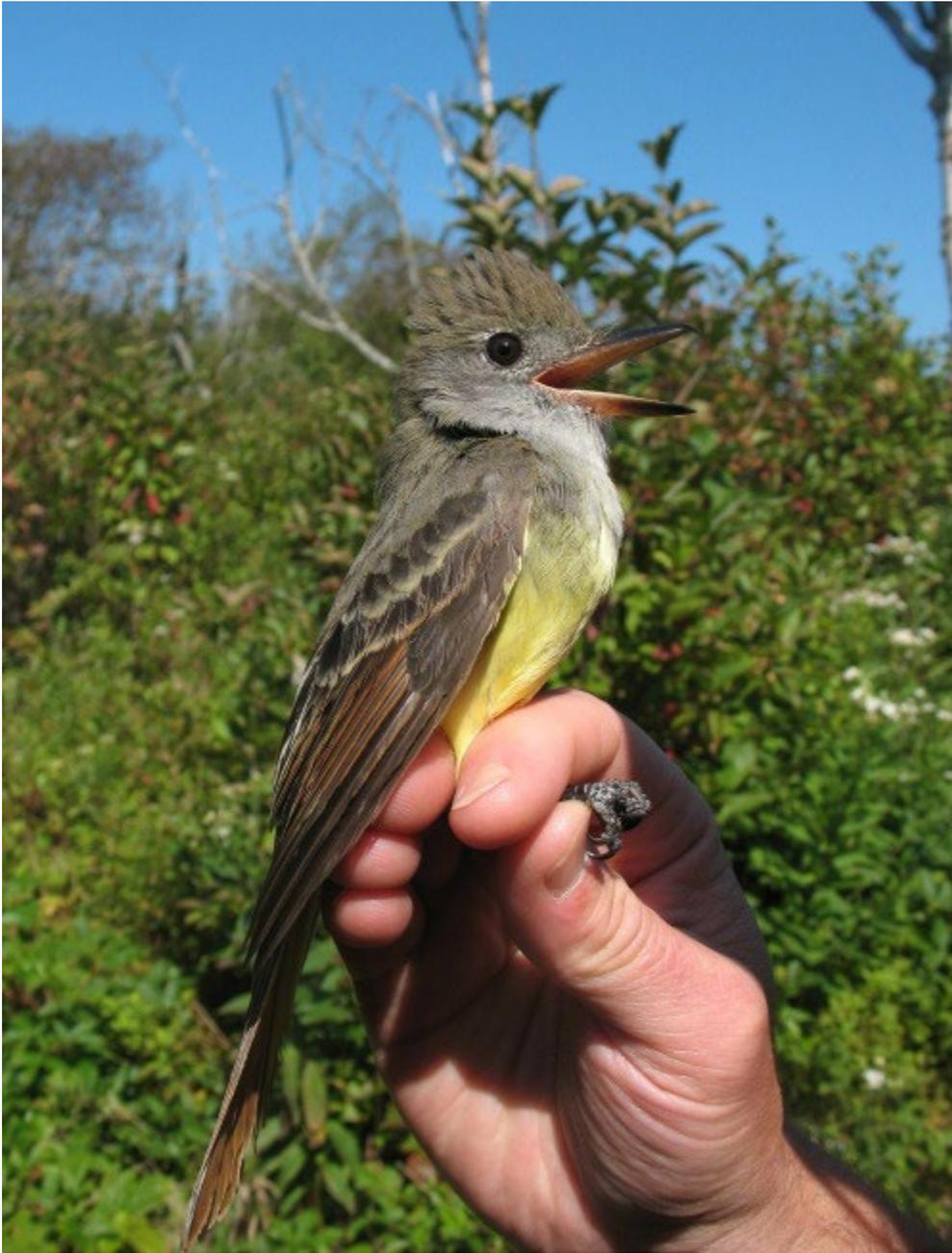
Fall Migration from Petit Manan Point

Posted in Passerine Migration on August 28, 2012

Here at the Petit Manan Point National Wildlife Refuge bird banding station <http://goo.gl/maps/bxrYB> we are very excited to have just begun our third season of migratory landbird monitoring. Since 2010 the station has banded over 5,000 individual birds of 75 different species, most of which are making their annual fall journey southward to warmer climates and more abundant food resources. The focus of this research is to glean as much information as we can from the birds – to describe demographic trends, inform habitat management decisions and to generally ‘take the pulse’ of the overall health of our landbird species. Though there are numerous monitoring methods available, banding provides managers, scientists and the public with specific information that can only come from a bird in the hand. For example, banding birds allows us to find out what age the individual is, what sex it is, and its physiological condition, among other things. As with any federally monitored research on wild animals, *the safety of each bird is the most important factor*, and to that end we minimize the handling of each individual to ensure they are released in a timely manner to go about their business.

This year we were able to start our banding effort on August 17 (a little earlier than in years past), and we were rewarded with a good number of flycatchers. Flycatchers typically depart the breeding grounds a little earlier than many species, as insect abundance starts to wane with the onset of fall. Pictured here is a Traill’s Flycatcher (above) and a Great-crested Flycatcher below it.





Note the large, spade-shaped bills and 'hairs' at the sides of each (known as rictal bristles) which aid these birds in their high-speed aerial pursuit of insects. It is common to hear their bill loudly 'snap' shut when observing one actively flycatching, even from some distance.

Certainly the most common bird banded since the 17th was, appropriately enough, the Common Yellowthroat. These active little warblers are found throughout the continent, and typically associate with wet, shrubby or marshy habitat. Given the amount of both shrubby and wet habitat here at the point, it is no surprise to see so many of these! Pictured here is a male, evidenced by the black face mask which is absent in females.



Note the 'pin' feathers at the edge of the wing – this male is actively molting, and when completed he will be heading south to the tropics, or perhaps even a shorter distance to the southern U.S. Molt is required to renew the feathers as they wear-out over the year, and this is particularly true for a species like the yellowthroat that spends most of its time 'skulking' through thick vegetation.

An additional bonus for our early start has been the number of wood warblers that have yet to leave for greener pastures. Below is a young male Northern Parula, with a fresh feather coat. Parula's are known to breed here at the point, and are fond of wet, coniferous-dominated woods.



Well, that is all for now, but stay tuned...migration is underway and we expect some incredible birds to grace us with their presence!

Cross Island: Our first week!

Posted in [Cross Island 2012](#), [Passerine Migration](#) on August 26, 2012

Greetings from Cross Island National Wildlife Refuge! We are the fall bird banding crew from the University of Maine. We are here to establish a study site and monitor bird and bat migration. Data will be used to assess the importance of the relative location and habitat characteristics of migratory species, as well as allow researchers to track any changes in migration due to yearly and future climate change.

But, before we get caught up in all the excitement of banding birds and exploring Cross Island, let us tell you bit about us.



Hello! My name is Xeronimo Castañeda. I am from Menlo Park, California. This is my first journey out to the east coast and I am stoked to band and see as many birds as I can. I graduated from CSU Monterey Bay with a B.S. in Marine and Coastal Ecology. The first time I realized my interest in birds was when I was working as a kayak tour guide naturalist in central coastal California. Soon after, I worked my first bird job with PRBO Conservation Science, I interned as a nest searcher. I stayed with them for just over a year and then decided to migrate east to explore and check out all these cool birds I've heard so much about. After this stint I may head back to California or follow the birds south for the winter. By the way I could eat pizza every day and currently my favorite bird is the Northern Parula.



Howdy! My name is Mary Beth Benton. I am from New Richmond, Ohio and a recent graduate of Ohio State University. My first year bird banding was in South Eastern Arizona with BLM on the San Pedro River National Conservation Area. I then returned to Ohio State to target color band and blood sample Acadian Flycatchers and Northern Cardinals. I am pumped to be passive banding birds migrating down the east coast! One of the best parts of the job is seeing life species in the hand. Currently, my favorite birds are the Spruce Grouse and Yellow-breasted Chat, and I love ice cream!



Hey, Kristina Giano here! I'm from Southington, Connecticut. I graduated from the University of Connecticut with a B.S. in Natural Resources concentrating in wildlife conservation and from the University of Basel, Switzerland with an M.Sc. in Ecology studying habitat partitioning and activity patterns in viperine and dice snakes. This past summer, I worked for the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection as a marsh bird surveyor. I've also worked with common and roseate terns and black bears. I've always been a bird nerd and I'm wicked excited for fall migration this year! My favorite bird is a tie between the marsh wren and the saltmarsh sparrow. Food wise, my all-time favorite is everything bagels.

Thanks to Captain Andy, we arrived safely to Cross Island on a warm and rainy Thursday morning, August 15th. We loaded all of our gear and food from a charter boat onto a little dingy and putted our way out to the dock. The boat house was the first building we approached and we could see that it was well worn and weathered from a life resting on the coast of Maine. About 40 meters past was our new home! A two story coast guard rescue house now used to host researchers, us!

We were excited and ready to get to work, but the rain kept us captive, except for Mary Beth, for the remainder of the day. Fortunately the rain gave way the following day and we were up early to get started preparing the banding site. The site is along a trail that leaves from behind the house and meanders through the forest out to a rocky beach. About half way down and at the edge of the forest we set up our banding station. Throughout the surrounding habitat we set up our array of nets.

The habitat types are scrub, forest and edge. Currently we are only running eight nets, we ran out of rope to string them up. Capt. Andy will be resupplying us tomorrow! Regardless of that, bird activity has been fairly consistent and we have had some good captures.

To date, eight days of banding with eight nets, we have caught 147 birds. Our most frequently caught bird is the golden-crowned kinglet at 38 captures. Our species count is at 28! Not bad for running only eight nets.

Some highlights for us are:

Yellow-breasted Chat, Northern Parula, Ovenbird, Northern Waterthrush, Mourning Warbler, Red-Eyed Vireo, Brown Creeper, Yellow-bellied Flycatcher...but really they are all cool.

Bird of the week is the GOLDEN-CROWNED KINGLET!



Peace, until next time!

Life in an Egg Shell: Petit Manan Island Perspective

Posted in [Petit Manan 2012](#) on August 5, 2012



Dodder is a relatively new invasive plant to Petit Manan which is steadily getting worse year after year.

From the beginning of May to the beginning of August, researchers gather together to collect data of various kinds on selected species. In our case, those species include Terns (Common, Arctic and Roseate), Alcids (Atlantic Puffins, Black Guillemots and Razorbills), Common Eiders and Storm Petrels.

Days on the islands vary depending on weather and at what stage the birds are at. At the beginning of the season, it was heavy lifting getting as much done before the arrival of the birds. It is important to provide adequate habitat for nesting. This was done by removing invasive and aggressive plants such as bittersweet nightshade, dodder and beach pea. To learn about invasive plant removal, visit the link below. (<https://mainecoastal-islands.wordpress.com/2012/05/29/petit-manan-making-space-for-all-the-avian-inhabitants/>)



Marine debris which has been collected from the shores of Petit Manan.

This also included an intense island-wide cleanup of marine debris that had accumulated after the harsh winter storms of the North Atlantic. To learn more about marine debris clean up visit this link.

(<https://mainecoastal-islands.wordpress.com/2012/08/01/keeping-the-shores-of-petit-manan-clear-of-marine-debris/>)



The lighthouse of Petit Manan is the second tallest in Maine.

Throughout the season, daily activities performed by the island researchers included: tower count where we climb up to the top of the lighthouse to count the number of alcid species seen at 7am and 5pm every day; predator control, where we do our best to prevent other species from preying upon the endangered species on the island; reading bands on Arctic Terns and Adult Atlantic Puffins as well as constant data entry.



A Common Tern that was banded in Argentina.

Once the birds arrived, it was our job to collect the data required of us while doing our best to try not to disturb them. When the weather allowed it, we marked flags and popsicle sticks so we could calculate the species ratio on the island. However, in the first few weeks of their arrival, mother nature was not in their favor. During this time, there was a storm that hit Maine and washed away probably hundreds of eggs that had been laid on the rocky shore including tern as well as puffin eggs. Many of those terns laid more eggs but the puffins did not. While still possessing the opportunity, we trapped and banded the terns so that they can be resighted in the future. This process included replacing their delicate eggs with fake wooden ones so that when the trap was set off the eggs could be safely returned, quickly transporting the birds so they could get appropriately banded and set free to return to their eggs. As the time neared for the incubated eggs to hatch we constructed what we like to call play pens for the young chicks. This would enable us to monitor the progress of the chicks as they grow.

(<https://mainecoastalands.wordpress.com/2012/07/03/monitoring-tern-productivity-on-petit-manan/>)



An Arctic Tern chick from one of my provisioning nests; the box in the corner is the blind I would sit in for 3 hours a day for at least 12 hours a week.

Time was running out before the arrival of our first chicks and we still had to conduct our two day island census to obtain the number of birds we had on the island.

[\(https://mainecoastalands.wordpress.com/2012/06/24/the-numbers-are-in-petit-manan-island-census/\)](https://mainecoastalands.wordpress.com/2012/06/24/the-numbers-are-in-petit-manan-island-census/)

Once Census was finished, it seemed things would calm down; or not. In fact, things only got more hectic. It was finally time for us to welcome the chicks and really start to dive into our research. Our normal routine started to expand to include provisioning, which is a three hour stint in a small blind where we record information about the type of fish species being fed to the A, B or C chick. Before we could start recording our information, we had to select a blind that we would focus on and then decide which 5-7 nests would be observed for the remainder of the season. To learn about how the blinds were constructed, visit this link. (<https://mainecoastalands.wordpress.com/2012/05/19/petit-manan-its-easier-to-sea-birds-blind-2/>)



Jarrett, a temporary intern who was grubbing for puffins in a sod burrow.

Not only did our time get sucked up by provisioning but we also had to let our hands dive into the granite and sod burrows of the island alcids to check for chicks and assess nest productivity.

Island living certainly has its ups and downs but the small sacrifices of going without running water or grocery stores seem to pale in comparison to the visual rewards that we receive while observing thousands of birds and a rolling blue sea. Each of us came from different backgrounds and interests that eventually led us to work with these amazing birds. It has been a great season out here on Petit Manan and we have been gifted the opportunity to be involved with this flourishing seabird colony on a beautiful island off the coast of Maine.

[Keeping the shores of Petit Manan clear of Marine Debris](#)

Posted in [Petit Manan 2012](#) on August 1, 2012

Petit Manan is an island that thousands of birds, representing a dozen species, call home during their breeding season. Four researchers also call this island home for three months. Our days are filled with avian amazement and we are fastidious with our observations, monitoring and recordkeeping.

Beyond our responsibilities to protect and monitor a thriving seabird colony, we are also stewards to this incredible island. Stewardship can take many forms but one of the ways in which it is displayed during our field season is the collection of marine debris.



After collecting debris from the south side of the island, Jordan carries it to the boat ramp on the north end.

Collecting marine debris from the shoreline of Petit Manan Island was one of our stewardship projects. We collected 15 bags of trash as well as hundreds of broken buoys.

We also collected over 50 lobster traps. With the help of Refuge staff and Student Conservation Association interns we loaded all of the debris onto a boat back to the mainland. It is important to keep our oceans and shores free of this litter. Marine mammals and seabirds can easily get entangled in derelict fishing gear or mistakenly ingest flotsam such as floating plastics.



Sara, Jordan and Chris loading the broken lobster traps onto the boat



Thank you to the many hands that helped gather and load all of the marine debris. Great Work!!

Archive for July, 2012

And That's a Wrap – EBI

Posted in [Eastern Brother's Island 2012](#) on July 31, 2012



Alfonso and Bernadette ready to leave their burrow any day now.

For seabirds in the Gulf of Maine, or at least for the researchers who work with them, the coming of August brings the end of another season and another summer. While you may be enjoying the beach or floating in your pool at home, seabirds are going through one of the most important events of the summer: the fledging of their chicks. For months now these parent birds have invested enormous amounts of time and energy into raising young and passing on their genes, and now is when all of that expenditure culminates, hopefully, into wonderful success when the chicks are finally old enough to leave the nest. For most birds, “fledging” technically refers to the age when chicks are old enough to fly, and for guillemots this means the chicks are at least 33 days old.



Flight feathers of a juvenile guillemot

That means their parents have been feeding and looking after their growing chicks for over a month now – not to mention the month of incubation before they even hatched – the parents themselves have lost weight from the strain of raising young while their chicks have demanded ever more from them. On July 27 and 28 Eastern Brother’s Island celebrated its first fledged chicks of the season, Alfonso and Bernadette. They no longer resemble their smaller, fuzzy black peers but have donned a beautifully speckled black and white plumage that will aid them as juveniles at sea.



Alfonso’s beautiful juvenile plumage

Unlike their relatives, the razorbill, guillemot chicks fledge independently, usually at night, when they leave the comfort of their granite burrows and fly/hop down to the water’s edge. Once in the water, they can dive immediately and begin to forage and fend for themselves. They float alone on the ocean for their first winter, going where the currents carry them, learning the ropes of how to be an adult seabird. A fledged chick means a successful parent (and a happy researcher); now the fate of their young is out of our hands and rests in the hands of the Ocean. We wish you well, little guillemots!

– Julia



If only they knew we were just trying to help! This is just the kind of spunk they need to survive, we happily let them test their strength on us.

A Smattering of Updates – EBI

Posted in [Eastern Brother's Island 2012](#), tagged [Black Guillemot](#), [chick](#), [Common Tern](#), [eastern brothers island](#), [EBI](#), [Leach's Storm-petrel](#), [Reggie](#), [Savannah Sparrow](#) on July 25, 2012

Hello once again from the Brothers! I am sure many of you are wondering how Reggie is doing with his harem of decoys. Well exciting news; the other day Reg was spotted presenting a nice big fish to a real live lady tern! Unfortunately having spent so long with the decoys Reg forgot his manners and was a little too insistent our new lady tern take his fish. She flew off, but not to worry, she was back the next day so Reg has an opportunity to try again.



An example of a chick who had a little too much rock gunnel.

In the area of guillemot chick checks we have chicks from two days old weighing in at 37g to Alfonso a tubby 27 day old chick at 345g. There is quite a size difference between some of our chicks which their parents do not seem to take that into account. In taking measurements on our two day old chicks we found that half of the size of the chick could be accounted for by its crop that was stuffed full of delicious nutritious rock gunnel. The poor chick looked as though he wished he would have stopped eating rock gunnel long before he had. We all feel for you little chick!



A Leach's storm petrel, presented here as a popsicle bird.

We at the Brothers are very pleased to announce that we have a Leach's storm petrel who has decided to take up residence on Western Brothers. The Leach's Storm Petrel is nocturnal. We have heard them calling several times during the night but until now we have not been able to find if they have actually been nesting here. Our petrel was incubating a single egg deep inside a burrow of loose dirt. Storm petrel's have a very distinctive odor which you may be able to smell at the entrance of the burrow if it is active. The odor is not entirely unpleasant as they smell very much like old books.

One last update for you. We have finally found some young Savannah sparrows. We had known that they were breeding here but we had not been able to find a successful nest until now. As you can see at this age they are almost perfect spheres with over-sized mouths. Adorable!



Savannah sparrow sphere with giant mouth.

Ship Island's First Fabulous Fledgers

Posted in [Ship Island 2012](#), tagged [Common Terns](#), [Fledglings](#), [Ship Island](#), [Tern chicks](#) on July 23, 2012

It's only been a few short weeks, but our first few tern chicks are already taking to the sky. Although adult terns may make flying seem effortless, a chick has a lot to do and learn before its first flight.

First off, you can't fly without feathers. Tern chicks are hatched covered in fluffy down. While these soft feathers may be warm and provide excellent camouflage, they aren't very aerodynamic. Over the weeks, our tern chicks have been going from this:



To this:



To this:



Their wings will grow from less than 20mm long to almost 200mm, mostly by adding long sturdy flight feathers. Their adult wingspan will be close to two and a half feet!

The chicks also grow tail feathers, but they won't get the long, pointed streamers that mark an adult tern. As a result, you can spot a fledgling by the stubby-looking tail, even if you can't see the unique color patterns on its back.

All these new feathers need to be kept clean and tidy, so soon-to-be fledglings spend a lot of time preening:



The next step is to build up muscle. Flying is hard work and for the first part of its life, a tern chick doesn't use its wings for much. To make up for this, tern chicks flap even before their wings are fully grown.



And of course, before a strenuous workout, it's always good to do a bit of stretching:



No, not all tern chicks are green. This chick is part of a provisioning study, so he's been color marked.

Once all their feathers come in, tern chicks start working extra hard to get airborne. It's actually quite common to see a chick's weight drop significantly just before it fledges.



It's not uncommon to see them taking naps, either. Hey, all that flapping is exhausting!

Finally, for some chicks it might take a little extra encouragement. This fledgling wandered onto a neighbor's territory and finally got airborne as he was being chased away.



While flying is a big step, these chicks still have a lot of growing up to do. Fledglings must master the delicate art of landing, figure out how to fly with a flock, and learn to catch their own food. In the mean time they can be seen begging food from their parents and making cautious practice dives into the water.



Feed me! Feed me! Feed me!

Like the terns, we've only got a short amount of time left on the island, but I've got a post or two more up my sleeve before we say farewell from Ship Island.

-Amy

The Elusive Roseate Tern of Petit Manan Island

Posted in [Petit Manan 2012](#), tagged [island living](#), [Petit Manan Island](#), [roseate terns](#), [Tern chicks](#) on July 18, 2012



The infamous Roseate Tern!

There are currently four colonies with a total of 151 breeding pairs in the state of Maine. On Petit Manan alone, it's been about a year since the last roseate tern was sighted and even longer since they last successfully nested.



A Roseate tern nest sharing a space with a Puffin egg.

Roseate terns have either a full black or mostly black bill, a whiter coloration and considerably longer tail feathers than wing feathers in comparison to the arctic and common terns. They tend to nest along the vegetation line close to rocks of the intertidal zone. If not careful, too much activity could cause them to abandon their nests considering their sensitivity to human presence.

This year, we have two confirmed nesting pairs and another possible sighting further along the intertidal. The two nesting pairs each have two healthy chicks which we hope will fledge successfully. Their chicks have black legs and dark mottled down with fine black spots as opposed to the common and arctic tern chicks which usually have orange or pink legs with brighter down and black spots.



A Roseate Tern chick being banded by our island supervisor Christa.



An Arctic Tern chick being banded by my coworker Jordan.

Hopefully this means more nesting Roseate terns on Petit Manan island in years to come.

~Brittany



Can you identify which of these birds are Roseate Terns? I'll give you one hint, there are three in this picture.

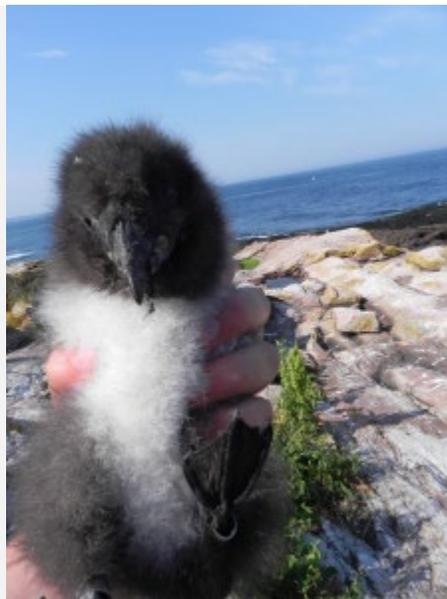
Alcid Burrow Checks on Petit Manan

Posted in [Petit Manan 2012](#), tagged [Atlantic Puffin](#), [Black Guillemot](#), [burrow checks](#), [chick](#), [Petit Manan](#), [Puffins](#), [razorbill](#) on July 16, 2012



A black guillemot chick grubbed from underneath the boardwalk

One of our most exciting endeavors on this lovely seabird island is monitoring the Alcid burrows around the perimeter of the island. Alcidae is a family of seabirds that includes Atlantic Puffins, Razorbills, and Black Guillemots, all of which breed here on Petit Manan. Unlike the terns that lay their eggs on the exposed ground, each of these species raise their chicks in a protective burrow. Razorbills and puffins always have one egg, while guillemots often have two.



Puffin chick!

Usually burrows are in the crevices between the pink granite rocks that border the island, but sometimes our Alcids choose some unconventional sites, like in the foundation of a fallen building, or under the boardwalk that stretches the length of the island from the boathouse to the lighthouse. In addition to rock burrows, puffins are able to dig burrows in the sod that can be over 6 feet long! Because Petit Manan is a tiny island with an incredible number of breeding birds, we also provide artificial burrows made from wooden boxes or overturned plastic buckets with tubes attached to the entrance so that the birds can crawl into a protected space like they would in their granite or sod burrows.

Alcids establish burrows in early May, around the time we arrive on the island. At the beginning of the season, once the birds have laid eggs, we do a survey of the burrows to determine which ones are active, peering in but trying not to disturb the birds while they are incubating. Later in the season (now!), once most of the chicks have hatched, we do another thorough investigation during which we “grub” the puffin, guillemot, and razorbill chicks and adults.



Applying metal identification bands to an adult puffin's legs

We remove them from their burrows so that we can put small metal identification bands around their legs, each with unique number/letter combination so that we can resight individuals later and determine how often they return to the island and what other locations they might be visiting year-to-year. We also weigh chicks now and again at the end of the season to monitor their growth. Many of the puffin and guillemot chicks won't fledge until after we've left the island in the middle of August.



Linda Welch (lead biologist) and Jordan (field tech) grubbing a razorbill chick.

“Grubbing” an Alcid can be quite a surprising experience, as it often involves reaching blindly into a dark, slimy crevice and feeling around until you find a fluffy little chick... or until your fingers meet the sharp vice grip of an adult puffin’s powerful bill!

So far this season we’ve noticed that the number of breeding guillemots on the island is on the rise, but there seem to be fewer breeding puffins this year than in years past. We have one confirmed Razorbill chick, and two more possible sites. We’ll keep you posted as we collect and analyze more data about our awesome Alcids!



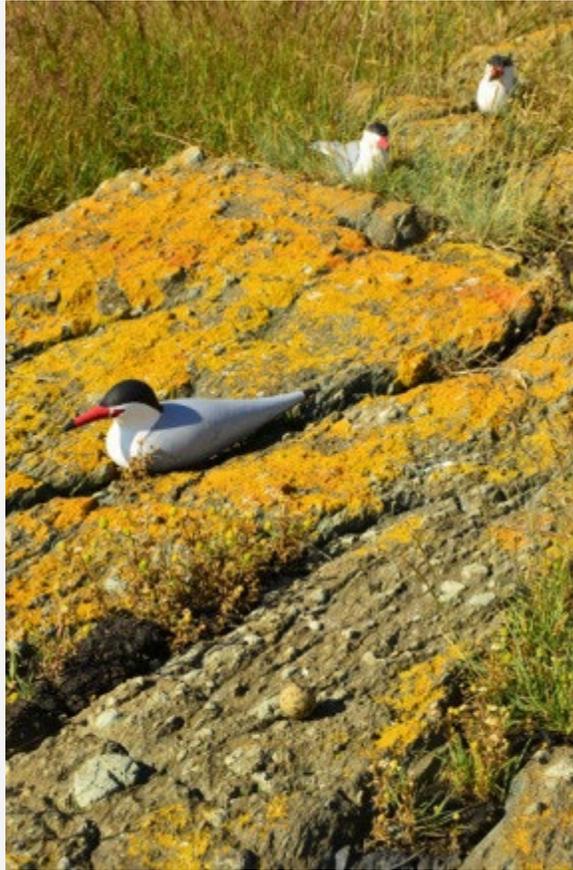
Linda with a freshly grubbed razorbill chick that is nearly ready to fledge. While puffin chicks take up to 50 days to fledge, razorbills are ready to go in only 16-20 days!



When a razorbill chick is ready to fledge, its dad leads it out of the burrow under cover of night and takes it to the ocean.

Taking a “Tern” for the Better at the Brothers – EBI

Posted in [Eastern Brother's Island 2012](#), tagged [chick](#), [Common Tern](#), [eastern brothers island](#), [EBI](#), [Guillemot](#) on July 11, 2012



Tern egg on the rocks with decoys behind it

Things are looking up for the seabirds at the Brother’s Islands lately! Events have taken a Tern for the better with the arrival of a new Common Tern pair and their egg. For the past several days now a new pair of terns have taken up residence in the decoy area with our old standby, Reginald McArthur, the tern who has lived here alone for the past several years now.



Tern Egg laying on the rocks

He seems as happy as we are to have new friends to fish, play, and preen with as the three companions glide around the decoys together calling and circling. All this activity attracted yet another, fourth, tern to the area this morning and it was seen interacting with the others; we hope it will reTern and bring its friends! No one has paid much attention to the egg that was laid on the rocks but we continue to check and see if it has been rolled, an indication that it is being incubated by the parents. So far, it doesn't look active, but just having the parents around is a huge step in the right direction!



Although you can't see them, there are 4 Terns, 1 Razorbill, and 3 Least Sandpipers in this view from the blind!

In other news, Razorbill numbers have been increasing in the past few days as we have seen as many as 200+ flying in small flocks across the water. Several, presumably young birds looking for a nesting site, have visited the islands in the past few days, circling and flying very close to it. One razorbill came a mere 3 inches from landing in one of the decoy areas this morning before it veered off to rest in the water close to shore. He was back at it again during lunchtime as we were out doing our "chick checks."

Speaking of chicks, the little black fuzz balls are continuing to thrive and grow, some have even begun to sprout real feathers and are looking more like gangly teenagers than young chicks now. It's amazing how fast they grow, gaining sometimes over 1/3 of their body weight every 2 days. We now have 36 chicks in our productivity burrows with more hatching every day. All in all things are looking up for the Brother's Islands! Here's to hoping that the next few weeks continue to bring good news. Keep your fingers crossed!

- Julia



A pair of younger chicks, just because they are so cute! Photo by Wingyi.



Our oldest pair of Guillemot chicks: Alfonso and Bernadette, 16 and 17 days old.

Monitoring Tern Productivity on Petit Manan

Posted in [Petit Manan 2012](#), [Uncategorized](#) on July 3, 2012



A productivity plot on the west side of the island



Tern chick!

One of the important questions that the research team on Petit Manan tries to answer each season is what the growth and survival rates are of the tern chicks on the island. There are over 1,900 tern nests on almost every surface of the island—the rocky shoreline, in amongst the vegetation, and even on the lawn around the light keepers' house that serves as our research station. Each nest usually contains between one and three chicks.



two eggs on the granite berm

Up to three chicks times almost two thousand nests... that's an impossible number of chicks to keep track of! In order to keep our monitoring effort reasonable, and to reduce the impacts of our presence in the colony, each year we set up roughly 10-12 productivity plots. These are basically tern playpens, each of which contains 5-15 nests. The temporary barrier that we set up at each prod plot allows us to consistently monitor a subpopulation that will be representative of the whole island.



Christa, Brittany, and Dave at a productivity plot

Every day we record the number of eggs, pips (eggs that have begun to hatch), and chicks we have in each nest at every productivity plot. We also weigh each chick and put a metal identification band around one of their legs so that they can be resighted and identified for the rest of their lives.



a pipped egg

We try to check each plot as quickly and efficiently as possible so that we don't stress the parent terns for very long, but it can be quite a challenge because tern chicks are really good at hiding!



a newly hatched chick and egg

The data that we collect about the chicks' growth and survival, along with information that we are gathering about the frequency and species of fish feedings (provisioning) will help us paint a more complete picture of the success of Petit Manan's tern colony. We'll have more information about provisioning in an upcoming blog, so keep checking in!

Archive for June, 2012

The Tiny Terns Take Over

Posted in [Ship Island 2012](#), tagged [chicks](#), [Ship Island](#), [Tern chicks](#), [Terns](#) on June 28, 2012

And now what we've all been waiting for (at all of us on Ship Island): tern chicks!



Hooray for tern chicks!

After a little more than three weeks of incubation, the first tern nest we sighted here on Ship became home to the first chick of 2012. This chick, affectionately nicknamed Fabio, was quickly followed by an as-yet-unnamed sibling about a day later. By the time the week was, out, we had chicks hatching out all over the colony



Fabio, on his hatching day

So what's life like for a tern chick on Ship Island? Well, it begins as a ball of wet feathers and oversized pink feet. Usually, terns lay two or three eggs in a clutch, each about a day apart. As a result, the chicks tend to hatch about a day apart. This small difference in age is often enough for the first-hatched (known as the A Chick) to be noticeably larger than its siblings (called the B and C chicks respectively)



A fluffy A Chick next to a newly hatched B Chick, and an unhatched C Chick

After a few hours in the sun, the chicks dry out and become balls of fluff and feet. In less than a day, they can already make their way a short into the vegetation to hide. Tern nests are very simple and don't offer a lot of shelter, so it's important for chicks to get out of the nest as soon as possible. One in the vegetation, their natural camouflage kicks in and they become very difficult to spot.



A chick conceals itself in the vegetation

With a little luck, either Jill or I will spot these adorable little fuzzballs on a walk through the colony. If their legs are large enough (and they usually are) we put a band with a unique number on one leg. These bands allow us to identify the chick so we can track its growth over the weeks. Once the chick fledge, resighting the band will hopefully help us learn about migration and nesting patterns. Terns will wear these bands all their lives



An adult tern with a band

For the next two and a half weeks, tern chicks spend their lives hiding in the vegetation and waiting for their parents to return with food. They have a lot of growing to do: a newly hatched chick weighs about 15 grams, while an adult tern will weigh as much as 145 grams. Chicks also have to grow a full set of flight feathers to replace their polka-dotted down. Fabio just reached 15 days of age, and his primaries (the long feathers at the tips of the wings) are really starting to grow! In less than a week, he should be flying around with his parents and learning to catch his own food.



Fabio sports his growing feathers

And just because I can, here's one more picture of a chick:



Until next time,

-Amy

Happy Guillemot Day!

Posted in [Eastern Brother's Island 2012](#), tagged [cake](#), [chick](#), [EBI](#), [Guillemot](#) on June 27, 2012

Hello again! As many of you may now know today, June 27th, is guillemot appreciation day. This day holds a special meaning for us on the Brother's, not just because it is the perfect excuse to eat chocolate cake, but also because three days ago we found our very first black guillemot chicks of the season.



We had a little trouble with the cake...

Guillemot eggs do not usually hatch at the same time. Even eggs in the same burrow may be a day or two apart. The chick that hatches first is referred to as the A chick and is typically larger and heavier than the B chick. As part of our routine on the Brother's we check guillemot burrows every two to three days. As the chicks are now beginning to hatch we will be measuring their wing cords and taking their weight during our checks to monitor their growth. At the end of the season these measurements will help us to determine the guillemot's productivity. Our first A chick, Albert, weighed in today at a whopping 63g! Our B chick, Bathalamue, came in at a slightly more modest 57g. In order to continue to tell the chicks apart in their burrow as they grow we must somehow mark either one or both of the chicks. At this stage a small dab of nail polish on the A chicks down does the job quite nicely. Later on we may

replace the nail polish with a more permanent metal band with an identification number around their leg so they can continue to be recognized in years to come.



Albert, looking for a fight!

Even though they are only a few days old Albert and Bathalamue have very distinctive personalities. Bathalamue is quite calm and lets us take our measurements without a fuss. Albert on the other hand is quite feisty and full of sass. From the moment we first pulled him out of the burrow he was a rage filled ball of fluff trying to snap at our fingers with his tiny black bill.

We found one new pair of chicks today and look forward to the next few weeks as still more will continue to hatch. We certainly appreciated our guillemots today and we hope you do the same!

~SK

Spotlight Species: Black Guillemots

Posted in [Petit Manan 2012](#), tagged [Black Guillemot](#), [International Guillemot Appreciation Day](#), [petit Manan National Wildlife Refuge](#) on June 27, 2012



Adult Black Guillemot foraging near shore at Petit Manan Island. We often see them carrying rock gunnel (a red eel-looking fish) in their bills.

As you glance at a calendar organizing your plans for the rest of a glorious Maine Summer, it might escape your attention that today is a very special day. Today is International Guillemot Appreciation Day!! The predominant object of our daily attention here on Petit Manan is the tern colony and with just under 2,000 nest sites this year they do keep us busy.



Guillemot parent with chick in their granite nest site

In honor of the many other avian residents that call PMI their breeding home, we are very happy to honor this internationally recognized day specifically for this alcid. Maine is the tip of their southern range, so we are the only state in the lower 48 to host them.

We have noted over 50 Black Guillemot nests here on the island and some chicks have begun to hatch.

Many mornings, during our twice daily lighthouse survey, we count more than 200 of them in the waters surrounding the island, paddling around with their bright red feet.

Happy Guillemot Appreciation day to our feathered friends here in the Gulf of Maine!



Black Guillemot Chick

The Numbers are in! Petit Manan Island Census

Posted in [Petit Manan 2012](#), tagged [GOMSWG](#), [Petit Manan](#), [seabird census](#) on June 24, 2012

During the first few weeks of the seabird field season the number of avian residents on Petit Manan is relatively low. Just two field technicians anxiously awaiting the arrival of a seabird colony. And then it happens, slowly at first but with increasing momentum, the nesting residents begin to descend from the sky until there is a frenzy of feathers everywhere you look or try to step. In order to gain an accurate estimate of such a large volume of birds we perform an annual island wide census. In order to perform that we call in reinforcements. This year we were lucky enough to gather 13 people with representatives from U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Acadia National Park, Schoodic Education and Research Center, Student Conservation Association and the University of Maine.



The census line scours the vegetation for nests of terns, eiders and laughing gulls.

In a straight (ish) line we walk shoulder to shoulder back and forth marking each nest site across the entire island.

Each step needs to be carefully calculated to avoid cryptically camouflaged eggs. The process is made even more nerve-racking by the dive-bombing terns screeching an alarm call to alert their neighbors of your intruding presence in the colony.

After two days of counting, the census numbers are in!! For the final nesting numbers of alcids (puffins, razorbills and guillemots) you will have to wait until early July, so check back.

Here are the number of nests for Petit Manan 2012:

Arctic Terns: 755

Common Terns: 1,180



Two Common terns perched on the granite rocks of Petit Manan

Common Eider: 67



Three eider ducklings found at one of the nest sites. Within 24 hours of hatching, their mother hen will take them down to the water's edge to begin their life at sea.

Laughing Gull: 650

(We also believe we have three nesting pairs of **Roseate terns**. After declining numbers and no nesting attempts last year, we remain hopeful that we might have some this season.)

Check back to see the hatching and success rates of the many Petit Manan residents. Thank you to all of you who helped with this year's census!

Citizens of Ship part II: Seabirds, Shorebirds, and Swimmers

Posted in [Ship Island 2012](#), tagged [Common Eider](#), [Cormorant](#), [Great Black Backed Gull](#), [Gulls](#), [Herring Gull](#), [Mallard](#), [Ship Island](#), [Spotted Sandpiper](#) on June 19, 2012

Hello again from Ship Island! Jill and I have been off the island for about 4 days as part of a mid-season break provided for us by the refuge staff. Now that we're back and catching up on our work, here's the second part of "Citizens of Ship Island", as promised.

In my last post, I wrote about the songbirds that call Ship Island home during the summer. This time, it's all about water birds of all kinds. While we have songbirds breeding right on the island, most of our seabirds and shorebirds are found on the three islands surround Ship: East Barge, West Barge, and Trumpet.

Take for example the Great Black-backed and Herring Gulls. Because both of these species of gulls will eat tern eggs and chicks, they aren't permitted to breed on Ship itself. Both species, however, make (usually unwelcome) appearances on Ship and have nests on both the Barges and Trumpet. Great Black-backed Gulls are one of the biggest North American gulls, with a wing span of over 6 feet while Herring Gulls are a bit smaller. Check out the photo below for a comparison.



Great Black-backed Gull on the left, Herring Gull on the right

Also nesting on Trumpet are North America's largest sea duck: the Common Eider. While the females may look like a standard brown duck, the males have flashy black and white plumage.



A handsome Common Eider male with two Common Terns on the beach of Ship Island

Most often we see these large ducks paddling around with their heads under the water before they dive down for mollusks and other invertebrates. As you can see, they are quite a bit bigger than a tern!



A male Common Eider on the left, a female on the right, and a Common Tern in the middle

Eiders are best known for the incredibly warm down they produce – the females actually line their nests with these soft feathers. Eider ducklings take to the water the same day they hatch. Females with ducklings will gather together to form crèches, made up of several females and their young, to help protect the ducklings from predators like gulls. Although eiders pose no threat to our terns, they find people a bit intimidating and so prefer to nest on Trumpet.



A female Common Eider and her ducklings

Out on West Barge, in addition to lots of Great Black-backed Gulls, we have a colony of Double-crested Cormorants. Like the eiders, the cormorants prefer to nest on human-free islands, but we see them every day in the waters around Ship.



West Barge's Double-crested Cormorant colony

They also sometimes come to shore to gather seaweed for nesting materials, like the one flying off in the picture below. The colony on West Barge seems to be doing well – we've counted about 50 cormorants on the south side of the island.



A Double-crested Cormorant flies off with some nesting material.

Not all of the water birds find us so intimidating. We have several Mallards on and around Ship, including a female with her ducklings. We usually see this fluffy gang paddling around in a swampy depression in the middle of the island.



Female Mallard paddling with her ducklings. Photo taken by Jill

Finally, we have our beloved Spotted Sandpipers. The only shorebirds that nest on Ship Island, Spotted Sandpipers are easily identified by their “teetering” behavior: as they walk (or even when they stand), they bob their rumps up and down. The purpose of this behavior is still unknown, but it makes them easy to pick out of a crowd.



An adult Spotted Sandpiper on the shores of Ship Island

We have several pairs of these nesting on the island, and we recently spied our first chick running around on the beach. Compared to other young birds, Spotted Sandpiper chicks are quick and agile. This one was already practicing its teetering! Jill snagged a photo of him bobbing his way down the beach.



A Spotted Sandpiper chick out for a run on the beach

Next time, the terns will be back in the spotlight with fuzzy chicks galore!

One Lonely Tern – Eastern Brother’s Island

Posted in [Eastern Brother's Island 2012](#), tagged [EBI](#), [Reggie](#), [tern](#) on June 16, 2012



Reggie flying and calling

While our sister restoration islands team with clouds of countless terns, the “colony” at EBI is a little more subdued. Meet Reginald Studpants McArthur, the affectionately named sole resident of our Common Tern colony. For the past few years Reggie has made his home among the harem of artificial tern decoys we install at the beginning of the season. Part of our job here on EBI is to monitor tern activity, so each morning we set up shop in the blind and prepare to watch Reggie for an hour as he goes about his daily business. He exhibits any number of behaviors such as fishing, preening, sleeping, circling the colony, chasing predators, and even attempting to court his decoys by offering them big shiny fish (sometimes while standing on their heads!). So far, no takers.



Reggie offering a Herring to the decoys

Terns, like other Larids (gulls and allies), each seem to have their own personalities as individuals. Even amongst a colony of thousands, their personalities shine through in the way they interact with others and their environment. Reggie is just the same and over the past several weeks it has been a real pleasure getting to “know” our tern as an individual. And by now he knows us, as well! When we enter the “colony” he is always right there with us, hovering above our heads or standing a few feet away, watching, calling, circling, and making sure we don’t harm his “friends,” the decoys. He trusts us and simply observes, curious about our activities but knowing we intend no harm. Novel objects, such as my backpack left behind on a rock, he seems to enjoy, hovering over them curiously. There is one thing he

does not tolerate, however, and that is the Eagle who visits us on occasional forays from neighboring Green Island. Eagles are destructive predators of seabirds and will eat anything. Terns exhibit a mobbing behavior to scare away such predators and Reggie is no different. To protect his colony of decoys he takes on the perilous task of chasing away the Eagle all by himself, diving, screaming, and doing everything in his power to chase the Eagle all the way back to Green Island before he returns, triumphant, to strut amongst his decoys as if congratulations were in order. And indeed they are, for one small tern against a giant Eagle is no meager feat! You go, Reggie.

-Julia

Petit Manan: Fluttering Featherless Fliers

Posted in [Petit Manan 2012](#), tagged [butterflies](#), [butterflies migration](#), [Migration](#), [Petit Manan Island](#) on June 13, 2012

Terns, Puffins, Razorbills, Guillemots, Petrels, Gulls as well as other birds we see at various times nest on the refuge islands during the late spring through early fall; but what about other species that inhabit the islands? We see a large array of sea birds, raptors, song birds, fish that the birds catch, seals loafing on the intertidal area and various invertebrates such as butterflies, bees and dragonflies. This particular post is written in hopes of relaying some information on the butterflies of Petit Manan Island.

Thus far, I have come across six different butterfly species that include: the American Copper, Question Mark, Red Admiral, American Lady, Painted Lady and the Black Swallowtail.



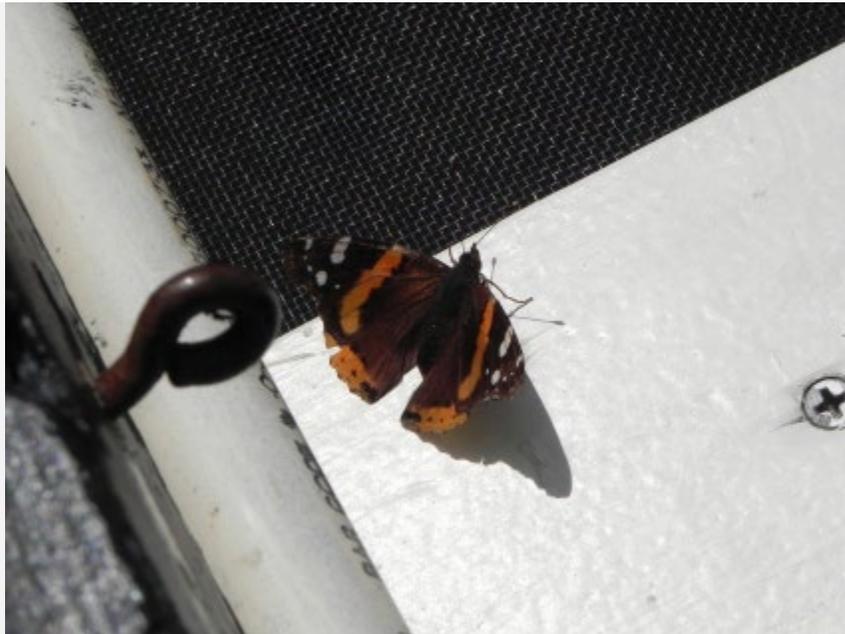
American Copper

The American Copper habituates disturbed open landscapes such as fields and has been known to eat from field sorrel, which is found in abundance on Petit Manan.



Question Mark is indeed the name of this butterfly.

The Question Mark habituates open habitats as well as woodlands and has been known to eat from Nettles and Hackberry. Petit Manan has one single shrub on the entire island, so it is unlikely that it was seen for our lush woodlands; however, we do in fact have stinging nettles growing in hidden locations, waiting to catch our pant legs when possible.



Red Admiral

The Red Admiral habituates open landscapes with flowers which can also include moist meadows and fields and has been known to eat from Nettles as well.

The American Lady habituates open landscapes such as fields and meadows and has been known to eat from pearly Everlastings as well as other Compositae.



The Painted Lady (above picture) looks very similar to the American Lady; however, Painted Ladys do not have the two large eyes on their inner bottom wings as the American Ladys do.

The Painted Lady habituates open habitats and has been known to eat from Thistles.

The Black Swallowtail habituates open landscapes such as meadows, fields, tidal marshes and lawns; while have been known to eat from parsleys, fennel and carrots.

Whether the butterflies are just flying by or have a reason to stay is something I wonder when I see them flying around. The landscape of Petit Manan Island is roughly open grasslands with patches of flowers found throughout. In this matter, it is not a surprise to have seen these butterflies dawdling about.

Butterflies have very delicate structures and will likely not come out of hiding unless it is a beautiful day. I consider them a little gift from nature that helps brighten your day after a period of dreariness. These invertebrates have four distinct stages they go through in their life: egg, caterpillar, pupa and adult. A question I myself had at one point was where do they go during the cold winter months? The female butterflies lay their eggs from the beginning through the end of the summertime, during this time the eggs hatch into caterpillars where they steadily grow in size until they become a pupa. Some of the eggs don't hatch during that season while some of the pupas go into a dormant state which both stages will remain in until spring time rolls around where caterpillars and beautiful butterflies will emerge to welcome the vibrant winter free landscapes. Something that has always proved true is, seeing a butterfly flying around is a sure sign of a perfect day.



The end of a beautiful day!

~Brittany L

Reflections from a First Time Researcher: Petit Manan

Posted in [Petit Manan 2012](#), tagged [Maine Coastal Islands](#), [Petit Manan](#) on June 7, 2012



The island staff out in the field, looking for Tern eggs; this one happens to be an Arctic.

Two weeks have passed since I first came out Petit Manan to begin my summer internship and at this point I find it hard not to reflect back on the weeks prior to arriving here. I guess the first thing that came to mind was an almost constant state of nervousness leading up to the date of departure. How much food should I bring? What would happen if I got really sick? But most prominently, what if I don't like it there? Even after discussing these matters with both present and past island staff I still could not calm my nerves until I, at last, spent my first couple of nights out here. Now I am here reporting that everything has fallen into place and life out on the island is incredible. Words cannot express the awe I felt when first arriving and seeing the cloud of terns that I am fortunate to spend my summer with, the pleasure of waking up to finding more nests than we have even been able to count filling up our tiny island, and the breathtaking beauty of watching a sunset from the top of the lighthouse that fills the sky with an almost divine pattern of auburn and vermillion rays that appear as if they are engulfing the heavens as we know it.



Regardless of how I might have felt before, I can now say I honestly believe that this will be a summer that I will never forget. The things that seemed like what would be huge inconveniences before have become dwarfed by the remarkable experiences and firsts (like holding my first seabird) that have already passed and I know there will be many more that will leave with fantastic memories and proficiencies. In the end, I know I will have an amazing summer that will be unmatched by any of my life so far.



A Laughing Gull, the first seabird I held this season!

-Dave

Citizens of Ship Island, Part 1: Song Birds

Posted in Ship Island 2012, tagged Bank Swallow, Common Yellowthroat, Nelson's Sparrow, Savannah Sparrow, Ship Island, Song Sparrow, Sparrows, Warblers, Yellow Warbler on June 6, 2012

While our terns are busy incubating their eggs, I thought I'd take some time to fill everyone in on some of the other birdlife here on Ship Island.

Although they might be the most numerous, Common Terns aren't the only birds that nest on Ship. In fact, Jill and I usually wake up to the sounds of song birds, not sea birds. Six species in particular call Ship their summer home: three sparrows, two warblers, and a swallow. Many local birders will find most, if not all, of these to be familiar Maine residents.

First up is the melodious Song Sparrow. Although they may lack the sleek elegance of a tern, they make up for it with a distinct voice. We estimate there to be about six pairs nesting on Ship, although they're loud enough to be heard on every part of the island.



Our second sparrow is the sonorous Savannah Sparrow. At first glance they look quite similar to a Song Sparrow, but they sport some flashy yellow eyebrows (technically called the supercillium). Again, we believe we have about six pairs nesting on the shrubby interior of Ship Island. We often see both Savannah and Song Sparrows chasing each other around the island.



A Savannah Sparrow

Our third sparrow is the more elusive Nelson's Sparrow. We've only spotted two of these on the island so far, but we're hoping to find more. Compared to the warbles, cheeps, and trills of the Savannah and Song Sparrows, the song of the Nelson's Sparrow is quite distinct: a sharp hiss, which reminds me of a burger being dropped onto a hot grill.



A Nelson's Sparrow

Besides those three sparrows, our most numerous non-tern residents are warblers: Common Yellowthroats and Yellow Warblers.

With their distinctive black masks, Common Yellowthroat males are quiet striking. They're also far from the secretive tree-top dwellers many birders think of when they hear the word "warbler." Our Yellowthroats are most often seen perched on the top of a bramble or other shrub, singing their hearts out like the fellow below. We've got at least three pairs nesting on the island.



A male Common Yellowthroat

Yellow Warblers are usually the first bird I hear in the mornings, probably because we've got a pair nesting right next to the cabin. We've got perhaps four or five nests of these flashy little, and it's not uncommon to see pairs of males chasing each other around the middle of the island.



A male Yellow Warbler

Our final bird for today is a change-up from the first five birds I've listed. Our seven resident Bank Swallows are in almost constant motion. They've set up shop under the bluff of the high side of the island. Presumably, they have a burrow there, but we haven't managed to spot it. We're keeping our eyes open, though. Until then, we've been enjoying the gurgling calls and acrobatic maneuvers of these zippy little birds. So far, they've proven faster than my camera, so here's a shot of where we suspect they're living:



Here's the bank, but where are the Bank Swallows? So far, they're too fast for my camera.

Stay tuned for Part 2: Seabirds, Shorebirds, and other Swimmers!

An Unexpected Guest

Posted in [Eastern Brother's Island 2012](#) on June 6, 2012



Our little seal pup, formally dubbed Quinton.

Hello again from the Brothers. Since our last post we have had a very special visitor, an adorable young harbor seal pup. This young pup we found one morning stranded in the cove that connects Eastern to Western Brother's Island. It is not unusual to see harbor seals from Western Brothers as they enjoy resting on the rocks on Little Brother's Island. Earlier that very morning we had seen an adult harbor seal hanging around the cove so we had high expectations that the mother would come back and claim her pup before too long, but the little sea dog was still there the next morning. He began to follow us around as we crossed the cove to do morning bird counts and would attempt to "talk" with a series of grunts. He would often suck on his tail or flippers and we became concerned that he may have been abandoned by the mother. We called Allied Whale, an association which deals in rescuing marine mammals, about what we should do. They reassured us that it was not unusual for the pup to be there for a few days and that its mother may come in after dark to feed it. The next morning our friend was gone, we can only assume he is off with his mom living the life of a seal.

In other exciting news, the black guillemots have begun to nest. The guillemots are currently our sole reoccurring alcid species around the Brother's, although recently we have seen an Atlantic puffin and a couple of razorbills who looked pretty interested in landing. Black guillemots typically have one to two eggs per burrow. So far we have located ten guillemot burrows some with one and some with two eggs. They are likely still in the process of nesting. We expect to find more as the weather continues to improve.



Black Guillemot vocalizing

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-SK

Dangerous ReTerns

June 3, 2012 by MCINWR

Sometimes it's a hard life being a tern: there's bad weather, trying to find food, and trying to avoid becoming food. Our research is not always done when the sun sets. Some predators will use the cover of night to their advantage. Because of this we use night vision binoculars to document what we would not usually be able to see. Our first predator stint shed light on the dangers that lurk in the tern colony with the coming of dark. At 10:30 pm a gull was seen walking around the edge of the colony which disturbed only a few Arctic Tern pairs. The next morning check led us to discover 5 empty Arctic Tern nests with evidence of a half-eaten egg in one nest cup.



A look through the night vision binoculars on a cold island night.

The tern colony on Metinic has a few unique predators. Besides the usual wandering gull, the tern colony also must avoid egg/chick-eating garter snakes (invasive to Metinic Island), local sheep that escape past the fence and don't watch what they step on, and a resident Merlin pair that will not only eat chicks but the adult terns themselves! Documenting all predation seen is an important part of understanding what the terns face when nesting on Metinic Island. This information is part of the big picture and helps us better manage the tern colony.

Another type of danger that poses a threat to all wildlife is human debris. Offshore Islands are not protected from litter that is washed ashore from the sea; even a refuge. This debris can be found on Metinic from the center of the forest to the edge of its shores. Common items are: plastic bottles, plastic containers, fishing gear, buoys, balloons, gasoline cans, rubber gloves, and even parts of ships. Human debris threatens life on land and in the sea. Many release toxic chemicals into the environment, some can easily be mistaken by animals as a food source while others can potentially entangle animals that come in contact with them. While living on the island we have and will continue to collect and properly dispose of the human debris that washes ashore but know that once we are gone the debris will continue to accumulate on the island. This is where you the reader comes in. Even if you are far away from Metinic Island you can still help the terns and other wildlife by disposing of your trash properly and picking up litter while out enjoying the environment. Remember first reduce, then reuse, and finally recycle. Together we can make our world a safer place for wildlife.



A sample of the debris that washes ashore on Metinic Island: plastic Vitamin Water, Plastic Pepsi bottle, rubber glove, plastic oil container, old lobster buoys and yards of rope.

Archive for May, 2012

Eastern Brother's Island, checking in!

Posted in [Eastern Brother's Island 2012](#) on May 31, 2012

Hello from Eastern and Western Brother's Islands! We are the northernmost seabird restoration island in the Refuge, and also one of the newest. This summer will represent the sixth year of seabird restoration for the brother's island and the crew (Julia and Sarah) are excited to be a part of it!

Historically, this 17-acre island was home to nesting seabirds of all types including terns, gulls, alcids, sea ducks, and petrels. In recent years the island has been subject to heavy predation by gulls, hawks, and small mammals such as mink, and many of our seabirds are now gone. It is our hope that with a continued human presence on the island to monitor and deter predators we will once again be able to establish a thriving seabird colony. Through it all black guillemots, the most common alcid in the Gulf of Maine, have persisted here and continue to thrive on the 80 foot cliffs of Eastern Brother's Island's south shore.

This year we have deployed alcid and tern decoys along the perimeter of the island to help attract seabirds searching for a new home. This method has been tried successfully on several other Maine restoration islands, but we have taken it a step further. In addition to the decoys we have set up two separate sound systems with speakers that play sounds from active colonies. This way, even when there is dense fog (like we have had the past few days!) birds flying within earshot are still attracted to the islands.

Despite EBI's seeming emptiness without terns, puffins, and razorbills, there is still lots of life to be found. The island hosts many different types of vegetation habitats and a variety of plants thrive here. Song and savannah sparrows make this their home and next door on WBI (where we also live) barn swallows, yellow warblers, and common yellow throats probably try to raise young. Sheep have been re-introduced to EBI to graze and are our constant companions as they are free to roam the island, lambs trailing behind. Creches (groups) of common eiders forage all around the islands and harbor seals bask in the sun on our rocks. As the season on Eastern and Western Brother's Islands opens, we look forward to what lies ahead!

-JG



Our home-away-from-home!

Petit Manan: Making Space for all the Avian Inhabitants

Posted in [Petit Manan 2012](#), tagged [beach pea](#), [nesting habitat](#), [Petit Manan](#), [seabird nesting habi](#), [vegetation removal](#) on May 29, 2012

Petit Manan is an island of just ten acres (although it can become up to 17 acres at the lowest neap tide). The island hosts nesting populations of three tern species (arctic, common and hopefully roseate), three alcid species (Atlantic puffin, black guillemot and razorbill), one sea duck species (common eider), one gull species (laughing gull), one passerine species (savannah sparrow) and one shorebird species (spotted sandpiper).



Beach pea

With all of these avian inhabitants as well as four human researchers, certain adjustments must be made early in the season to accommodate all the wildlife. One of these adjustments is removal of excessive vegetation. The southern end of the island, over recent years, has slowly been losing nesting habitat due to the encroachment of vegetation. One of the major culprits of this loss is the plant beach-pea (*Lathyrus japonicus*). This native plant is common to the coastline from Maine to New Jersey. We are happy to have it as an island resident but its abundance in certain areas was having a detrimental effect on the tern nesting potential. A few days were spent removing beach pea from this area and as a result we expect to see an increase in nest sites in this area.



Jordan proudly displays the efforts of her weeding...that is a lot of new seabird habitat!

So as you all tend to your flower and vegetable gardens, we will be weeding a garden of our own to make room for all the seabird nest sites. Happy Gardening!

Ship Island's Mustard Menace

Posted in [Ship Island 2012](#), tagged [garlic mustard](#), [invasive species](#), [Ship Island](#) on May 29, 2012

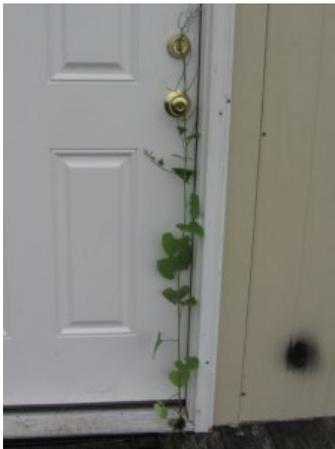
Allow me to introduce you to the worst enemy of the Ship Island Crew: garlic mustard. Although this may sound like a tasty addition to your next sandwich, we can't wait to see the last of it here on Ship.



A small stalk of garlic mustard showing its characteristic heart-shaped leaves

Garlic mustard, or *Alliaria petiolata* is a highly invasive plant species that has spread over several parts of the island and it is incredibly difficult to eliminate once it becomes established. On its own, a stalk of garlic mustard may look harmless, but don't be fooled: this stuff is a pain!

While the adult plant is easy enough to uproot, it is highly persistent in its other forms. Garlic mustard is a biennial plant, which means it takes two years of growth before it flowers and produces seeds. The smaller first year plants can be difficult to find in all the other greenery of the island. Small single-leaf seedlings are even harder to spot. On top of that, seeds can stay dormant for years before sprouting, so even if we were to pull up every stalk of garlic mustard, we would still see more sprout up next year.



So what are we doing about it? The Refuge has been working with Glen Mittelhauser, a private contractor, to determine effective measures for removing this invasive plant before it covers the island. To start with, we've been pulling up every flowering stalk we find. And there are A LOT of flowering stalks. See that picture below? That's about half of what we've pulled off of our 11-acre island so far.



Next step is the application of one or more sprays to kill the seedlings and non-flowering stalks. Since we're so close to breeding birds, we've been trying to avoid the use of strong chemical herbicides. After studying results from some test plots set up on the island, Glenn has us using vinegar and seawater in areas where we've pulled up the flowering stalks. Hopefully, if keep this up over the years, we'll be able to deplete the seeds that have been stored up in the soil and rid the island of this unpleasant plant.



Garlic mustard has small flower with four white petals

So why is it so important to get rid of garlic mustard anyway? One of the most important parts of our job out here on these islands is to maintain a habitat that is conducive to healthy seabird colonies. Terns nest in or near vegetation, and the presence of invasive species such as garlic mustard may reduce the amount of suitable nesting habitat. Additionally, terns aren't the only birds breeding on Ship Island: we've also got Savannah Sparrows, Song Sparrows, Common Yellowthroats, and Yellow Warbler. All these birds depend on a finding a healthy habitat on Ship Island so they can successful raise their young.

So wish us luck in fighting this mustardy menace!

The Research Season Begins!

May 9, 2012 by [MCINWR](#)



Petit Manan Island in early May

On Petit Manan Island, the savannah sparrows are singing, the violets are flowering, the seabirds are arriving... and we are fully adorned in layers of long johns, fleece, wool, and winter hats. The temperatures are significantly cooler out here than on the main land, but that hasn't deterred the birds!



Atlantic Puffins



The puffin observation blind

This morning we counted 78 puffins on the island and in the surrounding waters. We have also seen razorbills, black guillemots, and common eiders in the water. Many of the puffins have already established burrows along the rocky perimeter. Yesterday when we arrived we set up our puffin observation blind so that we can easily monitor them without disturbing their activities.

Some of our seabird residents have not established territories on the island yet, such as the terns, guillemots and laughing gulls—although we briefly heard and saw common terns yesterday! For the first week or two that we are on Petit Manan our primary task will be making sure that the island is safe and predator free for the nesting seabirds. We've already seen ravens, herring and great black-backed gulls, peregrine falcons, and bald eagles, all of which pose threats to the resident seabirds.



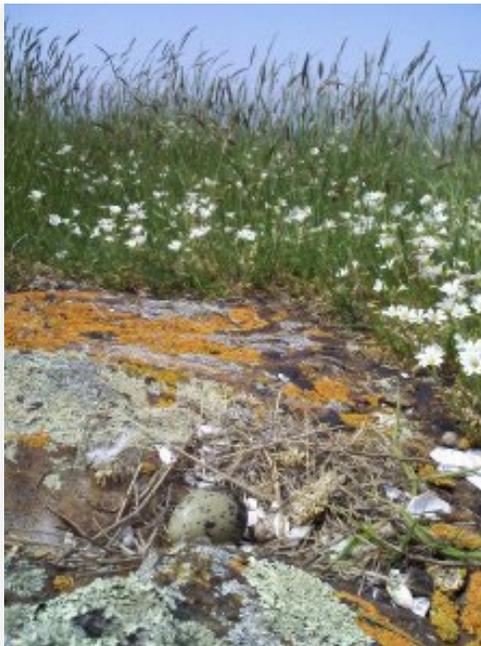
View from the top of the lighthouse of the boathouse and Green Island in the distance. Green Island is connected to Petit Manan by a bar of land at low tide.

We will keep you posted as more birds arrive and another exciting season gets underway!

Christa & Jordan

Eggcellent! 2012

Posted in [Metinic 2012](#), tagged [dishes](#), [Egg](#), [First Egg](#), [Metinic Island](#), [tern](#) on May 26, 2012



Arctic Tern Egg- First egg of the season!

Good news! The first tern eggs of the season have arrived on Metinic Island. Soon all of the eggs will be laid and the incubation period will start. Terns usually lay from 2-4 eggs one at a time until they are all laid. Because the terns are colonial breeders it is advantageous to them to all lay their eggs around the same time. This reduces the chances of predation through the protection of sheer numbers. We are excited to see the first eggs because this means the busy season is on its way. This past week we put together the three blinds on the island and have begun to record sightings of banded birds.



Inside the blind using a scope to read bands

Because we live on an island there are some things we have to do differently that many people take for granted. We thought it would be interesting to show you how we accomplish some of these everyday tasks. Today we will give you our step-by-step guide on how to clean the dishes with no running water:



Step one- retrieve water from well, Step two- fill pot, Step three- boil water in pot using propane stove



Step four- pour boiling water into two tubs; one for washing and one for rinsing.

Step five- clean the dishes

And then you are done!

So long for now,
Katie and Chelsea

Eggs on Ship Island! (and photos, at last)

Posted in [Ship Island 2014](#), tagged [Common Terns](#), [Eggs](#), [Nests](#), [Ship Island](#) on May 24, 2012

We found our first confirmed nest on Ship Island on Monday evening. The nest contained one egg at the time, but by Tuesday morning another egg was laid.



A Common Tern on Ship's first confirmed nest in 2012

As you can (hopefully) see, Terns don't build much of a nest – it's called a scrape for a reason! Their eggs are also very well camouflaged, so it can be difficult to spot them from up in a blind 10 feet in the air. Luckily, we were tipped off when this particular tern chose to stay put when the rest of the colony had taken off as part of a behavior known as dreading. After a few minutes of observation, the tern also stood up and changed position, revealing the egg.

In addition to being our first nest of the season, this nest is exciting for another reason: one of the parents is a banded bird. We've seen several banded terns along the beach, but we haven't been able to read the identifying numbers on the band. Now that we know where this particular bird is nesting, we've placed a stake that can serve as a perch near the nest. With any luck, the banded tern will stand there long enough for us to read the numbers off the band.



Spot the tern egg...

We'll be on the lookout for a third egg sometime today, as the usual clutch size for a Common Tern is 2-3 eggs. These eggs will be incubated for a little over 3 weeks before chicks start to hatch. Yesterday we also took a tour of the colony to look for more nests, and we were in luck: we found three more. In a few weeks, we might have as many as 150, but four is pretty exciting right now! Finally, I'll share with you a photo of Ship's fantastic new cabin:



Until next time!

We're Big Listers on a Little Island: Migrants Sighted around Petit Manan

Posted in [Petit Manan 2012](#), tagged [Barn Swallow](#), [Bird List](#), [Brown Thrasher](#), [Chipping Sparrow](#), [Island](#), [Magnolia Warbler](#), [Maine](#), [MCINWR](#), [Migration](#), [Petit Manan](#), [Red-breasted Nuthatch](#), [Spring migration](#), [Warbler](#), [White-throated Sparrow](#) on May 24, 2012



A beautiful Magnolia Warbler sitting on top of a washed-up lobster trap



The Petit Manan 2012 Bird List!

Starting the day we arrived on the island, we have been keeping track of all the bird species that we've seen. In just over two weeks, our list has exceeded 50 different bird species! The majority of them are migrants—birds that are passing through on their way to their summer homes. Offshore islands provide valuable stopover points for migrating birds to rest and refuel during their long journeys to or from breeding grounds. Oftentimes birds also get blown off course by foul weather and will spend several days on PMI waiting out storms, high winds, or fog.



A Barn Swallow perched in the intertidal

Migration season is a fun and exciting time of year because it is possible to observe birds that might otherwise be difficult to spot (like the Brown Thrasher), birds that are outside their normal habitats (like the Red-breasted Nuthatch), and birds flocking together during their travels that would not normally be in close association (like the White-throated and Chipping Sparrows).



A Brown Thrasher hanging out in front of one of our sheds



Red-breasted Nuthatches (right) are normally found in coniferous forests... on an island devoid of trees, our lighthouse sufficed for this little guy!



Three White-throated Sparrows and two Chipping Sparrows (can you spot all of them?)

Don't let us make you think that PMI gets all the cool birds—keep an eye out on the mainland, even in your own backyard, for colorful and interesting migrants!

Petit Manan: It's Easier to Sea Birds Blind

Posted in [Petit Manan 2012](#), tagged [bird blind](#), [Petit Manan](#), [USFWS](#) on May 19, 2012



View out the window of the puffin blind, with a spotting scope on the right



Christa assembling a blind

On Tuesday we finished setting up the last of our six bird blinds on the island. A blind is a structure that is designed so that you can see birds, but they can't see you. Our blinds are raised 6-10 feet off the ground so that we have a higher vantage point from which we can observe the seabirds on the island without disturbing them or altering their behaviors. Once inside the box-shaped structures, we can open small windows and peer out. As long as we only have one window open at a time, from the birds' perspective the inside of the blind is dark and they can't tell that we're spying on them!



Jordan assembling a blind

Collectively, the PMI crew will spend hundreds of hours in these blinds over the summer, gathering valuable data about the birds on Petit Manan—from predation to productivity and from feeding to fledging. Keep checking back as we share our discoveries throughout the season!

The Beginnings: Metinic Island

Posted in [Metinic 2012](#), tagged [MCINWR](#), [Metinic Island](#), [Sheep](#) on May 17, 2012



Metinic Island sunset for our backyard



Lambs on Metinic Island before the round-up

It has been just over a week since arriving on our island home. After the fog cleared we have been preparing for the coming season. The vegetation on Metinic Island is kept under control by grazing sheep. This flock is kept on the south end of the island when the terns arrive and begin to nest to prevent the sheep from accidentally stepping on the terns' eggs. In order to get them to the south end of the island we (with a lot of help from the refuge staff and friends) have to organize a round-up. This not-so-easy task can take all day, and this year in particular, due to a handful of clever sheep seeking refuge in the island's dense woods. We will miss the entertainment the lambs brought us but the hole in our hearts will soon be filled by the sound of many hungry tern chicks. Until then, we will be exploring the island, setting up blinds, and preparing for the busy summer ahead of us. Until next time, good-bye from Chelsea and Katie.



Common tern and Sheep- crew rock paintings

Greetings from Ship Island! 2012

Posted in [Ship Island 2012](#), tagged [Common Terns](#), [MCINWR](#), [Ship Island](#), [Terns](#) on May 16, 2012

Greetings from Ship Island! Located in Blue Hill Bay just southwest of Mount Desert Island, Ship Island is part of the Maine Coastal Island National Wildlife Refuge and serves as a summer home and breeding grounds for over 150 pairs of Common Terns. This year it will also be the summer home for a crew of two biologists: Supervisor Amy (Yours Truly) and Intern Jill.

Ship is actually quite a bit different from the Refuge's other managed seabird colonies. It is the last island in a chain that begins to the north with Tinker Island, followed by Bar Island and Trumpet Island. Thanks to a winding sand bar, Ship and Trumpet are actually connected at the lowest tides. Sand is another thing that makes Ship special: instead of nesting on rocks, terns at Ship nest on the edge of a sandy beach. This means the Ship island colony is in a thin band between the sand and vegetation,

Earlier this week, Jill and I arrived at the Refuge's office in Milbridge, ME and got an exciting surprise. Previously, researchers living on Ship Island for the summer were based in a large canvas tent, but this year we would be the first crew to live in a newly constructed cabin! Complete with bunk beds and a storage loft, our 12 by 16 home will soon have an indoor kitchen and a small refrigerator. In the meantime, we'll be cooking outside and storing perishables in a cooler, but we've already come to appreciate a solid roof over our heads during the recent rainstorms.

Like us, the terns have spent the week checking out the island and moving into their summer homes. So far we've seen about 70 Common Terns circling around the island and its surrounding waters. These birds have migrated thousands of miles and will settle here for a few short months to raise their chicks. It will still be a few weeks before they begin to nest, but after that things will really pick up around here. Eventually, we may have over 400 adult terns and their chicks living on the island.

In the meantime, Jill and I are keeping busy by getting to know Ship and the surrounding islands. In addition to Trumpet, there are two smaller islands, East Barge and West Barge, which we keep an eye on throughout the summer. These three islands host breeding gulls (Greater Black-backed and Herring) as well as Double-crested Cormorants and Common Eiders. Gulls are predators of tern chicks, so they're not allowed to nest on Ship, but there will probably be a few nests on these other islands.

I'd love to post photos, but the computer isn't cooperating right now, so hopefully I'll be able to post pictures of Ship and our lovely little cabin soon.

That's all for now!

Petit Manan: The Terns are here!

Posted in [Petit Manan 2012](#) on May 16, 2012



Nope, your computer screen isn't dirty — those black specks are terns!



Terns flying over with fish in their bills

Sunday the 13th was very exciting on Petit Manan because after days of hovering in the sky and offshore, our terns finally decided to land on the island and begin the breeding season! Although a few terns had been hanging around the island, on Sunday the group was at least 250 strong—both Common and Arctic Terns. They arrived early in the morning and flew around the island together, calling in loud squeaks and yips. By late morning they began landing and pairing up.



Terns flying in from the northeast side of the island

Males display with fish in their mouths, which they feed to their mates. When two are paired, they perform funny little courtship dances in which they drop their wings to their sides, stretch out their necks, and waddle around on the ground.



Three Common Terns establishing near the Boat House

In the days following their arrival, the terns have disappeared for long stretches as they forage at sea, but they have been coming back more frequently and staying longer as time progresses.

We're expecting eggs in the next ten days or so—we'll keep you posted!