

SUMMER WITH THE SEABIRDS

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

Archive 2013 – August, July, June and 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 August, 2013

Posted in [Uncategorized](#), tagged [alcids](#), [GOMSWG](#), [Guillemot](#), [Puffins](#), [razorbill](#) on August 8, 2013

Well, it's been a great summer here on Petit Manan. Tomorrow we say good bye to our little island, our birds and our bird people.

Over the last week we wrapped up our Alcid (puffin, guillemots and razorbills) monitoring for the summer. This summer we found 47 puffin, 68 guillemot, and two razorbill burrows. The razorbill chicks have already fledged, while most of the puffin and guillemot chicks are very close. Fun fact: male razorbills act as the post-fledging caretakers of the chick and teach the young how to hunt for fish!

We also wrapped up our season bird list at 106 species. As far as we know this is by far the most bird species seen on PMI in a summer. Not to brag or anything. Maybe we'll put another one on the list tomorrow morning though....

Now we are packing up the research station and Jordan (our crew leader) is furiously assembling our data to be presented at this year's Gulf of Maine Seabird Working Group (GOMSWG). It's a bittersweet feeling at the end of an amazing summer filled with beautiful birds, good laughs, good food, and good people.



Last Days

Posted in [Eastern Brother's Island 2013](#), tagged [Black Guillemot chicks](#), [eastern brothers island](#), [island living](#), [rainbows](#) on August 5, 2013

The Eastern Brothers Island crew checking in here with one last update before our departure. Our days are coming to an end for the 2013 season, which brings about bitter-sweet emotions. I find it hard to believe how quickly the summer has gone by and yet the other part of me thinks "My, won't it be nice to take a real shower and eat ice cream!" It has been a wonderful experience living out on this beautiful island and we have definitely come to feel as though the little cabin feels close to home.



Fresh picked flowers and welcome sign on cabin.

Due to quite a few early storms, as well as the presence of a mink on the island early season, the black guillemots had a wide-range of laying dates. There are several chicks that have already fledged or will in the next few days, yet there are also a few that hatched just days ago. Black Guillemot chicks will fledge on average after 33 days in the burrow and do not migrate south and so there is not a huge rush to get them out the door, per se. Here are pictures of the two stages:



A one week old chick practicing how to be fierce.



The oldest chick, just a day or two before leaving the burrow.

As a parting thought, some people believe that a pot of gold lies at the end of a rainbow, but we have reason to believe otherwise (see last photo). We hope you have enjoyed reading our posts and that you continue to have an interest in seabird colonies and the work we do on the Maine coast! Cheers! ~Mary and Jake



Somewhere over the rainbow lies Eastern Brothers Island.

Metinic Migration

Posted in [Metinic Island 2013](#), tagged [Arctic Tern](#), [Common Tern](#), [Metinic](#), [Migration](#), [sandpiper](#), [shorebirds](#), [Terns](#) on August 4, 2013

It's the end of the season and migration time for all of us. Hard as it is to believe, Zak and I have already been off Metinic for more than week. We're not the only ones heading out – our tern chicks will soon be off on their own travels.



Common Terns will head for South America, a pretty long haul for chicks only a few weeks old. The Arctic Terns have even farther to go – all the way to Antarctica! Lucky for them, they've got parents to guide them. Chicks will often complete their first migration by following Mom or Dad. This is because tern parents usually have lots of migratory experience – Common Terns can live to be twenty years old, Arctic Terns more than thirty, and they typically migrate every year.



The rest of our feathered friends are getting geared up for migration too. Shorebirds that we haven't seen since May are flying south from their Arctic breeding grounds and stopped by to say hi before we left. It's only a matter of time before the songbirds head out, too.



It's been a pretty good breeding season for our terns, especially in light of last's years troubles. The Arctic Terns in particular did very well thanks to good food, good weather, and few problems with predators. We hope this bodes well for future years on Metinic. We (or next year's crew) will let you know, starting next May!



Thanks for following along with our work here on Metinic. Zak and I have had a fantastic time out here and we hope you've enjoyed reading about what we and the birds have been up to.

Wish our terns chicks luck!

– Amy

(All photos by Zak)

Archive for July, 2013

[Alcid chicks, petrel and a departure](#)

Posted in [Petit Manan Island 2013](#), tagged [Andrea](#), [chicks](#), [Leach's Storm-petrel](#), [Petit Manan Island](#), [Puffins](#), [razorbill](#) on July 24, 2013

In the last few days we began our island wide Alcid (puffins, guillemots and razorbills) monitoring. This means we get a look at our first puffin and razorbill chicks! At the beginning of the season we searched within the rocks, ledges and debris around the edge of the island for burrows of Alcids. After marking their nests, we planned to return once the chicks hatched.



(above: Jill with a razorbill chick)

Alcids are burrow nesters, meaning they lay their eggs inside a tunnel or crack in the rocks or soil. This keeps the eggs and chicks safe from most predators and also keeps the temperature for incubation fairly steady. Puffins and razorbills put all their eggs in one basket (so to speak) and lay only one egg in their burrows, while guillemots lay two. It's interesting to note that guillemot eggs and razorbill eggs are speckled white and puffin eggs are solid white. I wonder why that is?



(above: Jill with a Puffin chick)

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While we were checking alcid burrows Jordan came across a beautiful find. A leach's storm-petrel! (see above photo) These strange pelagic seabirds nest throughout Petit Manan in burrows dug into the soil and sod. At night we can hear their strange calls that sound a lot like giggling. They are truly mysterious and beautiful creatures!

With the season coming to a close we are saying goodbye to our field tech and friend Andrea. It's been a great summer with all four of us here and we are sad to see her go. Andrea will be getting back to school this fall at Umaine where she is studying Zoology with a focus on seabirds. Good luck Andrea!

[“Hope is the Thing with Feathers” ~E. Dickinson](#)

Posted in [Eastern Brother's Island 2013](#), tagged [beach pea](#), [Black Guillemot chicks](#), [Eastern Brothers Island 2013](#), [roseroot](#), [wing chord](#) on July 15, 2013

Our first reachable chicks, Ally and Barnabas, are really growing! When they first hatched 2 weeks ago they weighed 40g and have now reached 230g! Their diet is mostly rock gunnel along with herring that is delivered by both parents to them in the burrow. Along with their weight gain they are gaining pinfeathers on their wings which is the beginning of their juvenile molt.



20 cm wing chord at 2 days old



60 cm wing chord with pin feathers at 2 weeks old

We are finding new chicks that have hatched almost every other day! We now have 11 chicks that we are collecting data from and we've noticed adults delivering food to several other unreachable burrows.

In our free time we have been identifying plants around the islands and have tasted several of the edible plants. There is a variety of berries on the island including raspberries, cranberries, blueberries, bearberry, and crowberry. Mary made a tart jam by combining the cranberries from last year, which are still on the plant, with honey and lemon. We have tried the leaves of rose root and seaside plantain and the inner stalk of bull thistle. There are also some beach pea pods, raspberries, and bearberries that will soon be ripe!



Rose root



Beach pea

We have decided that since we are essentially living in our own society, that we can create and celebrate our own holidays. Yesterday was our 14th of July celebration (combining National Guillemot Day and the Fourth of July), where we grilled and set off sparklers!



Enjoying the sunset in front of our freshly painted cabin on the 14th of July!

Black-backs Attack!!!

Posted in [Petit Manan 2014](#), tagged [dove](#), [dowitchers](#), [duckling](#), [Great Black Backed Gull](#), [robin](#), [sandpiper](#) on July 14, 2013

I can't believe the season is more than halfway over! Yet there is still so much to observe and enjoy here on Petit Manan Island. Recently we have begun to see the first of the arctic migrants, such as dowitchers and sandpipers. We have even seen some wandering passerines like mockingbirds, mourning doves and a fledgling robin. It says something about islands life when seeing a robin is a big surprise!

Unfortunately, the terns have had a rather bad stretch of luck. The combination of bad weather, predation and (seemingly) lack of food have had a huge impact on chick numbers. Parts of the island have done better than others. However, the colony doing okay. We even have a few fledglings flying around!



Most disconcerting, for us researchers, has been watching the great blacked-back gulls swooping in and picking off tern chicks. They are efficient predators. It is equal parts interesting and terrifying to see them hunting. Jill got a great photo of one taking an eider duckling, so you can see one in action below.



This weekend we have been joined by Bangor high-school student Max. He's been an excellent addition to the crew and has been a great help with our research. Here he is examining a tern egg this evening.



Our Forest Friends

Posted in [Metinic Island 2013](#), tagged [Birding](#), [Golden-crowned Kinglet](#), [Gray Catbird](#), [Metinic](#), [Metinic 2013](#), [Myrtle Warbler](#), [Savannah Sparrow](#), [Song Sparrow](#), [Songbirds](#), [Warblers](#), [Winter Wren](#) on July 14, 2013

It's almost the end of the season here on Metinic, and we've just spotted our 145th species: a Bonaparte's Gull. A significant part of why we've been able to spot so many different species out on this year is that in addition to seabirds, our island is the breeding ground for many birds found in forests and fields. Previous years' crews have caught some of these birds and banded them, but we won't be running a banding station out here this year. However, that doesn't mean we don't appreciate our feathery friends in the woods! Here are photos of some of our local songbirds looking their best. There are too many to cover in a single entry, so I've picked out some of our favorites. As usual, click the photos to see a Savannah Sparrows are without a doubt our most common songbird. They are found mostly in the relatively open portions of the island and build grass nests directly on the ground. We wake up every morning to their buzzy songs – one Savannah Sparrow in particular has claimed the top of our outhouse for his favorite singing perch.



Savannah Sparrow – Photo by Zak

A cousin of the Savannah Sparrow, the Song Sparrow is also quite common on Metinic. They're a bit drabber – no flashy yellow eyebrows here – but their song is much more melodious. Song Sparrows also prefer shrubbier habitat than the Savannahs.



Song Sparrow – Photo by Zak

Our first truly forest-dwelling species of the day: a Myrtle Warbler. These lovely little birds are lumped together with the Audubon's Warbler as a single species, the Yellow-rumped Warbler. These brightly colored "butter butts" (as some birders like to call them) are found throughout the Metinic woods, particularly around the edges.



Myrtle Warbler – Photo by Zak

Metinic is home to two champion singers: the Winter Wren and the Gray Catbird. The Catbird knows the most songs of any bird on the island – although some might say he cheats, since he's a mimic. Listening

to a Catbird you can pick out any number of other bird songs from his enthusiastic solo concerts. You might also hear the occasional cat-like “meow” that gives this bird its name.



Gray Catbird – Photo by Zak

The Winter Wren, on the other hand, composes and performs his own music. There may only be one or two Winter Wrens on the island, but we can hear them all over the woods.



Winter Wren – Photo by Zak

Our last and smallest (but not least!) bird for today is the fiery-headed Golden-crowned Kinglet. These tiny birds make their home in Maine year-round – they’re one of the smallest birds to spend the winter this far north. They’re even smaller than Maine’s ubiquitous Black-capped Chickadees! We spotted their cousin, the Ruby-crowned Kinglet, earlier in the season as well, but only the Golden-crowned decided to stick around for the summer. Check out that bright orange and yellow crown the kinglets use to attract mates and scare away competition!



Golden-crowned Kinglet – Photo by Zak

The season may be drawing to a close, but you haven't heard the last from Metinic 2013!

-Amy

All Sorts of Chicks!

Posted in [Ship Island 2013](#), tagged [chick](#), [Common Tern](#), [seabird](#), [Sparrow](#), [Spotted Sandpiper](#), [tern](#) on July 7, 2013



Common Tern not liking that I am taking his picture!

Hello from Ship! Unfortunately, we don't have any glorious food updates (though the adult terns are bringing in a lot of tasty fish!), but, we can report that we have little chicks everywhere! They come in all shapes and sizes, from seabirds, to shorebirds, to passerines, to ducklings.



Savannah Sparrow fledgling; basically a little ball with mouth and feathers.

Like Petit Manan Island, we have been noticing the vast variety of plumage colorations exhibited by the chicks, even within one family! Featured below are two chick siblings with different colorations. Chicks range anywhere from a warm sandy tan, to seaweed brown, to a silvery tan. They can have very dark well-defined spots or hardly any spots at all. All of these colors help them blend into their environment. The two below are already getting their juvenile feathers and are around 15 days old.



Chick siblings exhibiting some of the plumage color variations.

Two of Ship's posts ago, I posted a picture of an adult tern sitting on "Nest Two." I am happy to report that they now have three little chicks! They are part of our feeding study. Here is a parent with one of the chicks.



Nest 2 parent with chick.

And lastly, here is a spotted sandpiper nest with 3 chicks! One of them is very freshly hatched and is still wet from coming out of the egg. Sandpiper chicks are very mobile quite soon after they hatch, so we were lucky to witness these.

– Julia



Spotted sandpiper chicks in the nest.

Metinic has fantastic neighbors!

Posted in [Metinic Island 2013](#), tagged [Food](#), [Lobster](#), [Metinic](#), [Neighbors](#) on July 6, 2013

Zak and I got a tasty surprise yesterday from our neighbor Gene: a bucket of lobsters!

We threw them straight into a pot and had ourselves a feast. We're usually not the most sophisticated cooks out here (after reading their latest entry, I'd say Petit Mana takes that prize!) – pasta, hot dogs, and rice and beans are typical Metinic meals – so we were extra happy with such delicious fare.



I whipped up some lobster macaroni and cheese (my favorite food of all time), while Zak ate his straight off the plate (plus a bit saved for later).



Topped with Ritz crackers – I was out of bread crumbs

Thanks again to our wonderful neighbors!

-Amy

Census and Periwinkles (a much belated post)

Posted in [Petit Manan Island 2013](#), tagged [census](#), [chicks](#), [periwinkles](#) on July 6, 2013

Here on Petit Manan Island we have been very busy with census and tern chicks! Our first chicks hatched on June 17th and it's amazing to see how fast some have already grown. We especially appreciate the diversity of colors in our chicks. Some have a mottled brown plumage, while others are silvery grey. Even within a clutch, brother and sister may have very different colors. In a couple of weeks (around 21 days) those chicks will fledge. It will be interesting to watching them grow and develop over the coming month.



Over the week we spent two days conducting our island wide seabird survey. Biologists, staff and SCA students joined us from the mainland, and it was great fun to have everyone out for a few days. After adding up our numbers we found that the total number of nesting terns is down this year, unfortunately. Despite not know why numbers are down, we are confident that the nests we have are doing very well and are off to a great start.



We have also been very busy making delicious food here on Petit Manan. Yesterday evening we gathered periwinkles, dulse and mussels for our dinner. Jill made her special Alfredo sauce to go along with some

pasta and we had ourselves a feast. Surprising to some, periwinkles are quite easy to cook and delicious!



Meet Barnabas Beal Guillemot

Posted in [Eastern Brother's Island 2013](#), tagged [Black Guillemot chicks](#), [Eastern Brothers Island 2013](#), [razorbill](#), [Tall Barney](#) on July 2, 2013



Young Barnabas looking not too pleased with the photo shoot

We are happy to announce the long awaited arrival of our first black guillemot chicks! Our first chick is named Avery William and appears strong and healthy (he is tucked far back in a dark burrow visible only with a flashlight). His cousins Ally and Barnabas Beal hatched a few days later and are the cutest, 40 gram bundles of black down ever! We have named them in honor of the folklore legend Tall Barney (Barnabas Coffin Beal, III), who lived and fished in the Jonesport/Beals Island area in the mid 1800's. He was known for his tall stature (6 feet 7 inches and possibly taller!) and unheard of strength. We are hopeful that Barnabas Beal Guillemot and all his relatives to come grow to be strong and courageous like Tall Barney.



Tall Barney with son Napoleon Beal

On another exciting note, despite the hours of fog we have endured this last week, we were able to find an hour of clearing clouds during which we spotted a razorbill actually perched on the eastern tip of the island next to the alcid sound system. Attracting razorbills to Eastern Brothers Island is one of the main objectives of Maine Coastal Islands National Wildlife Refuge and so having one land and appear interested in the area is very exciting. We have been seeing one razorbill in the adjacent waters almost every day for several weeks now and decided that it was time for a name. Seeing as our local common tern is officially named Reginald, we thought that Ronald the Razorbill was a good fit. Stay tuned for more adventures of Reggie and Ron!

Here is a parting image of the Eastern Brothers cliffs breaking through the fog on a warm, summer morning. ~Mary



EBI breaking through the fog. Photo by Jake

Archive for June, 2013

It's Tern Time on Metinic!

Posted in [Meticinic Island 2013](#), tagged [Arctic Terns](#), [Banding](#), [chicks](#), [Common Terns](#), [GOMSWG](#), [Meticinic](#), [Meticinic 2013](#), [Tern chicks](#), [Terns](#), [Trapping](#) on June 24, 2013

Although I may have spent the first few posts talking about songbirds and gulls, terns are our focus around here. These feisty seabirds are what bring us to Metinic, so it's high time I let them have their "tern" as the center of attention.

Metinic's terns, both Common and Arctic, had a rough season last year. Because of an unfortunate combination of bad weather and lots of egg-eating gulls, the terns were forced to abandon their nests shortly after they began laying eggs.



A Common Tern soars over Metinic – Photo by Zak

We were all holding our breath to see if the terns would take a chance on Metinic again this year. Even if they did, we had no idea how many would actually return.

After completing our annual tern census this week, we're pleased to say we have 350 pairs of terns nesting on Metinic this year!



An Arctic Tern on the nest – Photo by Zak

We've also had chicks of both species start hatching – more than fifty of the island's most adorable residents have popped out of their shells. The adult terns are already hard at work bringing in enough fish to feed their new chicks. It will be about a month before these little fluffballs are ready to fly, so the adults have their work cut out for them.



An Arctic Tern brings back a fish for its chicks – Photo by Zak

These days, Zak and I are out banding chicks in our productivity plots so we can chart their growth. Unlike tern parents, we can't tell chicks apart without some kind of marker, so all productivity chicks are banded within a day or two of hatching.



Amy banding a tern chick – Photo by Zak

We've also been trapping and banding adult terns. As with gulls, the best way to trap a tern is on their nest. We replace the eggs with wooden dummy eggs and set a trap that springs when the adult returns to incubate. We then band the tern and take a few measurements before releasing it. The dummy eggs are removed and the real ones are put back in the nest. The terns aren't too happy with the process, but they always seem to return to the nest within 15 minutes of being released.



Banding an adult tern – Photo by Zak

By banding adult birds, we have a better chance of seeing the bands again – any breeding adult has already proven its ability to survive at least one migration, so it's likely that it will survive another year. Some terns can live to be more than thirty years old, and every time we see the band we add another piece of information about that bird's life.



An Arctic Tern – Photo by Zak

You may notice us wearing some strange looking hats in our photos. While we'd like to pretend these are the very latest in high fashion, they're actually a practical method of tern defense. When protecting their nests, adult terns aren't afraid to peck an invader, be it gull or eagle or human, on the head. They typically aim for the highest part of the body, so adding a flag to the top of your hat is a good way to keep your head from getting pecked.



Tern attack! Adult Common Terns defend their nests from an invading mammal (aka Amy) – Photo by Zak

We've got a few more terns stories coming up, plus an update on some of our other seabirds, like Black Guillemots and Leach's Storm Petrels, so stay tuned!

-Amy

Tern Chicks and Welcomed Visitors!

Posted in [Ship Island 2013](#), tagged [chicks](#), [least](#), [roseate](#), [summer solstice](#), [sunrise](#), [tern](#) on June 22, 2013

Hello from Ship Island! The beginning of summer marked not only the start of a new season here on Ship, but the start of something that has been highly anticipated for over a month now: the arrival of

Tern chicks!! These tiny bundles of life began hatching yesterday, June 21, and now we have over 30. With each nest having typically 3 eggs, and with at least 436 nests, we are looking forward to seeing many baby Terns in the coming days! We knew they would be arriving soon and found “pipping eggs” a few days prior to hatch. Tern chicks possess an “egg tooth” at the end of their bill to help them break out of their shell. They poke a small hole near the top a day before they hatch which we call a “pip.” Once they hatch, the chicks are wet and have bits of shell stuck to their down, but soon dry out into fluffy little babies.



A “pipping” egg that will likely hatch tomorrow.



A tiny, still-wet chick! Hardly bigger than the egg he/she came from.



Two fluffy chick siblings!

In additional news, the island was visited the other day by two very important guests: Least and Roseate Terns! Ship Island is at the northern end of both species' ranges, and both are State Endangered while Roseates are also Federally Endangered. Both came in pairs, and both were landing on the beach repeatedly and integrating themselves into the colony. After an hour or so the Least's flew on again, but the Roseates were seen courting with fish on the beach and searching for nesting sites in the grass. We believe they stayed the night, and were heard the next day, but have not been seen or heard today. We hope that they come back and decide to make Ship Island their home! Since they were here only briefly, and to minimize their disturbance, I was not able to get photographs of them, so will substitute photographs I have taken in the past from another protected Maine seabird island. And lastly, I couldn't resist sharing a photo of the Summer Solstice Sunrise from the beach!

– Julia



Least Tern in flight.



Roseate Tern parent with a fledgling chick.



Summer Solstice Sunrise by Bernard Mountain.

Irises, burrow searches, and all types of weather

Posted in [Eastern Brother's Island 2013](#), tagged [Arctic Blue Flag](#), [Black Guillemot](#), [cranberries](#), [Eastern Brothers Island 2013](#), [Foul weather](#), [razorbill](#) on [June 17, 2013](#)

While the weather continues to present us here on Eastern Brothers Island with, what could be referred to as, unpleasant conditions, I am coming to believe that it is for a couple of reasons. One of those reasons is: bad weather is good for the social community. If there wasn't sloppy weather, I dare say that some Mainer's wouldn't have much else to talk about. Fog, rain, and stiff north winds, while easy to complain about, are what makes us tougher. Here is a photograph of what it's like on the island in foul weather.



Eastern Brothers Island in foul weather

Now this is the more important reason why I believe we have gray days: foul weather makes you appreciate the good days more. After spending a day inside a 12 by 16 foot cabin staring out into a gray abyss and then going outside periodically only to completely drench my attire, I found that once the sun did shine the island was even MORE glorious than before. Here is my proof:



Eastern Brothers Island in all its glory

On our good days over the past week or so we have spent hours scanning the seas for alcids and have also become familiar with some of the local lobster boats. Eastern Brothers Island is an island that Maine Coastal Islands National Wildlife Refuge is hopeful in establishing a razorbill, puffin, and tern colony on. We have seen quite a few razorbills in the adjacent waters, including 40+ foraging, but more typically see one or two closer to the cliffs. While not scanning for alcids, we are also working on learning to identify our islands plant community. Essentially we live on a bog. Western Brothers is covered, literally covered, with cranberries. We also have cloudberry, white cotton grass, and Artic Blue Flag irises; species associated with northern climates.



A hand full of mouth-puckering goodness straight from our bog



Looking an iris in the eye



Black Guillemot eggs in crack on Western Brothers Island

On a parting note for this week, we just got back from a black guillemot burrow search and were very excited to find eggs in cracks and crevices and tiny dark holes all over the cliffs. Above is a typical burrow crack.

Where Do The Gulls Go? Part 2

Posted in [Metinic Island 2013](#), tagged [Foraging](#), [GPS](#), [Gulls](#), [Herring Gulls](#), [Maps](#), [Metinic](#), [Metinic 2013](#), [Tagging](#) on June 17, 2013

It's time to find out just what our gulls have been up to since we attached GPS tags. In our first round of tagging, we sent out five tags on five separate Herring Gulls. The tags we used are useful because they are lightweight, but they don't transmit the data directly to us. Instead, we have to catch our gulls again.

We started by watching the nest. Both gull parents will help incubate the eggs, trading off throughout the day. The gull not on the nest generally heads out to forage for food. However, we only tagged one gull from each nest, so it's important that we only set the trap up when the right gull of the pair is taking his or her turn at incubation. Thankfully, the GPS tags are easy to see from a distance.

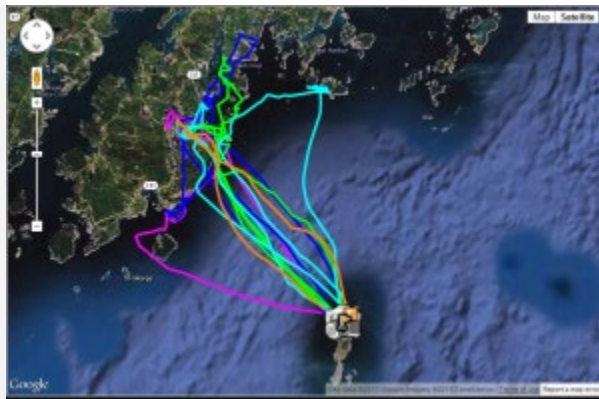
Once we know the right gull is in the area, we set the gull trap up, just like before. We were hoping they wouldn't get trap shy and refuse to sit on their eggs when the trap was present. Luckily, our first tagged gull was caught less than an hour after we set up the trap!



Success! A Herring Gull in a box trap

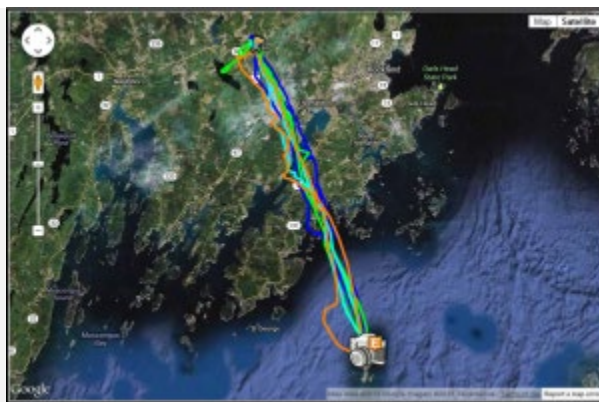
The tags were removed by cutting off the small tuft of feathers to which they were taped. Don't worry – birds regularly replaced their feathers, so the cut ones will fall out and be replaced with new ones.

After downloading the data from the tag, what we found was pretty cool: our first gull's foraging trips were more than 15 miles long. She stuck to the mainland coast, mostly between St. George and Rockland. Her trips sometimes took her more than four hours!



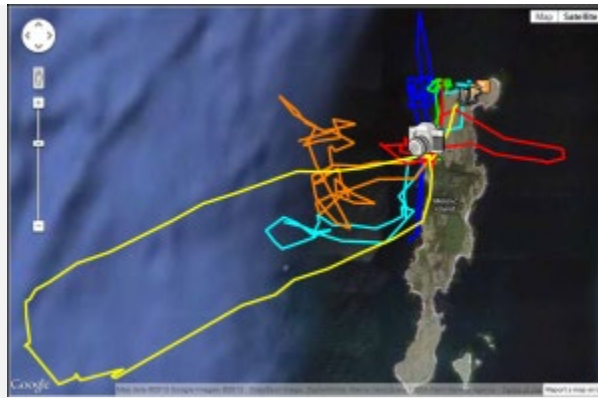
The foraging routes of our first recaptured gull

In the end, we recovered three of the first five tags we sent out, and none of the gulls followed the same paths. One gull went straight up to Warren, ME several times over a few days. That's a round-trip distance of almost 40 miles. We think he might have been looking for spawning alewives.



Our second gull made a beeline for Warren every time!

The third gull stayed local and barely left the waters around Metinic Island – it looks like she preferred feasting on the spawning polychaete sand worms just offshore.



Gull 3 must have found plenty to eat in her own backyard

We also lost two tags – the gulls managed to pull them off, so it looks like we need to come up with a new way to attach the tags. Our next step is to design a harness for the tags that the gulls can't rip or tear. Hopefully we'll have more news about our wandering gulls before the season is over.

Metinic also has plenty of terns and guillemots – expect to start hearing about them soon!

-Amy

Tern Census, Ducklings, and Osprey, oh my!

Posted in [Ship Island 2013](#), tagged [census](#), [Common Tern](#), [Osprey](#), [Ship Island](#) on June 17, 2013



Common Tern sitting down gently on her clutch of eggs.

Hello again from Ship Island! Last Friday, the 14th, we conducted an island-wide Common Tern census to determine just how many birds and nests we have here on Ship. Conducting a census involves several

people walking together in a line, looking for and recording every active nest. At the completion, we took turns guessing how many there were and came up with numbers like 300 and 350. To our astonishment, after all the corrections were applied, we ended up with a whopping 436 nests! This is 185 nests more than last year, and they are still laying. Needless to say, the Ship Island colony is growing and thriving. We even spotted a four-egg clutch! Normally, Common Terns lay between 1-3 eggs, so finding a 4-egg nest is unusual.



Four-egg clutch! We have very productive Terns.

In other exciting news, we have seen 3 clutches of Mallard ducklings already, and yesterday spotted our first Common Eider ducklings! I stumbled upon some mallards in the marsh and couldn't help snapping a quick photo before letting him run off after his family.



A wet little mallard duckling from the marsh.

Yesterday we had an Osprey fly right through the tern colony with a fish in his talons. Osprey don't prey on terns, and he was already packing his lunch, but the terns mobbed him away just the same. He hurried right out of there as fast as he could go!



Terns chasing away a startled Osprey!

Where Do The Gulls Go? Pt. 1

Posted in [Metinic Island 2013](#), tagged [Banding](#), [GPS](#), [GPS Tagging](#), [Great Black Backed Gull](#), [Gulls](#), [Herring Gull](#), [Metinic](#), [Metinic 2013](#), [Tracking](#) on June 11, 2013

You've seen them on docks. You've seen them on dumpsters. They eat fish, french fries, and everything in between. But where do all these gulls come from? And where do they go once they've finished their lunch?

Gulls can be found just about everywhere there's water (and plenty of places where there isn't). There are plenty of them around, and they've gained a reputation as garbage-eating pests. But there's way more to a gull than dumpster diving.



Some gulls, like this Great Black-backed Gull, are actually quite handsome! – Photo by Zak

First of all, gulls are actually cousins of the terns we're working so hard to protect out on these islands, and these cousins have a lot in common. Both terns and gulls prefer to nest in large colonies, and lay their eggs in nests on the ground. They're both strong fliers, capable of traveling long distances over the ocean (although nothing quite tops the pole-to-pole migration of the Arctic Tern). Males and females of both tern and gull species are almost identical (although males tend to be a little bigger) and both parents work together to raise their chicks.

So why have gulls done so well when terns are in trouble? It all comes down to food. Gulls are opportunistic – they'll eat anything. Terns are picky eaters – they generally only eat fresh-caught food they pluck from the water themselves. Like a tern, gulls also love fish. But they'll also eat mussels, urchins, crabs, and in recent years, human refuse. They've learned to follow fishing boats, flock to open dumpsters, or sometimes snatch food right out of people's hands. So gulls have thrived on these new abundant food sources, while terns have been struggling.



A Herring Gull, Metinic's most common gull – Photo by Zak

But we and the Refuge have been wondering, where exactly do Refuge Island gulls get their food? Does a gull here on Metinic fly all the way to the mainland for a meal? Or do they stay local and snack in the intertidal zone? This year is the pilot year of a study to answer those very questions with the help of GPS.

So, what's the plan?

Step 1: Catch a gull.

The best way to do this is on the nest. The setup is simple enough: the gull sits on a string tied to a wooden prop. The prop separates into two pieces and the box falls down, capturing the gull. We replace the real eggs with wooden ones so they won't accidentally get crushed. Sounds easy enough, right? Maybe not.

Some people call gulls rats with wings – and it's not a total misnomer. Both rats and gulls are a lot smarter than many people think. It took us several hours of trapping to catch our first Herring Gull.



Catch me if you can! AKA, Gulls – 3, Biologist-0

Step 2: Attach a GPS Logger

These little boxes, called IgotU tags, are programmed to take a GPS reading every 3 minutes for about 4 days. To attach one to a gull, we put it in a waterproof casing then tape it to the gull's back feathers with extra strong tape. The tag is light enough that it won't hinder the gull when it flies, and hopefully the tape will keep the gulls from preening the tag off.



IgotU tag getting taped to a Herring Gull's back – Photo by Amy

We also band the gull and take a few measurements to determine if it's a male or female.



Zak checks a GPS tag on a Herring Gull

Step 3: Release the gull!



Amy releasing a tagged and banded Herring Gull – photo by Zak

Step 4: Trap the gull again.

To get the data from the GPS loggers, we have to trap the gull again and remove the tag. Stay tuned for Part 2 to see what we find out!



A GPS-tagged Herring Gull on its way – Photo by Zak

– Amy

Alcid antics

Posted in [Petit Manan Island 2013](#), tagged [alcids](#), [Atlantic Puffin](#), [Petit Manan](#), [Puffins](#), [razorbill](#), [willet](#) on June 11, 2013

The field crew here on Petit Manan just concluded two days of Alcid burrow searching along the rocky perimeter of the island. Alcids (Atlantic puffins, razorbills and black guillemots here on PMI) are a group of seabirds that have exchanged some of their flying skills for superb swimming and diving abilities. They nest in natural crevasses and cavities in rocky berms and cliffs and, in the case of puffins, in dug out burrows in sod.

During our search for burrows we discovered a beautiful willet nest on the northwestern side of the island. The nest contained 4 gorgeous eggs; hopefully we can find the chicks when they hatch!



Locating Alcid burrows gave us a good idea of where the puffins, razorbills and guillemots are concentrating their nesting efforts. In a week or two we should start to see the first puffin chicks.



Green Island Census

Posted in [Petit Manan Island 2013](#), tagged [Common Eider](#), [Great Black Backed Gull](#), [Green Island](#), [Gull census](#) on June 8, 2013



Petit Manan in the foreground and Green Island, connected to PMI by a rocky bar at low tide.

Last Tuesday, the crew headed over to Green Island, joined by biologists Linda, Sara, and Christa, and two SCA students, to survey the seabirds nesting there. After being dropped on the Northeast side of the island, we were all issued "egg rings," PVC pipe connectors that are sized to allow herring gull eggs to pass through but not great black-backed gull. We formed a line going from the berm through the vegetation and headed west counting gull and common eider nests as we went along.



Egg ring for determining whether a nest belongs to a Herring or Black-backed Gull

Common eider nests are hidden in the vegetation and beautifully made from the mother hen's down feathers. She incubates her clutch of 2-9 eggs for around 25 days, only taking breaks in the evenings to drink and feed. After the first week of incubation females are reported to stay on the nest night and day unless disturbed. They go up to 3 weeks without leaving their clutch!



An eider nest lined with down.

Skirting the western edge of Green Island, we found the first great black-backed gull chicks of the season and a Canada goose gosling. As we headed back to Petit Manan along the bar from Green Island we spotted two oyster catchers in the cove. In years past they have nested on Green Island, we are hoping they do so this year as well.



Andrea holding a Black-backed Gull Chick.

Record Breakers on Metinic!

Posted in [Meticnic Island 2013](#), tagged [Birding](#), [Meticnic](#), [Meticnic 2013](#), [Migration](#), [Sparrow](#), [species list](#), [Tanager](#), [Warblers](#) on June 6, 2013

After a tough summer last year, we've been giving the terns of Metinic a little extra space. Zak and I have been minimizing our time in the tern colony itself so that the terns can feel safe and undisturbed. This leaves us with some free time on our hands, so we've been keeping busy and satisfying our love of birds by looking for migrating birds in the Metinic woods.



Black-throated Green Warbler – by Zak

Reports from previous years included a list of all the species seen on Metinic during each season. We counted them up and found 131 species was the previous record. However (drumroll please)...

As of today, we've got a new record: 135 species!

Many of these species are migrants that stop over on Metinic on their way to more northerly breeding grounds. On one single rainy day, we saw 90 species, most of them warblers and other small songbirds in a "fallout" from the bad weather.



Northern Parula eating a fly – by Zak

To celebrate, here are some of the best photos of our visiting feathery friends. Wish them luck because they've still got quite a ways to travel – some are headed all the way to the Arctic! (Click on the pictures to see them more clearly)



Scarlet Tanager – by Zak



American Oystercatcher – by Zak



Black-billed Cuckoo – by Zak



Lincoln's Sparrow – by Zak



Yellow Warbler – by Zak

135 birds, and we've still got a month and half on the island. We'll keep you posted as our list grows!

-Amy

A Rugged Gem of an Island

Posted in [Eastern Brother's Island 2013](#), tagged [Black Guillemot](#), [Eastern Brothers Island 2013](#), [island living](#), [seabirds](#) on June 5, 2013



Gray skies over Eastern Brother's Island

Greetings from Mary and Jake on Eastern and Western Brother's! This is the first summer for both of us working with the Maine Coastal Islands National Wildlife Refuge and we are really excited to be here on "our" island. We were launched out from Jonesport, Maine on a truly downeast day: rain pelting our faces, swells rolling across the bay, and fog blanketing the coast. The Refuge staff helped unload our gear, gave us a quick tour of the islands, and then waved good-bye with haste as the weather was only going to deteriorate.

The storm that then moved in created 10 foot southerly swells that crashed like huge geysers up the 60-70 foot cliffs on Eastern Brothers. We survived the storm and here we are two weeks in to exploring and marveling at the beauty our islands have to offer.

Through our morning counts, alcid watches, tern stints and personal explorations we have discovered a lot already about our island habitat. First and most prominent, our black guillemot colony is thriving. Daily we watch the hundreds of birds circling and nodding in courtship behavior. We have found several burrows with eggs and it seems as though the "big push" is still to come.



Black Guillemots in the fog

Also to note, the single common tern (known as Reggie) that has resided in the tern colony previous years has returned. While he seems more than content loafing on the rocks and foraging huge fish for himself, we are slightly worried that he might have an existential breakdown. “Why don’t they fly with me? Why are they never hungry?” These can only be the questions Reggie asks himself day to day.



Reggie on decoy's head

Here's to a summer full of seabirds and many more beautiful sunsets on the coast of Maine! ~Mary and Jake



Jake taking in our first sunset

It's Time for Nests!

June 4, 2013 by [MCINWR](#)

With migration all but over and done with, birds here on Ship Island have begun the second phase of their summer cycle: nesting! We found our first Common Tern nests on May 27, and now have over 100 nests. Both parents take "turns" incubating the eggs, and the male often reinforces their pair bond by bringing his female fresh fish. They work together to choose a nest site, then begin scraping the ground with their feet to form a shallow bowl that they will later decorate with twigs and shells.



One of our very first Tern eggs, this one a nice speckled brown.



One of our early nests recently – a full clutch of eggs and much more well-defined nest cup.

The other birds here on the island have begun nesting as well, and today we found 2 Savannah Sparrow nests and 2 or 3 Spotted Sandpiper nests. Savannah Sparrows typically make their nests on the interior of the island, forming a bowl of protective dried grasses in the fields.



Savannah Sparrow nest with three tiny little eggs.

Spotted Sandpipers, on the other hand, make nests near the water's edge. These sandpipers, and others, differ from song birds like sparrows in that it is the female, not the male, who sets up and defends a territory. She and potential mates choose a nest site together, form a shallow bowl rimmed with grasses, then once the eggs are laid, the female leaves it up to the male to incubate. Females may have multiple partners or they may choose just one.



Spotted Sandpiper nest found along one of our trails, with four eggs that look a lot like a Tern's, but smaller.

Though we haven't found their nests yet, we know that Yellow Warblers, Common Yellowthroats, and Song Sparrows are also nesting here. Until next time,

– Julia

Archive for May, 2013

[Meet Metinic's 2013 Crew](#)

Posted in [Metinic Island 2013](#), tagged [2013](#), [Arctic Terns](#), [Common Eiders](#), [Common Terns](#), [Gulls](#), [Metinic 2013](#), [Metinic Island](#) on May 29, 2013

Hello from the 2013 Metinic Crew!

There will two of us on this amazing island this year.

I'm Amy, and I'm returning for my second summer with Maine Coastal Island National Wildlife Refuge. If you're a long-term reader of this blog, you might remember my entries from Ship Island last year. I'm a graduate of Colby College, and this is my third summer on seabird islands (2nd with the MCINWR).



A Common Tern on Metinic Island – photo by Amy

Joining me on Metinic Island is Zak, a student at Michigan State University. This is Zak's first time on a seabird island, but he's had tons of other bird-y experiences, including work in China and Costa Rica. His most recent accomplishment is almost single-handedly meeting the all-time high species count for Metinic Island in under 3 weeks (more on that in future entries).



Our house on Metinic under the stars – Photo by Zak

Also settling in for the summer are our reasons for being here: terns, guillemots, eider, and gulls. It was a rough summer for the terns last year – bad weather and high levels of predation caused the colony to abandon the island before their eggs had hatched. Luckily, they've come back this year to give it another try! We've seen over 150 Common and Arctic Terns hanging out on the north point of Metinic. We hope to see eggs sometime in the next two weeks – keep your fingers crossed for us and the birds!



Arctic Terns investigating a nest scrape – photo by Amy

In the meantime, gulls, Spotted Sandpipers, and Common Eiders are already sitting on eggs, while Black Guillemots and Leach's Storm Petrels have been examining and excavating burrows.



A nest of Common Eider eggs – look at all that soft down! – Photo by Amy

We've just recovered from a stretch of rainy and windy weather, so expect more soon!



A Herring Gull in the rain – Photo by Amy

– Amy

We've "Shipped" Out!

Posted in [Ship Island 2013](#), tagged [Maine](#), [MCINWR](#), [migrants](#), [seabirds](#), [shorebirds](#), [Terns](#), [USFWS](#), [Warbler](#) on May 22, 2013



The cabin we are going to call home for the summer.

Finally, after weeks of anticipation and planning, we (Julia and Katie) have arrived at the island we are going to call home for an entire summer. Our island is called Ship Island, and it lies in Blue Hill Bay, Maine, just a few miles off shore. At just 11 acres, the small island will be called home to not just ourselves, but to a variety of various song birds, sparrows, and seabirds. Our focus, of course, will be on the seabirds, and we are looking forward to a wonderful summer with them.

May on the islands provides a fantastic opportunity to witness the migration of birds. As islands along critical oceanic migration routes, the Refuge's islands are essential to providing migrating birds a place to refuel and refresh. For the biologists, it is an exciting time to witness new species and observe them closely as they forage voraciously in trees and shrubs just feet away.



Northern Parula from the back window.

Like Petit Manan and other islands, Ship Island has been privy to sundry migrants: 72 in total at the close of today. It seems that nearly every morning we wake up to a new bird song. This morning, it was the Bobolink with his "R2D2" voice.



Bobolink singing his "R2D2" song in front of a tern blind and West Barge Island

But the migrants are not the only exciting birds we see here – shorebirds flock to our sandy beaches, scouring the rack line for tasty morsels as they probe incessantly with their long bills. Lately we have been seeing up to 50 Black-bellied Plovers, still in the process of molting into their striking summer

plumage. Others have included Least, Semipalmated, and Purple Sandpipers, Ruddy Turnstones, Dunlin, Willets, Whimbrels, Short-billed Dowitchers, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Semipalmated and Piping Plovers.

Until next time,

Julia





Petit Manan Island: It's Raining Migrants!

Posted in [Petit Manan Island 2013](#), tagged [Migration](#), [Petit Manan Island](#), [Warblers](#) on May 21, 2013



Petit Manan Island (on one of the few sunny days so far)

Andrea and I (Jordan) have been on Petit Manan Island (PMI) for a little over a week now, getting the island ready for the seabird breeding season. Although the weather has been rather wet and dreary, we've put up our observation blinds from which we can watch the Common and Arctic Terns that nest all over the ground, as well as the Alcids (Atlantic Puffins, Razorbills, and Black Guillemots) that nest in rock and sod cavities along the perimeter of the island. There are not many seabirds yet—the terns are still arriving (we're up to about 500 now), and they only land on the island at night and in the early morning, and the Alcids are just scoping out burrow locations. But luckily for us bird nerds, there are TONS of migrating songbirds stopping to rest and refuel on PMI. We've seen over 50 bird species so far, including many warblers, thrushes, and sparrows that are moving through on their way to their breeding grounds. We've included photos of some of the migrants we've seen so far, and we'll keep you posted as the seabirds settle in!



Black and White Warbler



Eastern Bluebird



American Redstart



Magnolia Warbler

PMI Bird List 2013

- #1 Bobolink 5/10
- #2 Common Raven 5/10
- #3 Common Eider 5/10
- #4 Black Guillemot 5/10
- #5 Common Tern 5/10
- #6 Arctic Tern 5/10
- #7 Savannah Sparrow 5/10
- #8 White-throated Sparrow 5/10
- #9 Great Black-backed Gull 5/10
- #10 Herring Gull 5/10
- #11 Double-crested Cormorant 5/10
- #12 Atlantic Puffin 5/10
- #13 Barn Swallow 5/10
- #14 Laughing Gull 5/10
- #15 Chipping Sparrow 5/14
- #16 Myrtle Warbler 5/14
- #17 Black & White Warbler 5/14
- #18 Song Sparrow 5/11
- #19 Gray Catbird 5/11
- #20 Yellow Palm Warbler 5/11
- #21 Great Blue Heron 5/11
- #22 Spotted Sandpiper 5/11
- #23 Common Loon 5/11
- #24 Northern Harrier 5/11
- #25 Swainson's Thrush 5/12
- #26 Razerbill 5/12
- #27 Blackpoll Warbler 5/13
- #28 Great Cormorant 5/14
- #29 Canada Goose 5/14
- #30 American Crow 5/14
- #31 Sharp-shinned Hawk 5/14
- #32 Peregrine Falcon 5/14
- #33 Leach's Storm Petrel 5/14
- #34 Common Yellowthroat 5/14
- #35 White-crowned Sparrow 5/15
- #36 Pine Warbler 5/15
- #37 Eastern Bluebird 5/15
- #38 Yellow Warbler 5/15/1
- #39 Empidonax Flycatcher 5/16
- #40 Ruby-crowned Kinglet 5/16
- #41 Magnolia Warbler 5/16
- #42 Dark-eyed Junco 5/17
- #43 Lincoln's Sparrow 5/17
- #44 American Goldfinch 5/17
- #45 Bald Eagle 5/17
- #46 Ruby-throated Hummingbird 5/17
- #47 Ovenbird 5/17
- #48 American Redstart 5/18
- #49 Eastern Kingbird 5/20
- #50 Canada Warbler 5/21
- #51 American Pipit 5/21



2013 Bird List (so far)