

# Observations on Colonial Waterbirds Breeding at Presqu'ile Provincial Park

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The status of colonial waterbirds breeding at Presqu'ile Provincial Park (most specifically on Gull Island and High Bluff Island), Northumberland Co. (Figure 1), has been well documented. Notes and observations on certain species (mainly *laridae*) have been made by personnel from the Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS), provincial park staff and certain individuals for several years. In some cases, these observations have been published. The most recent, inclusive publication that treats all colonial species here is the *Birds of Presqu'ile Ontario* (McRae 1982). The purpose of the present note is to update information pertaining to colonial waterbirds since the appearance of this publication, which includes information up to and including 1980.

## Species Accounts

### *Double-crested Cormorant*

The rise and fall (and subsequent rise) of the Double-crested

Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax auritus*) on the Great Lakes has been well documented by the CWS. Cormorants first appeared as a breeding species on the Great Lakes in the late 1930s on Scotch Bonnet Island, Lake Ontario, off western Prince Edward Co. By 1940, there were about 200 pairs nesting there, and the species was expanding and establishing itself elsewhere. It would appear that cormorants reached a peak of about 925 pairs on the Great Lakes in the 1940s. By the late 1950s, there began a gradual decrease in cormorant numbers (due in part to persecution), and by 1972 it was estimated that only 175 breeding pairs remained on the Great Lakes; by mid-decade they had all but disappeared. The late 1970s witnessed an increase both in numbers and in new colonies. In 1980, the CWS estimated about 375 pairs breeding in three colonies on Lake Ontario, and a total of about 800 pairs in several colonies throughout the Great Lakes (D.V.

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Weseloh, pers. comm.).

Recent figures indicate that about 10,000 pairs of Double-crested Cormorants nested on the Great Lakes in 1987; 3400 of these in seven colonies on Lake Ontario alone! Cormorants first appeared as a breeding species at Presqu'ile in 1985, when McRae discovered them nest-building on Gull Island on 7 June. On 1 July McRae and M. Illes counted a total of 116 active nests, 114 in trees and 2 on the ground.

In 1986 (23 June), the authors counted 129 active nests on Gull Island (including 7 active nests on the ground), and an additional 23 nests on High Bluff Island. This was the first instance of nesting on High Bluff. Most nests were situated in live trees (willow, elm, ash, maple and poplar), at heights ranging

from 2.5 -8m above the ground. It appeared that most nests held eggs on that date, but a few young were noted. By 1987, the colony had experienced phenomenal growth, and on 17 June, Richards, M. Peck and W. Scorns counted 447 active nests on Gull Island (including 42 ground nests) and 42 active nests on High Bluff Island. While most nests held from one to four eggs on this date, a few contained young at various stages of growth. It would appear that on Gull Island tree nesting by cormorants has reached the saturation point due to the availability of sites, but that ground nesting could increase dramatically. At present there would appear to be nothing limiting future expansion of the colony on High Bluff.

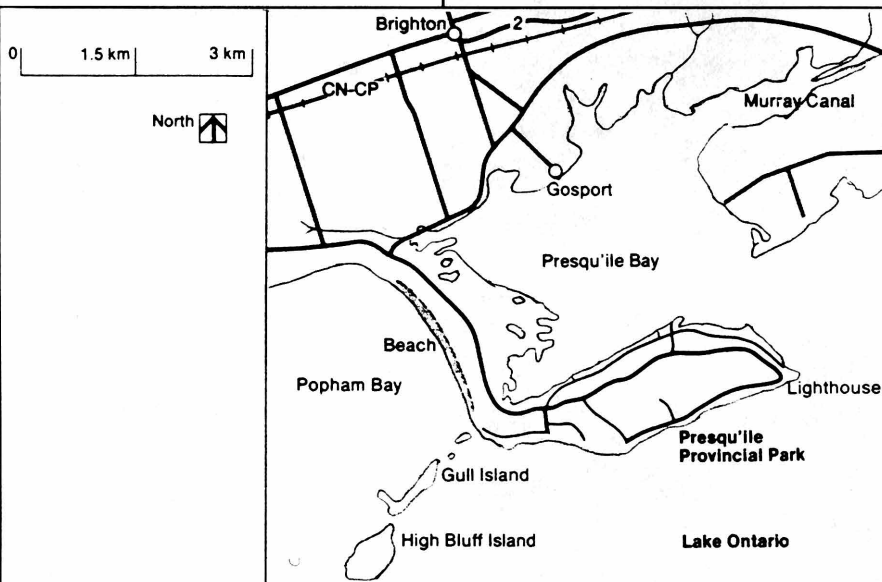


Figure 1: Presqu'ile Provincial Park, Gull Island and High Bluff Island. Map reprinted courtesy of the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources.

### *Cattle Egret*

The first known breeding records of the Cattle Egret (*Bubulcus ibis*) in Canada occurred in 1962, when an active nest was found on Luther Marsh, Wellington Co., in June, and a nest with one egg was discovered by Richards on 5 July on Gull Island, Presqu'île Provincial Park amid a small colony of Black-crowned Night-Herons (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) (Baillie 1963). There were no reported Cattle Egret nestings in Ontario in 1963. On 7 June 1964, Richards and R.G. Tozer discovered three active nests on Gull Island and a nest with three young was observed there by W. Wyett in 1965 (McRae 1982). There have been no known nestings at Presqu'île since then, although

adults were observed in the vicinity of Presqu'île and its islands in 1966, 1973 and 1977. Peck and James (1983) list three other known breeding sites for this species in Ontario other than Luther Marsh and Presqu'île; Pigeon Island, Frontenac Co., in 1968; Amherst Island, Lennox and Addington Co., in 1970 and Pelee Island and East Sister Island, Essex Co., during the mid-1970s. Peck and James (1983) document only 50 nests for the entire province. During the recent *Ontario Breeding Birds Atlas Project* (1981-1985), the only record of a potentially breeding Cattle Egret was obtained from Walpole Island, Kent Co. (Cadman *et al.* 1987); no nestings were confirmed.

### *Black-crowned Night-Heron*

Since this species was first recorded as nesting at Presqu'île by Richards in 1962 (McRae 1982), when he found 15 active nests in sumacs on Gull Island (5 July), the colony has fluctuated greatly in size and location. While Black-crowned Night Herons no longer nest on Gull Island, nesting has been regular on nearby High Bluff, but at scattered locations. The colony now seems to have stabilized, with between 30-40 nesting pairs as observed by the authors on 25 June 1986, and by Richards, Scorns and S. LaForest on 15 June 1987. H. Blokpoel (pers. comm.) of the CWS recorded only 19 nests in 1984. Once, in 1980, the main colony shifted from the islands to the mainland area, and was established in the cattail marsh



Common Tern. Photo by Donald M. Fraser.

of Presqu'ile Bay with only two nests left active on the island (High Bluff) as observed by McRae, J. Dean and G. Fox on 16 June (McRae 1982). The colony appeared to peak in numbers in 1978-79 when about 79 active nests were counted by McRae and D. Moffatt on High Bluff Island.

#### *Great Black-backed Gull*

Peck and James (1983) present only four Ontario breeding records for the Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*) in the province. Three of these records are from Presqu'ile, and are undoubtedly the same three cited by McRae (1982) as follows: nest on Gull Island found by A. Bunker and G. Lambert on 24 June 1962; nest on Gull Island on 29 June 1963, by Richards; nest on Gull Island on 6 June 1970 by Tozer and Richards. There were no other known records from Presqu'ile until a nest was reported by CWS staff on High Bluff Island in 1984 (Blokpoel, pers. comm.). In 1985, there were two confirmed nesting for Presqu'ile; one pair on Gull Island and another pair on High Bluff Island noted by McRae *et al.* A nest was recorded by CWS staff on Gull Island on 19 May 1986 and on 23 June the authors noted a pair with three large flightless young there. Also in 1986, in the second known instance of more than one breeding pair at Presqu'ile, McRae and Richards discovered a nest with two eggs on High Bluff Island on June 25. On 15-16 June 1987 three breeding pairs were noted by

Richards, Peck, Scorns and LaForest; two pairs on High Bluff Island and one pair on Gull Island, all attending large young. In the *Atlas of Breeding Birds of Ontario* (Cadman *et al.* 1987), Blokpoel cites 8 confirmed nestings in the province during the period 1981-1985, including the two at Presqu'ile in 1985.

#### *Herring Gull*

Traditionally, Herring Gulls (*L. argentatus*) have nested on Gull Island with annual variations in their numbers. Usually between 50-100 pairs are present. In recent years, Herring Gull numbers appear to be lower. The first nest was discovered on High Bluff Island by Dean, McRae and R. Tait, on 17 July 1979. Nesting now occurs on both islands in good numbers. A complete summary and analysis of this species as it relates to the islands at Presqu'ile is in preparation by CWS staff (Blokpoel *et al.*, in prep.).

#### *Ring-billed Gull*

The first recorded breeding of the Ring-billed Gull (*L. delawarensis*) at Presqu'ile was on Gull Island in 1948 when G. North found 10 active nests. Since that time the colony has continued to grow and appears to have peaked at about 100,000 pairs in 1958 according to R. Scovell (McRae 1982). We suspect that these figures actually represent individual birds, not pairs. CWS staff report that between 23,000 and 27,000 pairs continue to

breed on Gull Island. In 1979 (17 July) a new colony was discovered on nearby High Bluff Island by Dean, McRae and Tait, and it was estimated that 679 nests were occupied at that time. The following year, the colony had grown to between 10–15,000 pairs according to Fox. Blokpoel (pers. comm.) estimates that a total of 35,200 nesting birds were on High Bluff in 1987. As with the preceding species, a paper is in preparation regarding the status of this species at Presqu'île (Blokpoel *et al.*, in prep.).

#### *Common Tern*

The first reported nesting of Common Tern (*Sterna hirundo*) for Presqu'île was in 1948 when about 150 breeding pairs were discovered on Gull Island by G. North (McRae 1982). Tozer and Richards (unpubl. data) estimate that upwards of 10,000 pairs were present in the mid-1960s. Not unlike other colonies in southern Ontario, Common Tern numbers began to decrease in the early 1970s. In 1971, the Presqu'île colony had dropped to about 180 pairs according to Richards. Blokpoel recorded only three pairs in 1976! The colony had grown to about 16 pairs in 1980, 62 in 1983, 161 in 1984 and 227 in 1985 (Blokpoel, pers. comm.). On 19 May 1986, CWS staff counted 42 nests around the central pond on Gull Island (the traditional nesting site) but it would appear that heavy rains and high water levels had reduced the colony

to a single pair as observed by the authors on 23 June. On 18 May 1987, the CWS counted 38 nests on Gull Island, but only 36 could be found by Richards, LaForest and Scorns on 15 June.

#### *Caspian Tern*

The breeding of the Caspian Tern (*S. caspia*) has been well established at several Lake Ontario sites, throughout Georgian Bay and Lake Huron and elsewhere in Ontario. It is also possible that Caspian Terns nest on Lake Erie and at scattered locations in northern Ontario (Cadman *et al.* 1987). McRae (1982) lists two breeding records for Presqu'île. The first recorded nesting was on 15 June 1959 by J. Woodford and a second nest was found on 16 July of the same year (also on Gull Island) by D. Scovell. McRae (1982) also states that this species was reported as nesting at Presqu'île (one or two pairs) from the late 1950s until 1966. This statement is based on nests found on 7 June 1964 by Tozer and Richards on Gull Island (a nest with one young and a second nest with three eggs) and a nest with two eggs on Gull Island on 22 May 1966 by Richards and Tozer.

A nest was reported from Gull Island in June, 1984 by J. Chardine (CWS). Cadman *et al.* (1987) record this species as a confirmed breeder at Presqu'île between 1981 and 1985 but give no details. We know of no other published accounts. In 1986, the authors found a nest with one egg on Gull

Island and a second pair 'on territory', both on 23 June. In 1987, what would constitute the first "colony" for Presqu'île was initiated. Seven nests were noted by CWS personnel on 18 May, and on 15 June Richards, LaForest and Scorns discovered 36 active nests. The majority of nests held one to two eggs (some contained three) on that date, and a few nests contained newborn young. The colony was located in a barren zone resulting from receding water levels at a nearby pond in the central portion of Gull Island. The colony was being heavily preyed upon by Ring-billed Gulls. This colony warrants periodic monitoring and special protection in the coming years if it is to succeed.

### Summary

Knowledge of the actual breeding status and success of these colonial waterbirds can only be determined through periodic visitation and aircraft surveillance of the nesting islands. Careful monitoring is necessary to determine numbers, conditions and success/failure rates. However, it cannot be stressed too strongly that the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (OMNR), under whose jurisdiction these particular islands fall, should make every attempt to discourage unwarranted visits by persons not authorized to conduct such field work. As well, they should enforce present restrictions which govern visitation by park visitors, campers and boaters.

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