

RE-ESTABLISHING MUSKEGET ISLAND  
AS AN ALTERNATE NESTING SITE FOR MONOMOY TERNS

By Richard A. Forster, Framingham

Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge is unexcelled as a stopover area for migrant shorebirds. It is also a nesting place for terns and gulls. The 1980 figures for terns included 3400 pairs of Common, 400 pairs of Roseate, 5 pairs of Arctic, and about 750 pairs of Laughing Gulls. Also in 1980 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service conducted a careful census of Great Black-backed and Herring Gulls and determined that there were about 18,500 pairs of gulls, of which about 80% were Herring Gulls.

Only recently has Monomoy become a favored nesting area for gulls and terns. Monomoy Island was connected to the mainland until 1958 when a severe storm separated Monomoy from the mainland at a point just south of Morris Island. In the mid-1960's Common Terns became established in a colony on the southern end of Monomoy. These birds represented terns displaced by the burgeoning gull population from Tern Island in Chatham.

The first Herring Gulls nested on Monomoy in 1966. Since that time the Monomoy gull population has increased to the extent that it is one of the largest gull colonies, if not the largest, in the eastern United States. The Monomoy tern colony is now located on the northern end of the island at a point that is now subject to severe erosion. The gulls are nesting right up to the periphery of the tern colony, and a few even attempt to nest in the colony itself. Because of these extreme conditions, it is imperative to establish an alternate nesting site in the event that the present tern colony is destroyed by erosion.

Muskeget Island has had a history similar to Monomoy. Muskeget had long been a favored tern nesting area and numbers were probably at a peak, 20,000 pairs, about 1920. Since 1935 the terns steadily decreased and from 1950 on only sporadic nesting attempts have been recorded. In 1950 about 20,000 pairs of Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls were nesting on Muskeget and had displaced the terns. A census of gulls in June, 1980 indicated that about 800 pairs of gulls were nesting on Muskeget, a substantial drop from the 1950 figures. Many of the gulls that formerly nested on Muskeget may have relocated to Monomoy or other locations.

In 1981 the Massachusetts Audubon Society placed a man and a dog on Muskeget in an attempt to drive the remaining nesting gulls from the island and restore it as a potential tern nesting site.

The Monomoy colony is not only threatened by erosion and the expanding gull population but is also subject to extensive predation by Great Horned Owl and Black-crowned Night Heron. It is a simple matter for the horned owl to commute from the

mainland. Muskeget Island is sufficiently distant from adjacent mainland areas that predation would not be a major factor limiting tern productivity. Thus, re-establishing Muskeget Island as a potential tern nesting area is an attractive proposition.

The existing tern colony adds to the attractiveness of Monomoy as a birdwatchers' paradise. It is one of relatively few locations where Roseate Tern is a guaranteed sight. However, it may be to the ultimate benefit of the terns if they abandon the Monomoy colony for a more secure location. Even if the terns were to leave, Monomoy would remain an excellent birdwatching hot spot.

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