

THE ISLAND OF MOCKING LAUGHTER
By Mabel Gillespie

South of Cape Cod and Buzzards Bay in Massachusetts there are between fifteen and twenty islands, the largest of which are Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket, well known vacation resorts. Off the northwestern end of Nantucket lies Tuckernuck Island, and to its northwest is Muskeget Island. Seven or eight miles west of Muskeget is Wasque Point on Chappaquiddick, an island which is almost attached to the Vineyard. The four larger islands have barrier beaches or sand dune areas where gulls and terns nest. Muskeget is entirely uninhabited by man, and treeless. Its area, perhaps two square miles, is a nesting mecca for thousands of gulls.

It would be interesting to know the avian history of this island for the past five hundred years. The late Edward Howe Forbush, in "Birds of Massachusetts and Other New England States" Vol. I, states that he was told Laughing Gulls were abundant on Muskeget about 1850, but that through the subsequent depredations of egg and plume hunters the colony was nearly extirpated. About 1880 there were no more than twelve pairs nesting on the island.

Forbush describes the island bird life much as my husband and I saw it on the occasion of our first banding visit there in 1928. "When I first visited Muskeget in 1908 ... we were lost in wonder at the enormous flocks of its feathered inhabitants. As we approached the nesting grounds we were soon in the midst of a veritable storm of darting, diving, sailing, fluttering, screaming terns, while high above our heads in the blue and cloudless sky floated innumerable black-headed gulls, their clear cries mingling with the harsher sounds given out by the screaming terns. Nests were there in thousands: but while those of the terns were usually quite open and unconcealed on the sands, those of the gulls were more often made beneath the shelter of the high beach grass or that of umbraeous plants like the poison-ivy, a path beneath the vegetation leading in at one side of a nest and out the other."

Our banding visits to Muskeget continued from 1928 to 1936. I have no knowledge of any banding done on the island thereafter until 1957 when the William Peppers, Grace Meleney, and I participated in a day's banding there. During the twenty years' interim we had noticed about Martha's Vineyard a gradual diminution of Laughing Gulls and a tremendous increase of Herring Gulls. Formerly we seldom saw one of the latter; presently we seldom see one of the former. We had supposed, therefore, when we made our 1957 visit that we would see very few Laughing Gulls on Muskeget. Much to our surprise we found hundreds of nesting pairs. No longer, however, were the Laughing Gulls all over the island under the ivy growth. In fact, there had been a change even in the ivy growth. While there was still plenty of it, it did not seem as rampantly obiquitous as formerly. There were large, shrubby growths of beach plum which I do not remember

seeing before. The Laughing Gulls were crowded into limited areas, of which there were five, where the young ran about congestedly like chicks in a poultry yard. In the old days we had hunted with difficulty for the young below the thick covering of ivy; now we scooped them up by dozens more or less in the open.

With so many Laughing Gulls still breeding on Muskeget it seems surprising that we were seeing so few in the air about the Vineyard. I have no idea why this is so.

Obviously when we visited the island in 1928 there were far fewer terns nesting there than Forbush reported in 1912. The almost impenetrable mats of poison ivy covered extensive areas and terns nest only on open, sandy areas. However, we banded a few young of both the Common and Roseate species. Forbush stated that Arctic Terns formerly nested on Muskeget in considerable numbers. This was the southernmost breeding station for Arctics. The species must have suffered from the depredations of plume hunters. It is claimed that 40,000 terns of the various species were killed in a single year in the eighties. A few Arctics probably still nest in the general area.

Neither in 1957 nor in 1958 did I so much as see a tern of any species during the hours when on Muskeget, though terns in flight were frequently observed during the sail from and back to the Vineyard. I was not able to cover more than a quarter of the area of Muskeget in the few hours there.

Forbush reported finding Herring Gulls breeding on Skiffs Island in 1919, though at that time Herring Gulls rarely nested as far south as Massachusetts. Skiffs is a part of a long shoal off Wasque Point which sometimes has enough area above high tide to attract nesting gulls or terns. In 1920 two Herring Gull nests were reported on a sand spit off Muskeget. In 1929 one Herring Gull nest was found on Muskeget proper. In 1930 our banding group visited a sand spit near Muskeget and banded several hundred young Herring Gulls. By 1936 we were banding ever increasing numbers on Muskeget proper.

Since that time Herring Gull colonies have been established elsewhere on the islands. There are very large breeding colonies on Cape Poge Elbow and on Little Neck on Chappaquiddick, and in the Lobsterville dunes on Martha's Vineyard. There are colonies on Nantucket and on Tuckernuck.

Back in the twenties it was unusual to see a Great Black-backed Gull even in late summer. Recently Black-backs have started to nest on the islands and their nestings are increasing in number each year.

This brief survey indicates that dynamics of nature rather than the

interferences of man are responsible for changing gull and tern populations. Even though the depredations of egg and plume hunters nearly exterminated Laughing Gulls and terns of several species on Muskeget, the birds were able, in the natural course of the following years, to stage a come-back in numbers. Also, in fairly recent years, there have been attempts to control the exploding Herring Gull population by egg destruction. These attempts have been entirely unsuccessful.

On the other hand, ecological changes have obviously had a tremendous effect on these bird populations. It would be fascinating to know the story, not only of Muskeget, but of many islands; and of islands along the Maine and New Jersey coasts as well as the Massachusetts islands. Winds and tides build up sand bars into low-lying islands. Terns nest and, as the barren sand becomes a bit enriched by their droppings, vegetation begins to grow. Gradually the growing vegetation drives out the terns and the gulls move in. More enrichment is added to the soil and more plant species are able to survive. Given enough time, such islands might even become wooded. But, at the moment, the entire coast in the New England area is subsiding. It is a question whether the building up process can win over the general settling of the coast.

While Herring Gulls are beautiful in the air and interesting to study they have aroused a certain amount of human antagonism of late. They are clever birds and soon learn to drop shellfish from a height onto hard surfaced roads so as to smash the shell. This procedure can constitute a hazard to driving seaside highways. Furthermore, many dwellers near the shore find it frustrating to be restricted to a short season for digging bay scallops when thousands of gulls are taking the luscious morsels without regard to legal seasons.

On the other hand, gulls are important scavengers. And fishermen often find their way in the fog by listening for the cries of gulls. The only gulls that venture far from land when not migrating are the oceanic Kittiwakes. I had occasion to experience in a negative way this asset of gulls only last summer. Our Vineyard banders set out one day for Muskeget. Somewhere in the dangerous shoals and cross-rips between Chappaquiddick and Muskeget we were swallowed up in fog. Our skipper, a professional, claimed he could still find the island as he was well acquainted with the area and could recognize various shoals and currents. Every now and then he would cut the engine to listen for the cries of gulls. If we heard them it would be a sure indication that we must be near the invisible island. We never did hear the screaming gull chorus and failed to reach the island of Muskeget in spite of our skipper's assurance that we would.

Of these pros and cons, the cons bothered the predator control department of the federal Fish and Wildlife Service. According to a release by John S. Gottschalk, regional director of predator control stationed in

Boston, Mass., an "investigational team" was on Muskeget from July 18 through July 22 in 1960. The team included Dr. D.K. Wetherbee, Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit, University of Massachusetts, and Allen Morgan, Executive Vice-President of the Massachusetts Audubon Society. Permission to carry on their work was obtained only from Mr. Crocker Snow who owns about one fifth of the island. The rest belongs to the town of Nantucket and is regarded as a wildlife preserve.

As to the "investigation" a subsequent release states: "The procedure consisted of luring the birds from the island with bread cubes and then substituting poisoned cubes after the birds had begun to feed. No attempt was made to achieve a substantial reduction of bird numbers at Muskeget because of the experimental nature of the work.

"A count of birds on the island prior to the operation showed 20,000 Herring Gulls, a few Great Black-backed Gulls, some 400 Laughing Gulls, and somewhat more than 160 Common Terns. Only 240 young Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls were observed. The poison resulted in the nearly instantaneous death of birds and was judged to be quick and humane. There was no possibility of carry-over to desirable species because of the small amount of poison used and the tremendous dilution factor of the ocean waters. Approximately 1,500 Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls were destroyed. Only one Laughing Gull was affected directly. There is no evidence of damage to the rare Muskeget mouse, nor were the few young birds seriously affected directly or indirectly."

At the time this poison program was being carried out, the Nantucket banders had already made three visits to the island, banding some 3,500 Herring Gull fledglings. They had seen evidence of enough remaining unbanded fledglings to feel justified in making a fourth visit. On this final visit they were stunned to find hundreds of dead gulls.

After this episode, Dr. Wetherbee sent letters to persons who had banded at Muskeget in the past, stating that because there were so many complaints about the increasing numbers of Herring Gulls, a research study was to be made and he would appreciate all the data on Muskeget wildlife that was available. At the time I received the letter I knew nothing about the poison program and immediately answered to the best of my ability. Of course the banding information is all in the files at Laurel, but maybe it is not yet available because of the fire. This request seemed to me the normal procedure: the banders amass data, and this is used as a guide in planning wildlife programs. I was stunned soon thereafter to find out that the order of procedure had been reversed!

It was not long before the news burst forth. The residents of Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard, both permanent and vacationing, include a large number of conservation-minded persons. The editors of both island weekly papers conduct regular wildlife columns. Nantucketers were in-

curated to find that their sanctuary had been desecrated. Everyone was horrified to learn that hundreds, if not thousands, of fledglings had been left to starve because of the death by poisoning of the parent birds. During the fourth visit of the Nantucket banders they noticed emaciated fledglings, which is unusual.

In spite of the statement in the release that "there was no possibility of carry-over to desirable species because of the small amount of poison used and the tremendous dilution factor of the ocean waters", shortly after the poison episode piles of bread were found high and dry on Muskeget sands. Did you ever know of a mouse that wouldn't eat bread? And what about picnickers with curious children? Muskeget may not be frequently picnicked upon, but people do get about in motor boats these days.

I hope I am not over-sentimental, and I don't normally shed tears over dead Herring Gulls, but this was something I didn't like. The poisoners claimed that the season of helpless fledglings was over, but the banders knew better. I have already mentioned the fact that the Nantucket banders made a trip after the poisoning because they knew there were many more unbanded fledglings. The Vineyard banders went to Little Neck on Chappaquiddick on July 22, the day the poisoners finished their "research" at Muskeget. In two hours' time an assistant and I banded 148 fledgling Herring Gulls still unable to fly, as well as nine Great Black-backed Gulls. The other banders presumably handled far more than that number.

Of the two programs: bird banding and predator and rodent control, I am convinced that the former is more constructive and important. I hold no brief for Herring Gulls, but I am concerned about the prevalence of poison. Poison programs boomerang in unexpected ways and create worse problems than those the poison was supposed to solve. It seems a lazy and amateur way of meeting problems. It reminds me of the methods of disciplining children. You may administer corporal punishment, or you may spend time, patience and understanding in dealing with problems of discipline. There may be an occasional time when a swift slap is the better answer, but it is very easy to get into the sloppy habit of swift slaps.

Because bird banders are ipso facto and ex officio conservationists, we should all concern ourselves seriously with threats to our wildlife and ecology, as well as to our banding program. What is the concern of a few of us may easily become the concern of all. I was tempted to write to congressmen and to the Secretary of the Interior about the Muskeget affair, but wondered if I should take such a step without consulting other banders. Government employees are, in the last analysis, responsible to the people, and it is up to the people to watch what they are doing.

Of course the people don't always agree. Hunters and fishermen speak up for their rights and we are constantly reminded by the Fish and

Wildlife Service that without their fees the bird banding program could not be financed. I neither hunt nor fish because my time is filled with occupations that, to me, are more interesting. But I am perfectly willing that others shall hunt or fish - so long as there are adequate controls to preserve our wildlife heritage. I am very fond of bay scallops and am irritated to see Herring Gulls taking them when I can't have them. And I realize that the day may come when a conch shell will plunge through the roof of my car. But I don't think poison is the solution. Certainly not at the season when it was used last summer.

If a poison program doesn't succeed at once, it is too often continued year after year. Time to howl, taxpayers! I lived through the worst of the Japanese Beetle plague. Eventually the parasite that controlled the beetle in its natural habitat was introduced and, in my experience, this solution worked. It just took a little more ingenuity and know-how than poisoning.

We are all familiar with tent caterpillar infestations. This insect is native and its controls are here and they do control. We see the result of peak population years and worry for a few weeks. Few persons follow through so as to realize that there is a cycle which will inevitably reduce the peak population - so long as nature's balance is not upset.

Today we are faced with the problem of a Herring Gull population explosion. We don't know whether this is part of a cycle, due to ecological changes, or due to man's interference. Possibly to all three. Population explosions are nothing new in nature. The answer might be to let nature take care of the situation. But few people in the latter half of the twentieth century have the patience for that. Then we should recommend changes through ecological processes. Maybe that is what the poisoning teams will try eventually. Maybe not. But as bird banders and conservationists we have a right to know something about such control programs in advance.

The fact remains that nature built up a tremendous Laughing Gull population on Muskeget after a former large population had been reduced to twelve nesting pairs. Suppose poison succeeded in reducing the Muskeget Herring Gulls to twelve pairs or less. Wouldn't Herring Gulls from all over the New England coast rush in to fill the vacuum? Maybe the manufacturers of poisons would be delighted to have this program go on year after year. However, natural stages population declines as well as explosions. Her controls are sure to be more effective than any short-sighted human attempts.

The "investigators" have much to say about trying to control Herring Gulls in order to save Laughing Gulls. But there is no assurance that killing off one species will have a beneficial effect upon another. Even Laughing Gulls, in favor today, might become a pest tomorrow. Mankind's

favorite species are not always those of nature. And, although Laughing Gulls may be decreasing in New England, they are increasing steadily on the New Jersey coast.

Finally, may I repeat that I try to avoid sentimentality and would very much prefer fewer Herring Gulls and more Laughing Gulls in the south seas of Massachusetts. But I want to be assured that there will be reasonable coordination between the various services of Fish and Wildlife so that I can plan my small contribution to bird banding with a minimum waste of time, energy and money. And further, as a conservationist, I want to be sure that control measures are based on sound research.

In writing for publication in the past, I have referred to Muskeget as the island of mocking laughter. The cries of Laughing Gulls suggest the futility and failure of man's short-sighted attempts to control nature. Let us listen to them and take warning.

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