

## May 2008: Meditations on Terns

With an activity we feel strongly about, we often pick favorites: favorite Red Sox player, favorite actor, favorite restaurant, or, with bird-watchers, favorite bird. One of my favorite birds is the tern. I made this choice at a young age, and not only because the tern is a beautiful bird--a flyer of such grace it's often called a sea swallow--but also because this time every year terns return to the Maine coast after an incredible 12,000-mile migration flight spanning the longitude of the globe.

I've gone on several outings to see the successful Atlantic puffin colony on Eastern Egg Rock. Since their restoration, puffins have become Maine icons--they're colorful, look sort of like penguins, and whirr past like little wind-up toys. But what I secretly enjoy most about those trips is the bird circus of hundreds of terns swirling, diving, and filling the air above the island with their breath-taking aerial acrobatics and the cacophony of their screeching.

While many have become aware of efforts to bring back puffins, few realize that other colonial seabirds, including terns, have also needed help. Tern populations have suffered since European colonists first moved to islands, bringing livestock that trampled breeding colonies and eating their eggs. Then it became all the rage to wear bird feathers--sometimes whole birds--on hats, and tern feathers were in high demand. Although that practice was stopped in 1918 with passage of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, tern populations continued to be threatened by increasing numbers of gulls, thanks to open landfills which provided easy living for these predators of tern eggs and chicks.

In 2003 I was fortunate enough to join three U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) staff--Brian Benedict, Ron Joseph, and Linda Welch--on Metinic Island to help them count terns. USFWS has owned 149 acres of Metinic, about a dozen miles southeast of Rockland, since 1995. They initiated a tern restoration project there in 1998. Metinic is one of the many island gems that make up the Maine Coastal Islands National Wildlife Refuge, and private boats are not allowed to land there during nesting season. On our hour-long trip out, I feel as excited as if I were going to be shown the crown jewels.

We land in a small cove bounded by a cobble beach on the northeastern tip of the island. The bare tip of land beyond the cove is swarming with terns screaming and dive-bombing with such persistence that we have to tape flags to our hats. A house for the two young women spending the summer on the island as tern

researchers sits above the cove. I expect this. What I don't expect are all the sheep. About 100 black-faced ewes with gamboling lambs, belonging to the family that owns the other half of the island, roam freely.

This is mid-June, and the two researchers, Megan and Kristin, have been there for about a month and a half. I'm amazed they aren't completely stir crazy, focused on terns all day every day from behind two blinds. This is Megan's third summer doing this. She tells me another researcher stationed on Petit Manan island has promised to write his girlfriend every day. "What can he have to say to her each day? 'Today I banded another tern...'"

Inside the house is a dry-erase board listing "firsts"--First Egg, First Hatchling, First Fledgling. The first egg arrived in mid-May, the first chicks are hatching now. Linda tells me the chicks won't fledge for about 22 days. By summer's end, these youngsters will take flight southward on the world's longest migration.

The board also contains notes on sheep damage, such as the discovery of a trampled nest. The first few years of the restoration project, USFWS studied the impact of sheep on the site. Sheep have lived out there year round for a long time. It was decided they could stay because the sheep-cropped grass seems to be preferred tern nesting habitat. Herring and great black-gulled gulls are managed by breaking their eggs or what Brian calls "pyrotechnics," although that doesn't mean outright shooting as on some other islands in the Refuge where the terns desperately need that extra advantage to get a colony established. (The great black-backed is the world's largest gull and a fierce marauder.)

Birds were initially attracted to Metinic by using decoys and tape-recordings of tern colony noises. In 1999 the first terns nested there. Numbers progressed annually until 2005, when extreme weather devastated the colony. Numbers began to recover in 2006 and 2007. Last year, USFWS reports that there were 321 pairs of common and 338 pairs of Arctic terns on Metinic, but no nesting roseates terns, which are on the federal endangered list.

To count the tern chicks, we do a transect survey, looking for eggs and chicks and calling out numbers to Linda as we go. Some chicks we find are wet, just hatched. Some eggs are in the process of hatching. The nests are bare scrapes on the ground, many marked with red or blue flags indicating species. The eggs are works of art, splotched with brown on shades of brownish-grey. I hold a chick, the cutest ball of downy fluff, and feel no weight in my hand. It is unfathomable to me what this chick will become in just a few months.

On the beach, Arctic tern chicks blend in so well that Kristin has to point one out to me before I see it. I almost step on it--it's huddled right on bare granite--before I can pick out the speckled ball of fluff. Thinking about these tiny fragile chicks just lying among the rocks on the beach, I ask Megan about boaters who try to land on the island. She tells me a family of about 15, ten of them kids, tried to land there recently for a picnic, and she had to ask them to leave. She said the husband was nice about it, but the wife indignantly complained, "We've been coming here longer than these birds have!" Guess she didn't know her Maine island history.

Thanks to the hard work of USFWS biologists, Refuge staff, and summer researchers like Megan and Kristin (at least one case of our federal tax dollars being put to some good use), National Audubon Society, and support groups such as Friends of Maine Seabird Islands, terns will continue to be a part of Maine's island history and natural heritage. And its protected beaches will continue to serve as the stony cradles of thousands of tern chicks to come.

**Written by Kristen Lindquist**



101 Mount Battie Street, Camden, Maine 04843  
ph. 207.236.7091 fax 207.236.0612  
email: [kristenl@coastalmountains.org](mailto:kristenl@coastalmountains.org)