

# FOGGI



## FRIENDS OF GREAT GULL ISLAND

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### GREAT GULL ISLAND 2011

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The 2011 season on Great Gull Island was a great success and quite exciting! Birdathon participants raised \$12,961.95, contributing substantial support for the season. In spite of the weather Birdathon weekend you all got out and birded with very good results, which was wonderful for the Great Gull Island Project. Congratulations to the top three teams and to all of you who participated in the Birdathon as birders and/or sponsors! You provided excellent support for the 2011 season. Top three teams: Jeff Kimball and Chuck McAlexander (\$5741.75), Danny and Claire Lynch (\$890.20) and Steve and Claire Quinn (\$814.20).



In every season vegetation, particularly invasive species, limit the areas on Great Gull Island where the terns can nest. I was very pleased when Suzanne Paton at the University of Rhode Island, working through their Sea Grant program, offered us strips of landscape fabric and garden cloth to discourage the vegetation. She not only offered us the material but volunteered to bring a class to Great Gull Island to install it. Suzanne spoke to Margaret Rubega at the University of Connecticut and Margaret also offered to bring a class to the island to help install the cloth. Margaret arrived with her students April 30 and Suzanne and her group from the University of Rhode Island arrived May 7. Both groups put out strips of the two types of cloth of varying lengths in two areas at the western end of the island. They laid out the strips with about 4 – 6 feet between them. Once they were down the students sprinkled sand and dirt on top of them.

During the season some birds nested on the strips and some between the strips. The strips kept areas open through the end of June, making it much easier for checkers to check these areas for nests and chicks. By mid-July the strip areas were becoming quite overgrown, however they were still much easier to move through than areas which were not covered.

In early-May the weather was cold and wet. Bob Kane came out for a week and built six blinds – not an easy goal to meet! He sent out the Roseate Tern houses he and his wife, Sue, put together in their basement during the winter. When the University of Rhode Island students arrived, they put the houses in place. We found the first eggs in mid-May – the usual time – but this year we had more one egg clutches early in the season than we usually do. By the time of the peak hatch in mid-June baitfish were plentiful and survival was good. At the end of July, baitfish were in short supply for about ten days resulting in some mortality in the young birds. By July 28 the fish were back and there was a good supply for the rest of the summer. One well-fed young Common Tern weighed 150 grams! The normal weight for an adult is between 119 and 125 grams. We consider a 130 gram adult heavy, so that young Common Tern would have to lose a bit of weight before even thinking of getting off the ground!

We had wind and rain throughout the night before Hurricane Irene arrived. On the morning of August 28 the ocean swell, sent sea-water crashing over the retaining wall at the dock. Shingles on the roof of Paight stood straight up before blowing off. Large logs and sometimes whole trees passed the island, some narrowly missing the dock. About two hundred terns remained on the island during the storm. They sat in the lee of the pilings marking the middle of the dock



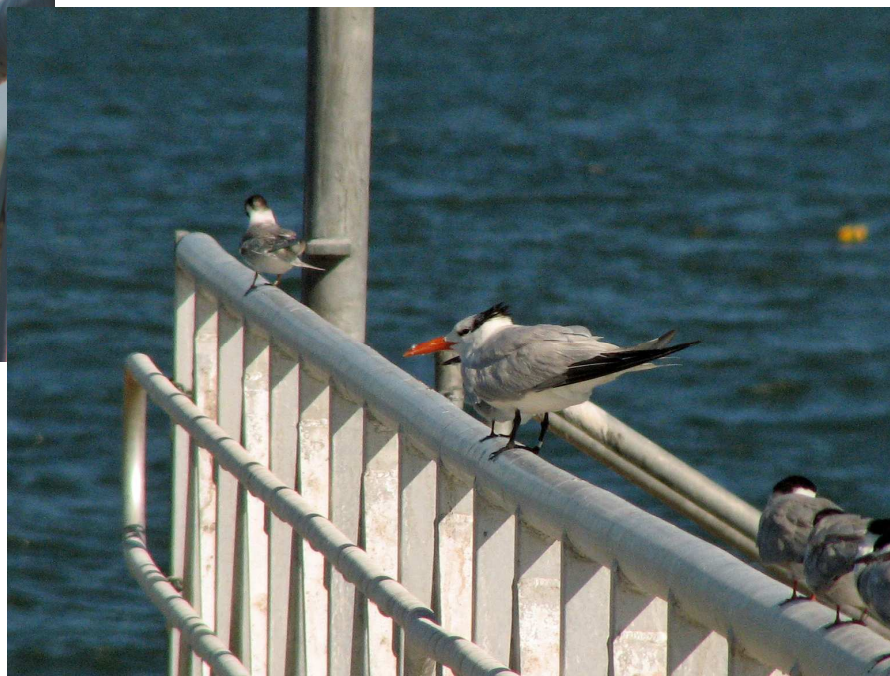
area well above the breaking waves. We were able to observe the terns throughout the hurricane, something we have not been able to do before. We set up a watch on the porch of Paight, the north building at the center of the island, to follow not only the terns, but to watch the sea for any exotic species which might have travelled north with Irene.





Joe DiCostanzo went to the porch early, determined not to let a Sooty Tern pass the island unnoticed. About twenty years ago John Walsh saw a Sooty Tern fly over Great Gull Island and Joe missed it. Joe has never forgotten it and was determined it would not happen again! I went to the porch at about 10:00 am and found Joe slumped in his chair looking very discouraged. His friends had been calling him from New York and reciting all the exotics Irene was dropping in the city. I

asked Joe what was the matter and he said: "I should probably be in New York". I sat down and said: "I'm sure you will have a Sooty Tern very soon!" At about 10:30 there was a shout from Joe – "Sooty!", as he pointed out to sea. We all saw it, the first of the day and Joe shouted the same thing eight more times before the day was over. In addition to Sooty Terns, Joe spotted seven other species of terns, a Lesser Black-backed Gull and Wilson's Storm-Petrels, a species not unusual to see on the way to Great Gull, but one we do not usually see from the island.

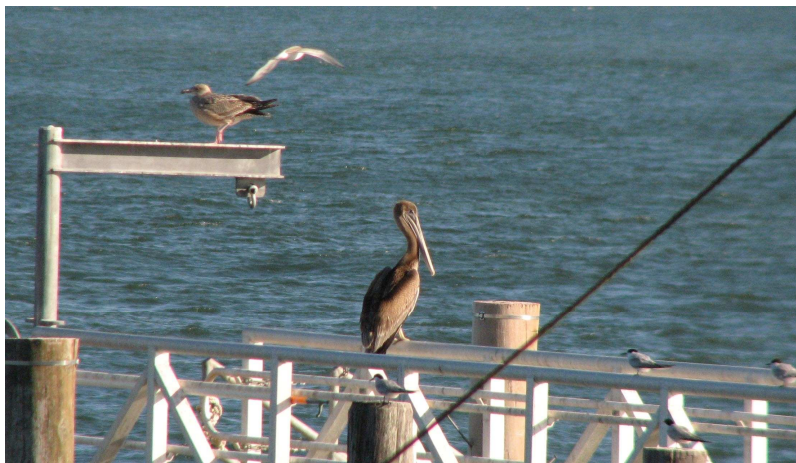




At 11:39 most birds faced southwest. At that time I was looking at the birds on the pavement east of Paight and as the wind shifted, they changed as one to face into the wind – perfect synchrony of movement, better than the Radio City Rockettes! By noon there were about 173 terns in front of us, birds had been taking off and landing again and the terns on the east side of Paight had gone. At 1:45 a Roseate adult brought in a butterfish and ate it. There were now at least forty-four birds sitting on the pavement of the dock area, no longer in the lee of the logs and these birds were facing east. Between 2:00 and 5:52 pm, when I left, terns brought in more than thirty fish and were often chased by Laughing Gulls ready to snatch the fish.







The morning after the hurricane, an immature Brown Pelican appeared and spent a while resting on the new dock before disappearing to the north. This was a second record for the species on the island and the first one to land – the new dock is building up quite a bird list!

On September 2, I spotted the same or another Brown Pelican going by the island.

In exploring the island after the hurricane we found the high seas had caused significant erosion in a number of places along the shoreline.

Fall work weekends this year were difficult because of the weather. I cancelled the first work weekend because of rain and high seas. For the second work weekend, September 16-18, we were delayed in getting off and for the final work weekend, September 23-25 rain was predicted and it poured in Niantic between 2:00 and 3:00 pm. Liz Liebson arrived from Boston and Jim Sorensen called me at Captain John's. We decided to risk it. Bob Kane had arrived and Stirling Danskin walked in just after Jim arrived. As it turned out the weekend was fine, by the time we left for the



island the rain had stopped and it didn't rain all weekend. Jim referred to himself and others who opted to go to the island as the "winter soldiers". During the weekend, we put the chick houses underground at the eastern end of the island, stored the last traps in the fort and surveyed the island for bands from dead chicks that we might not have picked up during the season. On Sunday the weather was beautiful. We took all the gear which we store on the mainland for the winter to the dock, gear we had not been able to take off the island the preceding weekend, and stored the boxes and bags destined for

New York in Captain John's barn. Bob Kane and Jim Sorensen took the gear we store in CT to Jim's barn. On Friday, September 30, Melissa McClure drove a truck to CT to bring our gear to NY. Utku Perktas, a post-doc in Ornithology offered to help Melissa and me load the truck and carry the gear to be stored in Ornithology for the winter. We were all pleased to close the last storage cabinet.





At the end of September the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers arrived to take out old oil tanks buried under the structures of the fort. In planning this work they were careful to do it when the terns were not on the island. This meant they could only work during periods when the weather is apt to be windy which makes it hard to access the island. On September 21 they moved heavy equipment to the island by barge. The men hired by the corps completed removing nine oil tanks in a month and only had to stay on Great Gull Island one



night (because of weather) during the time they worked there. The oil tanks had been filled with water before the army left and were in good condition. The men said they would have lasted another eighty years. They pumped them out, stored the fluid in barrels, then pumped the contents of the barrels into two tanker trucks they brought to the island on a barge. In order to work on the island they cleared and widened the paths a little, which will be wonderful for the terns as there are now fairly wide cleared areas on the sides of all paths.

(Photos – Melinda Billings: p. 2, p. 5 middle; Joe DiCostanzo: p. 3, p. 4, p. 5 top; Jon Fuller: p. 5 bottom, p. 6 right; Bob Kane: p. 1; Jim Sorensen: p. 6 left.)