

## Harbor Herons in New York

### New York City Audubon Monitors Wading Birds on Harbor Islands

May 26, 2007 [Rosemary Drisdelle](#) suite101.com



Windblown Snowy Egret - *Luis Rock*

New York Harbor, once home to few wading birds, now hosts more than 1700 breeding pairs. New York City Audubon monitors, protects, and showcases them.

### History of herons and other wading birds

Hérons, egrets, and ibis have had a difficult time in North America. A number of species, including the Great Egret were hunted and killed for their feathers, and were nearly extinct by 1900. Meanwhile, human destruction of their breeding habitat and foraging grounds, and water pollution, affected them as well. Only a turnaround in human attitudes toward these birds has saved them.

Today, the fortunes of the wading birds seem to have changed for the better and probably no place exemplifies this more than the city of New York. Once a center of the millinery trade that encouraged the slaughter of birds for feathers, and known for its polluted harbor, the city now hosts more than 1770 breeding pairs of wading birds on harbor islands: Great Egrets, Snowy Egrets, Glossy Ibis, Black-crowned Night-herons, and Yellow-crowned Night-herons all return each year to nest on the islands.

### Wading birds return to New York

The turnaround started in 1972 with the passage of the Clean Water Act, a piece of legislation that resulted in significant improvements in the water quality in the harbor. By the 1980s birds were starting to return to a number of harbor islands, once used by humans but now abandoned and reverting to nature. There, they found the bushes and trees they needed for nesting, solitude from human activities, and abundant food in nearby coastal wetlands. For some of them, it was a refuge from breeding and foraging range to the south where agricultural runoff continues to degrade habitat.

### New York Audubon's Harbor Herons Project

When Scotty Jenkins discovered egrets nesting on an island near Staten Island, he knew it was an historic discovery, and New York City Audubon knew it was something they wanted to nurture and protect. The Harbor Herons Project was born. For more than twenty years now, they've

monitored the breeding wading birds on harbor islands, protecting them from human interference as much as possible, but at the same time, advertising the fact that New York City has a natural treasure right in the middle of the harbor.

Today, NYC Audubon continues to monitor harbor islands—there are at least eleven islands where herons and other wading birds are breeding, or are likely to breed in the future, and most of them are now designated both parkland and Important Bird Areas in New York State. New York City Audubon also monitors foraging grounds, realizing that protecting the birds means protecting their food supply as well as their nesting sites.

To educate the public and alert people to the beautiful and fascinating colonies of wading birds in their midst, NYC Audubon maintains a web cam—the [Heron-cam](#)—on Goose Island, and gives guided harbor [Sunset Eco-cruises](#) from June to Aug, taking people near some of the islands to see nesting harbor herons up close. The challenge is to let people learn about the harbor herons and see them on their island refuges without disturbing the birds—too much human activity on the islands might cause the birds to abandon the sites. That would be a loss for both the harbor herons and the people of New York.



## **Metals in Feathers of Black-Crowned Night-Heron (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) Chicks from the New York Harbor Estuary**

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### **Abstract**

In heavily urbanized landscapes such as the New York Harbor Estuary, the local environment is subject to a variety of contamination sources. Environmental contaminants such as heavy metals and metalloids pose a risk to wildlife inhabiting the harbor. Metal concentrations in feathers indicate exposure and provide insight into the potential adverse effects on birds. In 2004 and 2005 down feathers were collected from 147 black-crowned night heron (*Nycticorax nycticorax*) chicks living on four island colonies in the New York Harbor Estuary, USA: Goose Island, Hoffman Island, North Brother Island, and Canarsie Pol. We examined geographical and interannual differences in concentrations of the metalloid arsenic (As) and the heavy metals cadmium (Cd), chromium (Cr), lead (Pb), and mercury (Hg). Significant differences in metal concentrations were a function of location, with North Brother Island having the highest As concentrations and Goose Island having the highest Cr and Pb concentrations in feathers collected in 2004. In 2005, feather samples indicated Hoffman Island had the highest Cr concentrations and North Brother Island had the highest Pb and Hg concentrations. Concentrations of As, Cd, and Hg decreased significantly from 2004 to 2005 on North Brother Island, Hg on Hoffman Island decreased from 2004 to 2005, while Cr on Hoffman Island increased from 2004 to 2005. Cd and Pb concentrations were higher and As and Cr concentrations were generally lower than concentrations reported in previous studies. Further investigation is necessary on the declining population of herons in the New York Harbor Estuary to determine specifically if birds are experiencing adverse effects from metal contaminants, or if organic contaminants, such as organic Hg or polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), are playing a role in this population's decline.

August 13, 2007, 5:14 pm NYT

## A Recipe for Hamptons Controversy: Piping Plovers, Piping Hot?

By [COREY KILGANNON](#)



A two-day-old piping plover. (Photo: Steven Senne/Associated Press)

Like the horrendous traffic and the celebrity watching, the piping plover issue has become a perennial hot topic in the Hamptons.

Every summer, the fuzzy little birds, a federally endangered species that migrates up from the Gulf of Mexico, get allotted huge swaths of sought-after shoreline so they can reproduce.

The problem is that Hamptons locals (who like to walk dogs and take trucks on the beach), as well as summer people (who like to throw fancy parties and sunbathe) find themselves battling the birds for beach rights.

Every summer, it seems, we hear about parties and Fourth of July fireworks being canceled because of environmentalists' concerns of damage to the birds, as well as beach closures or restrictions.

A popular bumper sticker around town explains that, "Piping Plover Tastes Like Chicken."

This summer has been no different. Back in June, there was a quintessential run-in when a bunch of fashionistas were accused of threatening nesting pairs in Amagansett.

L'Oréal's Ralph Lauren Fragrances threw a party to launch its new fragrance line, Polo Explorer. A group of models, photographers and fashion editors were [helicoptered](#) from New York City for a glitzy press event on an Amagansett beach with a white tent and exotic plants and Champagne. Participants were observed racing Land Rovers near protected areas and sending the birds into a tizzy, even after an East Hampton official who monitors the birds showed up. Town officials are still seeking redress from L'Oréal, which maintains that the birds were not harassed.

This year town officials were forced to postpone until the end of the summer their Fourth of July fireworks show at the town's Main Beach.

"You have some of the most powerful people in the world in the Hamptons and we've all been defeated by a little bird," said [Jerry Della Femina](#) on Monday, from his oceanfront home in East

Hampton, where he was having employees over for a retreat and cautioning them to step carefully on the beach, lest they get slapped with a whopping federal fine for molesting the plovers.

Mr. Della Femina, the Manhattan ad man, also owns [The East Hampton Independent](#) and writes a weekly column. He rarely misses an opportunity to lambaste the bird and the policies that he says prioritize them over people – and not just people, but people who have paid many millions for their oceanfront homes.

He has published a recipe for plover grilled with garlic in his paper, prompting another East Hampton paper, [The East Hampton Star](#), to print a recipe for spit-roasted ad man. Mr. Della Femina promptly put that recipe in his paper.

When town officials have canceled Fourth of July fireworks because of fear of endangering the plovers, Mr. Della Femina has shown his party guests DVD's of previous year's fireworks.

So, pity poor Larry Penny, director of the town of East Hampton's natural resources department. It is Mr. Penny's job to erect the fences that allocate huge sections of beach to the plovers.

"I get grief from both sides, environmentalists who say we should be doing more for the birds, and from beach users who can't believe we protect them at all," he said on Monday.

"Other than the traffic issue, the plovers are the No. 1 hot issue in the Hamptons throughout the summer, even more than celebrities," he said.

"I've heard a lot of nasty things from people, like, 'I pay good money to use this beach and how come you protecting them, and not us,'" he said. "Next year, I'm considering having certain beaches for plovers and others for people."

Mr. Penny said that he is encountering another problem lately: owners of oceanfront homes in Beach Hampton section of town, east of the village, are complaining about the use of four-wheel drive trucks on the beach and they have begun taking the wood-slat snow fences erected for the plovers and reconfiguring them.

"They're stretching them all the way down the beach to the water, so trucks can't drive on the beach past their homes," Mr. Penny said. The whole thing has an element of class warfare, he said, since the truck owners tend to be local year-rounders, often fishermen. Mr. Penny said a group of homeowners are suing the town's board of trustees for the right to control beach property behind their homes.

Well, what's a summer vacation in the Hamptons anyway, without a good lawsuit?

*In a special edition of our Beach Patrol feature, Corey Kilgannon will be blogging all week from the Hamptons. E-mail story ideas and tips to [him](#) or to [CityRoom@nytimes.com](mailto:CityRoom@nytimes.com).*

## **Gulls Are Cast as Threat to Avian Neighbors; Agency Is Cast in a Bad Light**

By SARA RIMER

Published: May 27, 1996

**CHATHAM, Mass., May 24** — The gull has long been a symbol of Cape Cod. Swooping, flying, feeding gulls. But as the Memorial Day weekend began in this usually bucolic resort town, the talk was of dying gulls -- and the Federal Government.

The local newspapers were full of pictures of dead birds, and plaintive letters to the editor wondering, for example, why "the sea gulls had to suffer if they never did anything."

And on the shores of White Pond here, a Humane Society veterinarian was performing euthanasia on dozens of moribund gulls.

The Federal Government had poisoned nearly 6,000 great black-backed and herring gulls at a national wildlife refuge off the coast in hopes of creating a "gull-free zone" where 95 pairs of piping plovers might someday nest in peace.

The plover, a tiny sand-colored creature that darts along the shoreline, is listed as threatened under the Federal Endangered Species Act. Extraordinary measures have been taken to protect it: closing beaches to off-road vehicles during breeding season, erecting string fences around nests, constant monitoring of nesting sites, and, now, the poisoning of one of its enemies.

But the gulls are winning sympathy here. And in the process, the Federal Government is once again being portrayed as inept and lacking in compassion.

Diana Weaver, a spokeswoman for the Fish and Wildlife Service, which carried out the avicide, said agents had received death threats and had obtained law-enforcement protection. She said they had operated out of a secret location after getting telephone calls accusing them of being "jack-booted thugs" and Nazis.

Malcolm Ward, a retired businessman, lives on a hill overlooking White Pond, where this week he has been watching gulls die.

"I respect gulls," Mr. Ward said. "They're part of nature. I like gulls. The plovers -- I'd like to see them live, and expand. But I don't think it should be at the expense of the gulls. The gulls are suffering."

Fish and wildlife officials say that gulls have taken over the refuge, on Monomoy Island, and that their aim is to restore "avian diversity." They say the poisoning is the start of a four-year project to create the "gull-free zone" for the piping plover and an endangered bird, the roseate tern.

"Gulls are very large, aggressive birds," said Anne Hecht, a Fish and Wildlife Service biologist and leader of Atlantic Coast piping plover recovery team. "They take over plover nesting sites. A

gull will eat anything -- hot dogs, bread, fish, plovers. We're not trying to be sadistic. This is very difficult."

Several animal protection groups, including the Humane Society, the Orenda Wildlife Trust, and the International Wildlife Coalition, have protested the poisoning. The Massachusetts Audubon Society, which has supported similar poisonings of gulls in Maine, says the Monomoy Island plan will not work.

"There are 10,000 gulls remaining" after the poisoning, said Robert Prescott, director of the Massachusetts Audubon Society. "Those 10,000 gulls are going to be looking for plovers and terns to eat."

Mr. Prescott said the Federal biologists thought they were doing the right thing. But, he added: "We're not good at managing. Look at us as a species. Look at the budget crisis."

Ms. Weaver said it was too soon to tell whether the project would be successful. "People don't understand what it's about," she said. "They tend to anthropomorphize."

In 1955, 15 breeding pairs of piping plovers were reported on the refuge, on Monomoy Island, according to Fish and Wildlife officials. Between 1983 and 1993, only 2 to 5 pairs of plovers per year nested on the refuge. There were 7 pairs in 1994, and 14 pairs in 1995. The capacity for the refuge is estimated at 94 pairs.

With the extraordinary measures taken to protect the birds, which are flightless in their first five weeks of life, the piping plover has made a remarkable recovery along the shoreline of Massachusetts in recent years. The population has increased from about 160 pairs in 1991 to 445 pairs last year.

Fish and Wildlife officials say they have tried to regulate the gull population at the refuge in the past through a variety of methods -- shooting, scarecrows, oiling the eggs, kicking the nests. But the gulls, feasting lavishly on human food at landfills, kept multiplying.

"We have artificially increased the gull population," said Mr. Prescott of the Audubon Society. "We were good at turning gulls into rats."

There have long been efforts to control gulls at airports, landfills, reservoirs and seabird colonies. Indeed, the Fish and Wildlife Service tried to poison gulls at Monomoy Island in 1980, but stopped after negative public reaction.

And while the gull population has begun to decline in the last four or five years, as the landfills have been closed, there are still thousands of gulls on Monomoy. Last weekend, fish and wildlife agents mixed the poison, known officially as DRC-1339, with margarine and spread it on slices of bread, which were then placed in the gulls' nests. The poison does not contaminate the environment, Federal officials said, and is unlikely to be eaten by other species.

The poison takes up to 48 hours to work, and despite earlier predictions by Federal officials that most of the gulls would die on the island, hundreds of dying birds have flown to White Pond in search of fresh water. Barbara Birdsey of the Orenda Wildlife Trust has been collecting the gulls and bringing them to Dr. Pat Klein, the Humane Society veterinarian, to inject with pentobarbital, which kills them immediately.

"We're trying to minimize the suffering," Mrs. Birdsey said.

Last week, The Cape Cod Chronicle published a photograph of a gull standing "protectively over his fallen comrade." The newspaper also had a series of letters, including one from Martha Rogers, 10, and Ashley M. Kent, 9, who wrote of the poisoning: "I mean, why do they have to suffer if they never did anything? It's not like animals come around and poison us! Wouldn't Cape Cod not be a real tourist attraction, a nice play to visit if there was a bunch of dead sea gulls all over the place?"

The paper also published a cartoon of three gulls standing around talking. "I think the politically correct term is downsizing," one says.

At this time of year, visitors who stop at the white clapboard Chamber of Commerce information booth on Main Street usually want to know where the public restrooms are (in back of Town Hall), and where the ocean is (several blocks to the east).

"The subject now is gulls," said Richard Swan, an 83-year-old retired actor who is beginning his 15th season behind the information desk.

So many people are asking about the gulls that the Chamber of Commerce has distributed an in-house memo instructing information-booth workers to tell inquiring visitors that it was the Federal Government that poisoned the gulls.

"Do your best to remind them that this is NOT a Chatham action," the memo says, "and we will still be the same lovely vacation spot."

"I tell them it's a Federal refuge, and the Federal big boys have the say," Mr. Swan said.

Speaking for himself, not the Chamber of Commerce, he added: "The gulls -- they're thieves. But I'm tender-hearted, and I'm told it's a slow death, which worries me terribly. If you're going to take matters into your own hands, I'd like it to be swift."

## **FOLLOW-UP ON THE NEWS; Plan to Poison Cape Cod Gulls**

Published: May 03, 1987

The Federal Fish and Wildlife Service, which usually defends wildlife vigorously, was in the uncomfortable position of proposing to poison some sea gulls in the Cape Cod area.

There were so many black-backed and herring gulls on Monomoy Island, off the Cape, the service said in December, that they were forcing out smaller, rarer birds. When the island became a Federal wildlife refuge in 1963, it had but five nesting pairs of common gulls, the agency noted. The total in 1986 was put at 20,000 pairs.

The Federal service proposed as one solution to spread margarine and a poison called 1339 on bread and drop the bait in selected gull nests.

The public has responded with "almost 140 letters," most urging that the gulls be spared, reports Anne Hecht, an agency planner in Newton Corner, Mass. "We're evaluating the comments, developing a final plan."

The goal is to keep at least 90 of Monomoy Island's 2,750 acres free of common gulls, so four species of terns, along with laughing gulls and piping plovers, can again nest in the area, Ms. Hecht says.

Once a common gull is nested, she notes, "it's pretty hard to move that gull." That leaves three alternatives: "We might use nest and egg destruction. We might use shooting. We might use poisoning."

At the Petit Manan Wildlife Refuge near Milbridge, Me., "we have very successfully used" the poison 1339, Ms. Hecht observes. "We now have 1,500 pairs of terns where we didn't have any."

## **Shorebird and wading bird management discussion questions**

Within your groups, read the articles given out and answer the following questions. Each group should submit one set of answers that all members have helped write. Use the articles, the internet and your own knowledge to address all the questions. We will discuss your answers next class.

### **Piping plovers**

1. Describe the life history of the piping plover. Where are they found? What do they eat?

When and why do they come to New York City?

2. Why is the piping plover endangered? Use terms and concepts that we have learned in class: habitat destruction, births, deaths, predation, competition, etc.

3. What is it about the environment currently that makes it difficult for the plover to survive and/or reproduce?

4. What are the reasons why some property owners dislike the efforts to protect the piping plover?

5. What is your opinion on the matter after learning a little bit about the situation? What would you do as a wildlife manager?

6. In Cape Cod, by far the most efficient way to increase the piping plover's reproductive success was to remove their main predator, gulls. This can be done by poisoning or shooting them. There are thousands and thousands of gulls in our area.

What do you think of this method? If you were a wildlife manager responsible for protecting plovers, would you use predator control methods?

### **Harbor Herons**

1. What species of wading birds nest in New York City?

2. Describe the life history 2 species of these wading birds.

3. Most of the wading bird colonies have been protected as wildlife sanctuaries. In a city as big as New York, do you think 12 islands is enough protected space for these birds?

4. In the New York City area, where do wading birds nest? Where do they eat? What does this say about how best to manage for the species?

**5.** Toxic chemicals, such as the metals mercury and lead, have been found in many young wading birds. How did this happen? What should be done?