


Mass Audubon's Coastal Waterbird Program at Felix Neck

Mass Audubon's Coastal Waterbird Program is one of the most effective entities working to protect coastal birds and barrier beaches in North America. Launched in 1986 in response to declining populations of piping plovers and terns in Massachusetts, the Coastal Waterbird Program's primary objective is to protect nesting and foraging areas throughout the state.

In partnership with federal, state, and municipal agencies, and with private landowners, the program has helped to increase the number of piping plovers nesting in the state from 135 pairs in 1986 to 729 pairs in 2012—approximately 1/3 of the Atlantic Coast population.

Felix Neck Wildlife Sanctuary locally manages shorebird protection efforts on Martha's Vineyard. We protect shorebirds and their habitat at sites across the island and provide guidance and expertise to private landowners and public entities. In addition, our education and volunteer programs with schools, groups, residents and visitors enhances wildlife protection efforts island-wide.

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2015 Field Summary

Felix Neck staff monitored Joseph Sylvania State Beach for piping plover, tern, and American oystercatchers presence from late March to early August on more than 50 visits. Monitors installed educational signage and erected and maintained protective fencing at the site. Informal education regarding shorebird conservation and management was provided to interested beachgoers and formal programming, Saturdays at Sengekontacket (sponsored by Friends of Sengekontacket) were provided. Piping plovers, American oystercatchers, and common terns were observed nesting on the Edgartown portion of the site during the 2015 season, and piping plovers and least terns were observed nesting on the Oak Bluffs portion of the site. No protected shorebirds were reproductively successful this season due to nest loss. Management recommendations include continued monitoring of the site, increased enforcement of dog regulations, and enforcement of vehicle access protocols at the site.



Coastal Bird Reproductive Success:

Many shorebirds passed through the site and utilized the site to feed and loaf during the 2015 season. Shorebirds were particularly abundant on the pond side of the site during low tide, as the pond side of the site is comprised of mudflats and marsh habitat that is suitable for feeding.

Joseph Sylvia State Beach Edgartown: As in previous years, one American oystercatcher pair nested on the pondside marsh. The nest failed for unknown reasons. A two-egg renest was identified on the pondside marsh later in the season. Prior to the hatch date, the oystercatcher pair spent periods of time away from the nest and were observed incubating irregularly. It is possible that the nest failed due to predation; however, it is also possible that the chicks hatched. The adults were observed foraging along the pond side of the site multiple times throughout the remainder of the season. No chicks were ever observed.



American oystercatcher adult

A second American oystercatcher pair nested on the south end of the pond side of the site. The nest failed due to suspected predation. The oystercatcher pair did not renest at the site during the 2015 season.

One piping plover pair and one common tern pair were observed nesting on the ocean side of the site during the 2015 season. Both nests failed soon after they were identified, possibly due to predation or overwash. The common tern pair did not renest at the site. A piping plover renest was identified on the ocean side of the site; however, the renest failed due to unknown causes.

Joseph Sylvia State Beach Oak Bluffs: One piping plover pair and one least tern pair were observed nesting on the ocean side of the site during the 2015 season. Both nests failed between late May and early June due to suspected predation. Neither pair renested at the site.



Piping plover adult

Management Activities:

Site Visits: The site was first monitored on March 30, 2015. The site was monitored approximately three times per week between April 10, 2015 and July 30, 2015, after which site visits were reduced to two visits per week due to a decrease in bird activity. The site was last monitored on August 13, 2015.

Fencing: Protective fencing was erected on the ocean side of the site between beach entrances 19 and 20 (i.e. just south of “Big Bridge”) and between beach entrances 21 and 32 in late March. Paths were maintained from all beach entrances this season. In addition, protective fencing was erected on both the ocean and pond sides of the site upon the identification of American oystercatcher, piping plover, common tern, and least tern nests. Fencing was expanded as necessary to protect nesting shorebirds and to preserve their habitat.

In late May, six “Please Stay off Island” signs were installed at the boat launches on the pond side of the site in an effort to deter boaters from landing on the islands in Sengekontacket Pond. In addition, educational signage with information about nesting shorebirds was installed just south of “Big Bridge” near beach entrance 20 and just north of “Big Bridge” near beach entrance 21.

Sources of Disturbance/Threats: The ocean side of the site is densely

2015 Bird Abundance and Productivity

	Number pairs	Number fledged
Piping Plover	2	0
Least Tern	1	0
American Oystercatcher	2	0

populated during the high summer season. From late June through mid-August, up to 1,000 people were present at the site at one time (approximately 500 people on the Edgartown side and 500 people on the Oak Bluffs side). Human, dog, American crow, and gull tracks were observed on 100% of site visits. Striped skunk tracks were observed on approximately 80% of site visits.

Vehicles are allowed on the pond side of the site if the vehicle owners possess a shellfishing permit and are actively shellfishing. On the Edgartown portion of the site, vehicle tracks were observed on approximately 50% of site visits, and vehicles were observed on approximately 10% of site visits. One vehicle without a shellfishing permit was observed on July 25, 2015. On the Oak Bluffs portion of the site, vehicle tracks were observed on approximately 95% of site visits, and vehicles were observed on approximately 20% of site visits. Vehicles without shellfishing permits were observed on June 25, 2015, July 5, 2015, July 12, 2015, and July 29, 2015. In addition, vehicles without shellfishing permits were occasionally observed from Beach Road as monitors drove past the site.

On the weekend of July 10 through 12, 2015, a kitesurfing regatta was held on the Edgartown side of the site between beach entrances 5 and 8. The competition launching area was marked off on both ends with rope on the sand and beachgoers/spectators were discouraged from entering the area by regatta staff. Approximately 30 competitors took part in the competition and upwards of 750 beachgoers/spectators were present from the site to Cow Bay. No protected shorebirds were observed nesting at the site during the event. Least terns and common terns were observed feeding over the ocean in the vicinity of the regatta; however, they did not appear to be disturbed by the event.



Educational signage

Management Recommendations:

The site should continue to be monitored. As needed, and depending on the locations of nesting shorebirds, considerations should be made to work with the County Manager and Town Shellfish Wardens to limit vehicle access (including both permitted shellfishing access and unpermitted recreational access) on the pond side of the site. Rules and regulations concerning dogs should be better enforced. It is recommended that any future kitesurfing events be postponed to occur outside of the shorebird season. Finally, considerations should be made to speak with kite surfers and kayak rental companies about advising customers to maintain a safe distance from the islands, posted shorebird areas, and remote marsh areas in Sengekontacket Pond.



Least tern adult



Common tern adult