

The Isles of Shoals Important Bird Area

The New Hampshire Important Bird Area Program is part of a national and international effort to identify areas that provide critical habitat to birds during some stage of their annual cycle. In New Hampshire the program is a partnership of the Audubon Society of New Hampshire, the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department, and the University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension. IBAs are identified based on strict scientific criteria, including 1) the presence of threatened or endangered species, 2) other species and habitats of conservation concern, and 3) areas where birds congregate during breeding, migration, or winter. It is hoped that recognition of IBAs can help guide future conservation and research efforts at areas that meet these criteria.

The Isles of Shoals meet categories 1-3 of the IBA criteria, as follows:

1) Threatened and endangered species

Common Tern (state threatened) – Through a partnership between the Audubon Society of New Hampshire and the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department, a tern restoration project began on Seavey Island in 1997. In that first year, five pairs of Common Terns nested and raised chicks. By 2004, this colony had grown to over 2500 pairs, and some birds nested on adjacent White Island for the first time.

Roseate Tern (federally endangered) – A pair of Roseate Terns nested on Seavey Island for the first time in 2001, and roughly 40-60 pairs have bred every year since (high of 100 pairs in 2004). These numbers make Seavey Island one of the largest Roseate colonies in the Northeast.

Arctic Tern (state special concern) – Between 1 and 7 pairs have nested here since 2002. The Isles of Shoals is near the southern edge of this species' range, so a large colony is not to be expected.

The Seavey Island tern colony exists and thrives largely because of a continued human presence on the islands during the breeding season, as is true for the majority of islands where terns currently nest. In addition to monitoring the colony's success, the researchers play an important role in discouraging gull predation.



2) Other species and habitats of high conservation concern

Black Guillemot (state special concern) – Black Guillemots were confirmed breeding on Star Island in 1985, and sporadic nesting has been suspected ever since. Birds are present in waters just offshore throughout the year.

Two species of shorebirds use the islands during migration or winter. Ruddy Turnstones peak at 20-30 individuals in spring and up to 120 in fall, making the islands the main stopover site for this species in the state. During the winter, over 500 Purple Sandpipers occur on the islands, representing at least two thirds of the state's population. Up to 200 individuals occur during spring, and these congregations probably represent a combination of lingering winterers and northbound migrants. Perceived population declines and threats of habitat alteration along the coast (development, aquaculture) have resulted in Purple Sandpiper being a species of high conservation priority in the Gulf of Maine, where a large portion of the population spends the winter.

3) Congregatory species

Common Eider – 50-60 pairs of eiders nest on the New Hampshire islands each year. With the possible exception of irregular breeding on the mainland coast, this is the only breeding location in New Hampshire for this species. During the non-breeding season, 200 or more eiders can be found in the nearshore waters.

Double-crested Cormorant – At present, the Isles of Shoals is the only nesting location for this species in the state. In 1995, 483 nests were counted on Seavey Island. This number has dropped significantly with the implementation of the tern restoration project, and currently cormorants nest primarily on Lunging Island (85 nests in 2001). During the non-breeding season, large numbers of cormorants (Double-crested and Great – latter primarily in winter) roost on Square Rock.

Gulls – Both Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls nest on the islands not used by terns, with numbers ranging from 50 to 150 depending on island and species.

Terns – During the post-breeding period in August, up to 5500 Common Terns and 110 Roseate Terns have been observed roosting on Seavey Island or foraging in nearshore waters.

Landbirds – The islands serve as important stop-over habitat for migrating landbirds in spring and fall. Banding studies on Star Island documented between 1300 and 1600 individuals during 4-6 week study periods. Banded birds represented over 75 species, although many of these were represented by only a few individuals.

For the purposes of the NH IBA Program, the Isles of Shoals IBA is defined as the five New Hampshire Islands of the archipelago: Star, Lunging, White, and Seavey Islands, and Square Rock. The four islands on the Maine side also support the same species (except terns), as well as a heron colony. Appledore Island is the site of a long-term bird banding station, which would satisfy Category 4 (research and monitoring areas) of the IBA criteria. At this point the Maine islands have not been recognized as an IBA, although they may be included in the New Hampshire IBA in the future to acknowledge the entire island group as an ecological unit.



For more information on the New Hampshire Important Bird Area Program, contact:

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More details on the IBA Program are also available on the N.H. Audubon web site.