

Return to Eastern Egg Rock: Celebrating Puffins 40 Years Later

Seabird restoration began in 1973 when Dr. Stephen Kress launched Project Puffin to return Atlantic Puffins to a historical nesting site on a treeless, granite slab of a Maine island called Eastern Egg Rock. For years his team moved puffin chicks (pufflings) from Newfoundland, Canada to human-made nesting burrows on the island, and watched those chicks fledge and go off to sea. As puffins do, they began returning to Muscongus Bay as adults a few years later. With the help of social attraction techniques like decoys and sound systems, puffins and other seabirds began to come ashore to Eastern Egg Rock in greater numbers every year. Eight years in, however, puffins still had not successfully nested on the island. Finally, on July 4, 1981, Kress spotted a puffin with fish in its beak! That could only mean one thing—somewhere under the slabs of island granite there was a puffling being fed. The project was a success!

This summer we celebrated the 40th anniversary of this remarkable milestone. As if to help celebrate this study of seabird resiliency, and human perseverance, one of the original puffins

brought from Newfoundland was discovered in July. In 1989, it had been translocated as a chick to Seal Island NWR, and this year was found breeding on Matinicus Rock at the ripe old age of 32! Today, Eastern Egg Rock alone is the summer home to hundreds of Atlantic Puffins along with many terns, guillemots, storm-petrels, and other seabirds. As many as 3,000 puffins may now nest in the entire state of Maine, up dramatically from the few pairs that remained in the early 1970s.

Success for these little seabirds is tied to healthy marine environments on which we all depend. They disappeared from Maine islands over a century ago because they had been over-hunted, but these days puffins are telling us about a new threat. The changing climate is disrupting their ocean food and habitat. This was in evidence in 2021—a challenging year to be a seabird in Maine. To overcome these and other challenges, and following the example that first puffin parent set 40 years ago, our island teams will return each year to lend a hand and listen to what puffins can tell us about their world.

*But there it was. It was real:
Puffins were nesting once again
after 100 years of absence from
Eastern Egg Rock.*

—Steve Kress



PHOTO: JEAN HALL

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MEET OUR Policy and Advocacy Partners



Jessica Grannis Interim VP, Coastal Conservation, Washington, DC

PHOTO COURTESY OF JESSICA GRANNIS

Jessica directs Audubon's national coastal strategy, guiding coastal policy and conservation around the country, from coastal resilience to marine conservation and restoring the Gulf Coast.



Anna Weinstein Director of Marine Conservation, San Francisco, CA

PHOTO: EWAN BURNS

Anna leads Audubon's federal and regional marine policy work, working with our state & regional offices, coalition partners, and fishery managers to ensure sea- and shorebirds have the food and habitats they need to thrive.



Rachel Guillory Communications Manager, Coasts New Orleans, LA

PHOTO: EMILY BRAUNER

Rachel leads strategic communication for Audubon's coastal policy and conservation work, telling stories of how birds and people across our many coastal areas are affected by climate change, overfishing, habitat loss, and oil spills.



Maddox Wolfe Coastal Campaigns Manager Washington, DC

PHOTO: CAMILLA CEREJA

Maddox runs Audubon's coastal grassroots advocacy campaigns at the state and federal level, engaging Audubon's chapter network to push for the policy changes needed to protect seabirds from threats like climate change and overfishing.



Tykee James Government Affairs Coordinator Washington, DC

PHOTO: MORGAN MOORE

Tykee coordinates Audubon's relationships with congressional offices on Capitol Hill, building support from our elected leaders for federal policies that protect birds and people

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The science and educational programming of Audubon's Seabird Institute benefit from the support and partnership of many individuals and organizations. Our program's founder, Steve Kress, continues to advise our efforts and promote seabird conservation widely. We are grateful for support, feedback, and guidance from the members of our Seabird Advisory Council. Our work on Eastern Egg Rock, Jenny Island, and Outer Green Island is in partnership with Brad Allen, Kelsey Sullivan, and others with the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife. Work on Seal Island National Wildlife Refuge (NWR), Pond Island NWR, and Matinicus Rock is in partnership with Brian Benedict, Eddy Edwards, Michael Langlois, Linda Welch, and other staff of the Maine Coastal Islands National Wildlife Refuge. We thank these partners for their support and collaboration. Others who have provided assistance over the past year include:

We thank the following for their generous assistance and gifts

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Kress Native Plant Garden Inspires

A new feature is in full bloom at the Todd Wildlife Sanctuary. Nearly two years in the making, the Seabird Institute formally dedicated the Kress Native Plant Wildlife Garden and Pavilion at a garden party in early August. Why dedicate a garden to the renowned scientist that brought Atlantic Puffins back to Maine's coastal islands? In addition to his seabird expertise, Steve is a dedicated advocate and author for native plants and the resources they provide for birds.

Nearly three billion birds have disappeared from North America in the last 50 years and preserving bird habitats is crucial to avoiding further loss. The Steve Kress Native Plant Wildlife Garden serves as an example to inspire visitors to transform available green spaces into bird-friendly habitat. Interpretive signage providing helpful hints and recommendations are found throughout the garden's various habitats.



PHOTO: STEPHEN W. KRESS

Old friends and new partners of the program participated in the dedication ceremony. During his remarks, Steve made this connection: While most individuals can't work with puffins or spend weeks on a remote seabird island, by planting native plants people can create islands of habitat where other birds—like cardinals and chickadees—can be restored.

This popular addition to the Todd Wildlife Sanctuary campus furthers the Seabird Institute's conservation efforts in Maine while recognizing Steve's substantial

contributions for birds around the world. In addition to visits by frequent guests, the garden is used as an instruction space for Hog Island Audubon Camp and a conference location for Seabird Institute researchers and staff. No matter the season, Steve's dedication to birds will be on brilliant display at our permanent home in Bremen.



PHOTO: AMY SIMMONS

PHOTO: KIMBERLY KELLER



Left: Great Spangled Fritillary on Purple Coneflower (Echinacea purpurea). Right: "Seabird Sue" Schubel presents Steve Kress with Atlantic Puffin decoys signed by Project Puffin and other Audubon staff. Bottom: The garden contains several beds and provides examples of different types of habitats.

Seabird Tracking to Inform Offshore Wind

Two initial offshore wind projects are being planned for the Gulf of Maine: a single turbine south of Monhegan Island (11 miles from Eastern Egg Rock), and a 12-turbine research array farther to the south (approximately 30 miles from Eastern Egg Rock). These projects are expected to move forward in the next two to three years to test technology and environmental impacts before commercial scale projects are developed (perhaps 50 to 75 turbines per project). The Seabird Institute is initiating multiple efforts to track seabirds nesting on the sanctuary islands we manage. This work took a significant step forward in 2021, with a pilot study tracking Common and Arctic Terns at Seal Island National Wildlife Refuge. By identifying important foraging areas for our nesting species, we can inform siting decisions for future projects and minimize potential impacts. We'll also be able to conduct similar studies following turbine installation, and assess any changes in foraging areas with and without turbines.

This past season 10 Common Terns and 5 Arctic Terns were fitted with tags using Global Positioning System (GPS) technology to determine location, and an internal Very High Frequency (VHF) transmitter to send data to a hand-held radio receiver positioned in the center of the Seal Island tern colony. The tags weighed less than 3 grams (about the weight of a dime) and were held on the tern's back using a lightweight harness that will eventually break down and allow the tag to fall off. The terns were captured and tagged a few days prior to their eggs hatching, and tracking occurred throughout the chick rearing period.

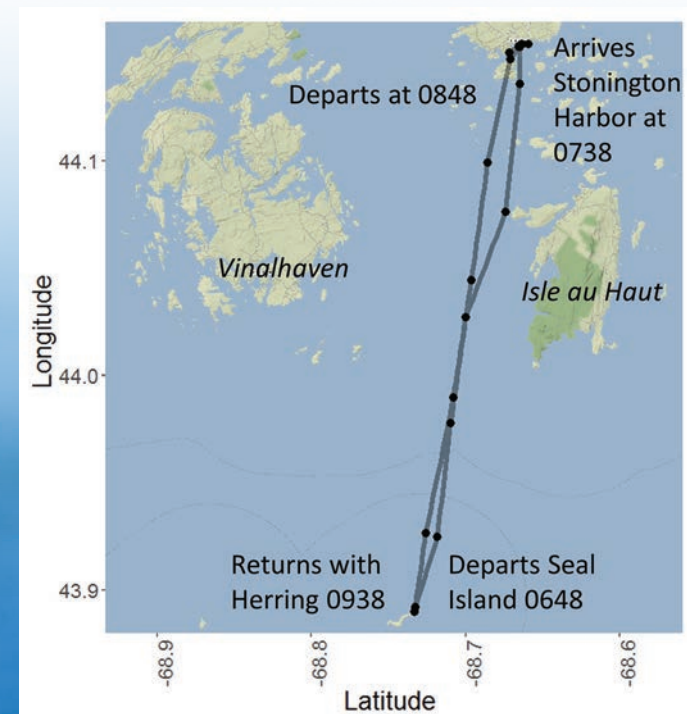
In addition to collecting tracking data, the Seal Island team monitored the nests of the tagged birds and observed the fish



New Ph.D. Student, Keenan Yakola, and Research Assistant, Elaine Beaudoin, with a tagged Arctic Tern.

brought back to feed chicks. By combining the tracks with specific fish deliveries, we were able to identify locations and habitats terns used to obtain particular prey types (see map). With this information, we will be able to prioritize areas for protection where terns get high-value prey species, such as herring and hake.

This work is being led by long-time Audubon island researcher Keenan Yakola, who will begin a Ph.D. program at Oregon State University in fall 2021 with a focus on tracking Gulf of Maine seabirds and informing offshore wind power development. Key partners are the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Maine Coastal Islands National Wildlife Refuge) and the University of New Hampshire/Shoals Marine Lab.



Left: Mapped data points outline a Common Tern's flight track between Seal Island NWR and Stonington Harbor. Right: A Common Tern with a GPS tag soars through the air, en route to deliver food to a hungry chick.



PHOTO: KEENAN YAKOLA

Seabird Restoration in Maryland's Coastal Bays

The Mid-Atlantic states have historically been home to significant colonies of terns, skimmers, gulls, and other species of seabirds. In recent decades, however, low-lying, sandy coastal islands have been lost—eroded away—due to increased storm events and a rise in sea level. In Maryland's coastal bays, Common Terns have declined by 90% and Black Skimmers by more than 95% since 1985. To counter this trend, Audubon Mid-Atlantic colleagues partnered with the Maryland Department of Natural Resources, Maryland Coastal Bays Program, and others to initiate a pilot restoration effort near Assateague Island National Seashore during the 2021 nesting season. The Seabird Institute joined the project to provide technical assistance and decoys through our Mad River Decoys by Audubon program.

Unfortunately, stable and secure island habitat does not currently exist in Maryland's coastal bays. A long-term goal

in the region is to build or restore islands that can provide permanent habitat, but as an interim step, a floating raft was proposed. A temporary raft could help evaluate if there are seabirds still interested in nesting in this region, ensure adequate forage fish resources are available for adult terns and skimmers to successfully feed and fledge young, identify factors that might limit success on a permanent island, such as predators or human disturbance, and provide habitat for at least a modest number of seabirds to nest and raise young before the construction of a permanent island.

During the 2020–2021 winter, a raft was designed and constructed on land, consisting of eight 8' x 16' modules. Each raft module was a lumber deck built over floating dock blocks. The four raft modules were floated into place in early May, then joined to provide a 32' x 32' nesting surface.



PHOTO: DAVE BRINKER

A Common Tern tends to its chick on the rafts that were built to restore nesting habitat.



PHOTO: DAVE BRINKER



PHOTO: DAVE BRINKER

Floating rafts are used to create nesting habitat before they are deployed into Maryland's coastal bays. Once assembled (right), tern decoys from the Seabird Institute's Mad River Decoys by Audubon, along with sand, crushed shell, and nesting boxes welcome terns to the new habitat.

Season Summary

2021 MAINE ISLAND HIGHLIGHTS

Seal Island NWR

- **Seventeen Summers:** “Troppey” the Red-billed Tropicbird returned yet again!
- **Spirit Bird:** A leucistic Great Cormorant chick, dubbed the “Spirit Bird,” hatched and fledged.
- **A Crush of Cormorants:** There were at least 47 Great Cormorant nests (up 20 from 2020) and 36 Double-crested Cormorants nests (up 10).



Outer Green Island

- **New Arrivals:** An American Oystercatcher pair nested, a new breeding species for the island. Three pairs of Roseate Terns nested, the first since 2018.
- **Good Guillicies:** Most Black Guillemots laid two eggs and hatched at least one chick.



BLACK GUILLEMOTS. PHOTO: JEAN HALL

Pond Island NWR

- **Problem Predators:** Two Great Horned Owls were captured and removed from the island. Crows and Peregrine Falcons limited hatching success and productivity.
- **Fabulous Foraging:** Food was in abundant supply for the smaller number of terns nesting on the island this year.



RESEARCH ASSISTANT JAKE BROWN WITH GREAT HORNED OWL. PHOTO: ADAM DINIOW



TOP: “TROPPY” THE RED TROPICBIRD. PHOTO: KEENAN YAKOLA. BOTTOM: SEAL ISLAND’S LEUCISTIC GREAT CORMORANT AMONG ITS CORMORANT COUSINS. PHOTO: SUE SCHUBEL.



SEABIRD
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LEAST TERN. PHOTO: WILLIAM DIX

Stratton Island

- **Return of the Terns:** Least Terns returned to the island after an absence in 2020, making 63 nests.
- **Rose-Colored Colony:** Stratton was again the home to Maine’s largest Roseate Tern colony, with 140 nests.

Eastern Egg Rock

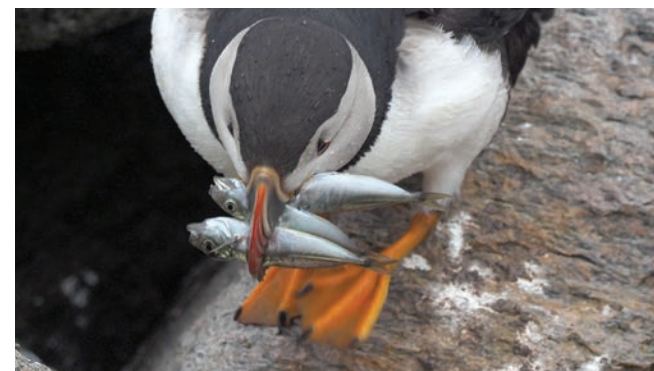
- **Parenting Puffins:** 140 puffin nests were confirmed, down from 188 in 2019. This apparent decrease is likely due to a combination of poor puffin productivity and a smaller island team observing puffin behavior this year.
- **Chick-splosion:** A chick-splosion occurred early in the season as 1,359 Common Tern nests—the most counted since 2001—began to hatch.



ATLANTIC PUFFIN. PHOTO: JEAN HALL

Rough Scad to the Rescue?

It was a challenging year for puffins and terns to find enough fish to feed their chicks. In response to the scarcity of preferred prey, puffins brought in a greater diversity of fish species. One significant contributor to chick diets was Rough Scad (*Trachurus lathami*), a warm water fish species not commonly seen as far north as the Gulf of Maine. The only other year Rough Scad has been seen in puffin chick diets to any significant extent was the warm and similarly challenging year of 2012. While scad are a nutritious fish and easily eaten by chicks—unlike Butterfish, another warm water species—its presence in the diet likely indicates that the typical fish puffins rely on (e.g., herring, hake, and sand lance) are not easily obtained.



ATLANTIC PUFFIN WITH SCAD. PHOTO: SUE SCHUBEL

Matinicus Rock

- **Razorbill Records:** 1575 Razorbills were counted on the island in early June, a new record!
- **Marvelous Manx:** 7 active Manx Shearwater Nests were confirmed.
- **Murre-aculous:** 18 Common Murre eggs were counted this season and at least 7 chicks hatched and fledged



COMMON MURRE AND RAZORBILLS. PHOTO: JOSHUA PELTZ-HELLER



COMMON TERN AND CHICKS. PHOTO: JEAN HALL

Jenny Island

- **Tremendous Terns:** 2044 Common Tern nests were counted—the most recorded since restoration began!
- **Bird Bites:** Hake, herring and sand lance were on the menu for tern chicks.

Education and Outreach

Hog Island Audubon Camp

The camp launched a variety of new programming during the pandemic including the fall “Making Bird Connections” lecture series and new spring favorite “Tern the Page” book club. Hog Island also welcomed back limited numbers of campers this year and began new, mid-coast Maine birding daytrips to Eastern Egg Rock, Monhegan and Hog Island. The programs were all so well received that we’ll be offering them again soon—don’t miss out!



An informal gala is held at the end of every Arts & Birding session on Hog Island. During this event, campers share their work from the week.

Audubon’s Conservation Tools

Since donation of Mad River Decoy to Audubon in 2016, the Seabird Institute has been manufacturing decoys and other conservation tools to help restore and protect seabird colonies worldwide. During the 2021 decoy season the team manufactured and sold 653 decoys to 20 different locations in the U.S., Curacao, Puerto Rico and Palmyra Atoll. Specific projects have included enticement of Black Skimmers and Common Terns to nest on temporary nesting rafts in Maryland (see page 5), relocation of Least Terns in Curacao, and restoration of Blue Noddies in Palmyra.





Hog Island
Audubon Camp

2022 Tentative Hog Island Camp Sessions

- Returning in 2022: Day Trips
 - Monhegan
 - Eastern Egg Rock
 - Midcoast Maine
- Puffin Islands
- Field Ornithology
- Arts & Birding
- Educators Week
- Family Camp I & II
- Birds of Maine Islands
- Migration and Monhegan
- Spring Migration & Monhegan
- Building Better Birding Skills
- Creating Bird-friendly Habitats
- Raptor Migration and Monhegan
- Mountains to Sea Birding for Teens
- Coastal Maine Bird Studies for Teens I & II

Save the date!

Registration opens February 1, 2022.

Sessions subject to change.



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We’re Open!

After being closed more than a year, the Project Puffin Visitor Center is once again open to limited numbers of visitors. Come learn about Project Puffin’s journey to bring puffins back to the coast of Maine and experience the critical work of Audubon’s Seabird Institute.

Record Numbers

We were happy to celebrate long-time partner Hardy Boat Cruises’ receipt of the Governor’s Award for Tourism Excellence with a surprise visit by Governor Janet Mills herself! Educators from the Seabird Institute narrate puffin-watching tours with both Cap’n Fish’s Cruises and Hardy Boat Cruises to Eastern Egg Rock. This year’s tours reached double the visitors, sharing the magic of puffins with nearly 20,000 people on board.



Welcome Kelly Bell-Brown!

The Seabird Institute is proud to welcome Kelly Bell-Brown as its new Senior Office Assistant. First to greet you in the office, Kelly brings 20 years of office administration experience to the team. She lives in Owl’s Head, Maine, with her husband and two Labrador retrievers.



Education and Outreach Assistant, Emmylou Kidder (right), poses with Maine Governor Janet Mills during a puffin cruise on the Hardy Boat.

2020–2021 CONTRIBUTORS

Contributions listed were received from October 1, 2020 through August 31, 2021. Space restrictions prevent us from listing our 1,651 Supporter-level friends. Every donor is important to us and we sincerely regret any omissions. Your continuing participation makes our work possible.

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IN MEMORY

Charles “Trip” Dennis (1969–2021)

Project Puffin is saddened by the passing of one of its most accomplished “puffineers.” Charles “Trip” Dennis signed on to Project Puffin in 1990—the same year that his mother Nancy volunteered on Seal Island NWR. Together they made an impressive team. Trip had already developed a passion for birds from his mother and inherited a love for the sea from his father, but those days on Seal Island, surrounded by puffins and other puffineers, set his path for a lifelong career helping seabirds and engaging people with ocean conservation.

After three years with Project Puffin, Trip received a Master’s degree in biology from the University of North Carolina-Wilmington where he studied threats to island-nesting birds. He was hired as a naturalist for Abercrombie and Kent Expeditions, beginning a long career on ships devoted to ecotourism. Trip’s expertise was in seabirds and marine mammals, and he also had great familiarity with temperate, tropical, and arctic land birds. He crossed the Atlantic six times. In a stopover in the Falkland Islands he met his future wife, Gillian Walker. The two worked together from Antarctica to the Arctic Circle, the Amazon River Basin, and most of the remote Islands of the Atlantic.

Thanks to Trip’s many friends and family, who made generous gifts to Project Puffin in his memory, future puffineers will carry forward his passion for seabirds.

—Stephen Kress, Founder, Project Puffin



Trip Dennis (right) and his mother, Nancy, pose for a photo on Seal Island NWR during a volunteer trip during the early 1990s.

Gifts in memory of Charles “Trip” Dennis

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Project Puffin

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Every summer is a seabird summer at the Seabird Institute.
Take a peek inside to read about this year's seabird season, including

- The 40th Anniversary of "Puffin...With Fish!"
- A new, peculiar prey being fed to pufflings
- How the Seabird Institute is tracking seabird movements
- The impact of our evolving outreach efforts