

Predators taking their toll on Monomoy's birds

Report shows coyotes, foxes and raccoons use the new land bridge to reach the protected species.

By [Doug Fraser](#)
STAFF WRITER

October 18, 2007 3:55 PM

South Monomoy island has become treacherous territory for the protected species that live there.

According to a 2007 nesting report released last month, possums, raccoons, red foxes and scores of coyotes have crossed the new land bridge from the mainland and ravaged a large number of the eggs and chicks on the Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge.

A storm broke Monomoy Island off from the mainland in 1958. Until then, it was relatively easy for these predators, as well as skunks and weasels, to come over and hunt in the refuge, which was created in 1944 to protect important habitat for migratory birds, especially federally protected species. The refuge has the largest common tern colony in Massachusetts with 53 percent of the population, according to the latest U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2007 nesting report.

These terns, as well as federally endangered roseate terns and least terns, black skimmers and American oystercatchers, have no real defenses and need nesting areas isolated from predators to survive. When South Beach reconnected with the South Monomoy in November 2006, that isolation ended, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service knew it could be hard work to protect these birds.

Ironically, the coyotes did a lot of the predator control for them, eating foxes and possums.

"I thought it was going to be a lot worse this year than it was," said Refuge Manager Michael Brady. That is not saying that the news was good, however.

Coyotes, gulls and black-crowned night herons still took a heavy toll on the common tern colony on South Monomoy. It was already down by almost 1,400 pairs of birds from the previous year, to 7,948 pairs. Predators reduced the chick count to .70 chicks surviving to fledge per pair of birds. Brady said those kinds of numbers mean the colony could be in for a big population drop in coming years.

Other species on South Monomoy were similarly affected by the increased numbers of predators, all with low chick counts. Brady said his staff killed 19 coyotes this year, as well as 15 gulls and two night herons.

Massachusetts Audubon Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary Director Robert Prescott said the Monomoy refuge has to protect its birds. He said terns have an especially hard time with mammals.

"It is the most important place for terns right now. There are no other options for them," he said. "It's a real battle."

Robbie Fearn agrees that management options at Monomoy are "tricky" but the director of the

Humane Society of the U.S. Cape Wildlife Center doesn't think killing predators will work in the long run.

"If they were a truly isolated ecosystem, there might be ways to protect those species, but continuing to exterminate one species is unlikely to be successful because another will move into the vacuum," Fearn said.

Doug Fraser can be reached at dfraser@capecodonline.com.