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# NEWS

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### Mary Richmond Photo

OUT FOR A WALK – A lone willet takes a walk on a jetty.

## Where the Birds Are

By Mary Richmond

The first time I was out on Dead Neck, a tiny barrier island off Osterville and Cotuit, it was about 25 years ago.

I canoed out with Manomet Bird Observatory's Kathy Parsons, who at that time was completing her doctorate and studying colonial waterbirds, specifically black crowned night herons and snowy egrets. It was one of the first times I had been in a nesting bird colony and the density of birds, noise and smell of the colonies of herons and egrets as well as the sounds and sights of hundreds of terns was amazing.

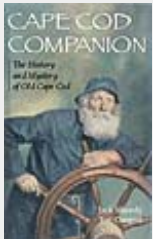
Sampson's Island and Dead Neck used to be two separate barrier islands but have joined to become one longer one. Over the last 25 years the island has suffered a lot of beating from the waves and wind and erosion has been intense, leaving little beach area for birds to nest on. The herons are gone, but piping plovers and least terns, two endangered species, are found there in significant numbers.

In 1998, Three Bays Preservation was born and more than \$1.5 million

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was raised to replenish the area with sand from dredgings that also opened up the three bays that are affected by the integrity of the island itself.

In 2004, the Mellon family donated 90 acres to Three Bays Preservation for ongoing stewardship. The remaining 30 acres are owned by Massachusetts Audubon and the two groups share monitoring responsibilities.

“Audubon monitors the birds and we monitor the people,” said Judy Heller, project manager for Three Bays.

Substantial numbers of piping plovers and least terns nest on Dead Neck and Sampson’s Island. In fact, last year Dead Neck was the most productive nesting area for piping plovers in the area, averaging 2.8 fledglings per nest. This year about 60 least terns are setting up housekeeping and a fair number of willets are nesting in the grassier areas.

I went out to Dead Neck recently with Judy Heller and one of her assistants. The day was gray and the skies threatened to wet the parts of us not already wet from boat spray, but the wind was fairly quiet and the birds were busy as we approached the island. The least terns were noisily wheeling above their nest area and we headed off around the point of the island and several pairs of piping plovers ran ahead of us along the sand.

The area was replenished with sand from dredging just last summer and the terns have happily adopted the more upland areas of sand that are surrounded by electric fencing in an attempt to keep coyotes out.

The side of the island facing Nantucket Sound took a significant beating this winter and the piping plover nests on the lower part of the beach have all washed away. It is easy to see how, as the lower beach is flat right up to the steep cuts in the dunes.

Some plovers have adapted and are building nests up on the higher parts of the dunes, but there is some concern about the steepness of the dunes themselves and how tiny birds will or will not be able to navigate that. Time will tell.

Dead Neck is also a good place for horseshoe crabs to mate and lay eggs. Significant numbers come here at this time of year to do their part in the continuance of the species.

Willetts, those seemingly quiet and dull brown shorebirds that burst into elegant patterns of black and white when they take flight, are also nesting on the island. They let us know in no uncertain terms when we were approaching a nest, several flying quite close to remind us whose territory this really is.

Three Bays Preservation has taken a very active role in the management of this tiny but productive preserve. Members of Massachusetts Audubon or Three Bays are welcome to visit the island as long as they observe the rules and monitors are on the island daily to help make those rules clear.

Visitors must respect the fenced in areas and most importantly, must leave their dogs at home. Just the appearance of a dog can spook already anxious birds and cause them to permanently leave their nests and young.

“Most people are great,” Heller said. “They love being out here and they want to keep it this way. Being members, they actually have a stake in its success so they comply. We’ve really only had one nasty person out here who gave us a hard time.”

She says sheer numbers of boats and people make the balance difficult sometimes. She is concerned that this year there will be very little beach at high tide, due to the severe erosion and wonders what problems may arise. In the meantime she and her staff will be out on the island just about every day, making sure all is well and that the birds remain undisturbed.

**Learn more at [www.3bays.org](http://www.3bays.org).**

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