

Monomoy-South Beach Connection Raises Access, Jurisdictional Issues

[by Tim Wood](#)

CHATHAM --- Federal, state and local officials are working together to develop plans to address the consequences of the recent melding of South Beach and Monomoy Island.

Mike Brady, refuge manager at the Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge, met recently with representatives of the National Park Service to discuss what could happen on the barrier beach in terms of emergencies, and how those would be addressed. He plans to hold similar talks with Coast Guard and town officials.

Brady said he wants to have the paperwork in place to allow vehicle access to Monomoy via South Beach in case of an emergency. Vehicles are not allowed on Monomoy because it is designated a National Wilderness Area.

“I’d rather have the documents drawn up ahead of time,” Brady said. “We need to have those documents in place to protect people and not slow the process down.”

He also plans to do what is called a minimal tool analysis, which spells out what sort of equipment would be allowed within the Wilderness Area, in a situation that is not an immediate emergency but could require mechanical equipment, such as a boat running aground.

The growing land bridge between South Beach, which is owned by the town and within the boundary of the Cape Cod National Seashore, and South Monomoy Island, under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, is forcing officials to rethink policies and reinforce existing regulations, because of the easier access afforded to both humans and animals. The connection, anticipated for at least two years, formed during a Thanksgiving storm, and has since become wider and more solid.

“I think it’s definitely wider,” Brady said Monday. “It’s not going away.”

“It’s still building up,” confirmed Harbormaster Stuart Smith. “I don’t think there’s any question that it’s permanent.”

Along with developing emergency plans to help people, a high priority for Brady and his staff is putting in place strategies to stem an anticipated influx of predators to the island, which hosts the largest tern colony on the Atlantic coast.

So far, Brady said there’s been no sign that new predators have discovered Monomoy. “We’ve looked every week, but there’s been no new tracks,” he said. The influx may not begin until the spring, when shorebirds begin to nest.

Coyotes, a presence on the refuge for years now, were very visible during the Christmas bird count that was done last week, Brady said. “There’s coyotes everywhere down there,” he said, although he doesn’t attribute that to the joining of South Beach and Monomoy. “They’re good swimmers. They didn’t care too much” that water separated the landforms previously, he said. He anticipates continuing the policy of lethally removing coyotes in April, before they have a chance to have pups.

Perhaps more problematic will be creatures such as raccoons, skunks and weasels, which have proven a problem for nesting piping plovers and other shorebirds on South Beach. On one hand, the creatures are more difficult to find and can den more easily, but they can also be removed using simple box traps. “We don’t really know how it’s going to work out yet,” Brady said, adding that if the critters can be intercepted at the land bridge, before they can infiltrate Monomoy, “I think it could be fairly easy this year.”

“We’re going to continue to protect our birds, but once [predators] get a foothold, they’re going to stay. We won’t have that island effect any more,” Brady said.

And that could have a significant impact on the tern colony. Since the Fish and Wildlife Service began its avian diversity program a decade ago, the number of nesting pairs of common terns has grown from 300 to more than 10,000. Federally protected least and roseate tern numbers have also increased, as have piping plovers, American oystercatchers and black skimmers. Whereas gulls were the biggest predatory concern in the past, refuge staff will now have to be on the lookout for other creatures that can disrupt or even destroy the colony.

Terns have been known to abandon areas when predators move in, Brady said, and move to other locations. And there's no way to predict if, or when, that might happen. "It's really going to depend on what the birds decide," he said.

Dogs may also be a factor this season. Many people who walk along South Beach bring their dogs along, and if they happen to cross over to Monomoy, "a domestic dog can totally ruin the colony," Brady said. "We see loose dogs on South Beach all the time. They could easily walk that land bridge and get over to the island. It's not something we've ever had to deal with in the 10 years we've been doing avian diversity. People were limited and dogs were limited. Now it's a different game."

Smith routinely drives down to the new connection, and agrees having the ability to drive to the tip of Monomoy would be beneficial in case of emergencies. "It's still not an easy trip," he pointed out, giving the high dunes and steep slope on the east side of the beach. But he agreed developing protocols now will smooth out responses to future emergencies for both town rescue personnel and the Coast Guard.

"It's not so bad this time of year, but when the birds are in season, it's going to be more of an issue," he said.

As refuge manager, Brady has the authority to draw up an emergency plan for access to the refuge, but under the federal Wilderness Act, there's a "whole line of documents" and rules that have to be followed above and beyond the refuge rules and regulations, he said.

Ultimately, however, "the very high up folks" in the federal Department of the Interior are going to have to tackle the jurisdictional issues that the new land bridge raises, Brady said.