

# Seabird Nesting Islands

### Maine's Rocky Islands: Key to Seabird Survival

Terns (Arctic, common, and roseate), puffins, guillemots, razorbills, cormorants (double-crested and great), Leach's storm petrels and common eiders are some of the diverse assemblage of colonial nesting seabirds in Maine. Seabirds live over the open ocean, returning to land only once a year- touching down to breed, lay their eggs and raise their young. Their survival depends on undisturbed nesting habitat.

Many seabird species nest on the ground among the rocks or in burrows. The small, unforested, rocky islands off the coast of Maine provide a perfect setting- one free of predators and surrounded by rich waters abundant with fish and invertebrates, their primary food source. Of the 4,617 coastal islands and ledges in Maine, 616 harbor nesting seabirds.

Maine's coastal islands are key to the survival of several species of seabird. The only breeding sites in the US for Atlantic puffins and razorbills are found here and the Gulf of Maine is the southernmost breeding territory for black guillemots, Leach's storm petrels and common eiders. In addition, other species depend on Maine's coastal islands. Some islands support rare birds such as bald eagles, peregrine falcons and roseate terns. The associated coastal wetlands and mudflats of many islands are used for feeding and resting by large numbers of migrating waterfowl and shorebirds and the islands also provide important stopover habitat for neotropical migratory birds.

### Threats to Seabirds

Historically, seabird populations in Maine declined from overharvesting and introduced predators. As Europeans began settling Maine's islands in the 1600's sea bird islands were utilized for livestock



Razorbill



Eastern Egg Rock



Atlantic Puffin

grazing and seabird eggs were harvested as food. As ground nesting birds, seabird colonies were particularly vulnerable to predators (rats and other mammals) introduced at the same time. Seabirds experienced a great decline in the late 1800's as many species were overharvested for the millinery trade and feathers were used to decorate women's hats. Open landfills on the mainland resulted in increased gull populations leaving seabird chicks and eggs vulnerable to increased gull predation. By the 20th century many species were at the brink of extinction in Maine.

Concern for the future of the birds has led to the passage of federal and state laws and efforts to protect and to manage the islands that provide important nesting habitat. Many seabird species have made dramatic recoveries. However, as development spreads along the eastern seaboard today, islands are becoming more important than ever for supporting bird populations, but are also attracting increased attention from potential human users. Disturbances associated with second home developments, recreational use and aquaculture ventures are increasing and sometimes threatening coastal island habitats and Maine's seabird populations.

### **Significant Wildlife Habitat Regulations**

In 1998, islands supporting significant populations of nesting seabirds were afforded protection in the State of Maine as Significant Wildlife Habitat (SWH) under Maine's Natural Resources Protection Act. Permits from the Department of Environmental Protection are required for regulated activities in Significant Wildlife Habitat, including but not limited to dredging, bulldozing, draining, filling, and construction or alterations of permanent structures. The permit review process ensures that activities are done at a time or in a way that minimizes harm to

seabirds and their nesting habitat.

Under NRPA, a Seabird Nesting Island is defined as: 1) an island, ledge or portion thereof in tidal waters that has documentation of 25 or more nests or seabirds or adults displaced from nests in any nesting season since 1976, provided suitable nesting habitat still exists, or 2) an island, ledge, or portion thereof in tidal waters that has documentation of one or more nests of a seabird that is a Maine endangered or threatened species in any year during, or since, 1976 provided that the island, ledge, or portion thereof, continues to have suitable nesting habitat.

The Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife has identified and mapped 234 seabird nesting islands as Significant Wildlife Habitat. Maps of the location of these islands are available from the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife.



Common Tern



Matinicus Island



## What You Can Do

- If you are planning to build or conduct other regulated activities on Seabird Nesting Island or in other Significant Wildlife Habitat, contact your local DEP office for more information about the permit process so you can efficiently plan your activities and get advice about steps you can take to avoid impacts.
- If you are working on local land conservation efforts in your town or region, learn more about Seabird Nesting Islands and other Significant Wildlife Habitats (SWH) in your area by looking at SWH maps from the Maine DEP website ([www.maine.gov/dep](http://www.maine.gov/dep)) or by consulting your town's High Value Plant and Animal Habitat map from Beginning with Habitat ([www.beginningwithhabitat.org](http://www.beginningwithhabitat.org)).
- Boaters and recreationists should not land on nesting islands during the nesting season. Access to seabird nesting habitat is restricted during this crucial period (April-August). If you are near a nesting colony of seabirds, watch them with binoculars and keep your distance (at least 100-yards). Repeated human disturbance can cause nest abandonment.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF REGIS TREMBLAY

## For More Information

### Natural Resources Protection Act

[www.maine.gov/dep/blwq/docstand/nrpapage.htm](http://www.maine.gov/dep/blwq/docstand/nrpapage.htm)

### Department of Environmental Protection

[www.maine.gov/dep](http://www.maine.gov/dep)

Bureau of Land and Water Quality (Augusta)  
(207) 287-3901 or (800) 453-1942  
Southern Maine Regional Office (Portland)  
(207) 822-6300 or (800) 769-1036  
Eastern Maine Regional Office (Bangor)  
(207) 941-4570 or (888) 769-1137  
Northern Maine Regional Office (Presque Isle)  
(207) 764-0477 or (888) 769-1053

### Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife

[www.mefishwildlife.com](http://www.mefishwildlife.com)

For questions about SWH regulations, contact the Environmental Coordinator (207) 287-5258

For questions about SWH in your area, please contact MDIFW Regional Biologists

Region A: (207) 657-2345  
Region B: (207) 547-5300  
Region C: (207) 434-5927  
Region D: (207) 778-3324  
Region E: (207) 695-3756  
Region F: (207) 732-4132  
Region G: (207) 435-3231

For questions about wildlife and habitats, please contact staff at Beginning with Habitat (207) 287-5254 or visit [www.beginningwithhabitat.org](http://www.beginningwithhabitat.org)

