

[Previous Story](#)

[Next Story](#)

Article rank | 2 Sep 2016 | The Day | By JUDY BENSON Day Staff Writer

Striking a balance between birds, humans on Sandy Point

Fish & Wildlife Service wraps up first season of regulating activity, monitoring plovers

While Kacey Srubas wrenched some of the 120 fence poles out of the sand Wednesday, Yianni Laskaris wound the rope strung between them into a bucket.

With the poles, rope and signs removed by Srubas, who holds the title of piping plover intern, and Laskaris, a biological technician, so went the physical evidence of the new authority that watched over both birds and humans at a popular barrier beach in Little Narragansett Bay this summer.

For them and the rest of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service team working at Sandy Point Island, this weekend marks the end of the agency's first season of actively regulating human use of the island while monitoring the rare and endangered plovers, American oystercatchers and least terns that nest there.

About five of the 39 acres are located in Connecticut, while the remainder is part of Rhode Island, all within easy access for those with motor boats, sailboats and kayaks from Stonington and Westerly.

"With it being peak hurricane season now, we're in crunch mode to get our signs and fence poles up," said Karrie Schwaab, deputy refuge manager for Sandy Point.

"The thing that's really unique here is the balance we try to achieve between habitat conservation and wildlife protection and allowing people to use it for passive recreation," she said. "There's a lot of families that come here and learn about nature. It's an exciting opportunity."

Over the past seven years, the Avalonia Land Conservancy, which owns the island, has given over more management responsibilities for Sandy Point to the federal agency, enabling better care for birds and humans both, said Beth Sullivan, Stonington Town Committee chairwoman and steward for Avalonia.

Before the Fish & Wildlife Service established its own system this year of requiring and checking users for permits, part-time fee collectors patrolled the island but often didn't have the wildlife expertise needed to educate the public, she said.

"They have a great presence, because these are knowledgeable, dedicated stewards," she said. "These are people who are invested in the preserve as a preserve."

The change began in 2015, when Avalonia reached a lease agreement with the Fish & Wildlife Service, and Sandy Point became part of the Rhode Island wildlife refuge system.

Fish & Wildlife Service rangers spent last summer talking to the many boaters who use the island about the new permit system that would be implemented in 2016, and the rules they would need to follow.

This summer, as with the permit system run by Avalonia, the passes were sold through the Stonington Community Center, but online sales were added through www.thecomo.org, bringing the total sold to more than 600.

For those 18 and older, daily passes cost \$10 per person, while season passes are \$25. Those under 18 get in free.

"This is the first year we've been implementing the beach pass. Last year we did the outreach," Schwaab said.

The prices, she said, were set to provide enough money to support the monitoring program, which includes patrols four to five days a week, including weekends, by Park Ranger Steven Brown, along with periodic visits by Fish & Wildlife Service enforcement officers.

"It's been a busy summer," said Brown, showing a photo on his cellphone of the shoreline lined with boats, beach chairs, umbrellas and people. "It really is in the middle of a high-traffic area."

Brown said he focuses on asking people whether they have a permit, and making sure they know how to buy one.

Many people, he said, have bought permits on the spot using their smart phones, then showed him the receipt.

He also frequently reminds people about rules against bringing dogs to the island, which are seen as predators by the nesting birds.

On Wednesday, cruising just offshore in the agency's boat with Schwaab and Wildlife Biologist Ryan Kleinert,

he approached one such couple, who had anchored their motorboat a few feet from the beach.

After learning they had a permit, Brown asked about their dog, who had just run on the beach and into patches of seaside goldenrod and dune grass before taking a swim.

"Do you know about the dog rules?" he asked the couple, who declined to give their names.

"Yes," replied the man, wearing a bathing suit as he stood knee-deep in the water while his dog swam.

"We just wanted to take him swimming," the woman with him replied. "He's never been swimming."

"Dogs do scare the wildlife," Brown replied. Under the rules, he added, the dog could stay in the water, but couldn't go back on shore.

"My job is to educate them," Brown said, as the boat carrying him and the other agency staff pulled away from shore.

Schwaab said the service is focusing its efforts on enlisting the public's help in protecting the birds and how to protect them, rather than enforcement and fines.

"We're trying to build a community of folks who will talk to us," she said. "We're not here to write a ton of tickets."

During this April-to-Labor Day season the service is concluding, the island was home to four nesting pairs of plovers, which between them raised two chicks that successfully fledged, surviving the crows and gulls that preyed on the other young, Kleinert said.

It also saw 20 pairs of nesting least terns and eight pairs of oystercatchers, which fledged one chick each.

"The oystercatchers do extremely well here," Kleinert said, adding that the island also supports nesting red knots, spotted sandpipers and is an important stopover for migrating birds in the fall.

Brown, the ranger, said most of the people he interacts with are cooperative and willing to follow the rules that prohibit campfires, staying after sunset, flying kites that some birds mistake for hawks and shooting firecrackers that can cause plovers to abandon their nests.



"There are four to five people who walk the island daily to pick up trash," he said. "They're people who've been coming to the island since they were kids, and just want to see it kept nice."

This article was shared by a user of PressReader - an online source of publications from around the world. PressReader contains copyrighted material, trademarks and other proprietary information. Receipt of this article should not be interpreted as grant of any licenses express or implied, to the intellectual property of PressReader or publishers of publications presented. PressReader - Connecting People Through News PressReader, 200-13111 Vanier Place, Richmond BC V6V 2J1, Canada Phone: +1 604 278 4604 © 2003-2016 NewspaperDirect Inc. dba PressReader. All rights reserved. Terms of Use: <http://care.pressreader.com/hc/articles/206528495-Terms-of-Use> Privacy Policy: <http://care.pressreader.com/hc/articles/205818089-Privacy-Policy>

[Previous Story](#)

[Next Story](#)