

Admiralty Audubon Pippings

Avian flu drama plays out at Caspian Tern colony near Flagler campground

The Caspian Tern colony, the one across the bay from the Port Townsend waterfront, was just wiped out by avian flu. Nearly. At the start of the summer, we estimated the colony at about 1,500 adults. So far, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) – in five trips to the island, roughly once a week – has picked up over 1,100 dead adults and 400 dead chicks.

This is painful on several levels.

First, this colony, on Rat Island just off the tip of the spit at Fort Flagler Campground, is a relatively new phenomenon. Analysis of satellite images suggest it began last year. **Unfortunately, in 2022, in two attempts, about 500 to 1,000 adults produced maybe a dozen fledglings.** The first attempt was

wiped out by human disturbance. A minus-four tide on the Fourth of July enticed many campers to walk from the spit to the island. I personally watched through my scope as a couple with a dog (on a leash) walked right up to the colony, putting all the birds up in the air, and stood there, naively enjoying the birds and filming them with their phones. Unbeknownst to them, gulls were pouring in underneath the cacophonous mob of terns, no doubt devouring eggs and chicks. This is how human disturbance impacts seabird colonies. A month later, the gulls tried again. This time a coyote managed to swim across from Indian Island and had a feast. Coyotes previously wiped out a colony on the tip of Dungeness Spit.

This year we were prepared to at least address the human disturbance problem. As the Conservation Chair of Admiralty Audubon, I reached out to State Parks and WDFW. They contacted the Friends of Fort Flagler, who created a team of 25 volunteers to serve as docents during extreme low tides to intercept and educate beachgoers about the terns – and the harbor seal haul-out next to it. WDFW put up signs around the island to educate kayakers.

Everyone was trained and more birds than ever came to nest. They seemed to be doing great. Most were on eggs, and we estimated they were just about to hatch. Then, on July 10, Sam Kaviar, a naturalist guide who runs Olympic Kayak Tours, noticed a dead tern. Not a big deal, I told him, unless you start seeing more. Within two hours, he saw a dozen more. He called WDFW. They were nearby in a boat so came over to check it out. They collected 35 dead terns and suspected highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI), also known as H5N1. They collected carcasses to run tests, which eventually came back positive.

The second painful thing is that Caspian Terns are a long-lived slow-reproducing species. The loss of chicks is one thing, but the loss of adults is

a much bigger deal. Caspian Terns, the largest tern in the world, can live 26 years. Most adults live 10 to 15 years. This means they only need to reproduce themselves once every 15 years or so to sustain their population. It also means that, if you lose an adult, it might take 15 years to replace them.

The third painful thing is that Caspian Terns are already declining, both in the

Pacific Northwest, up and down the entire West Coast, and across the whole continent. The Birds of the World species account for Caspian Tern, in the section on conservation concerns, highlights their need for disturbance-free nesting sites: “Human disturbance at colonies facilitates egg predation by gulls when more wary terns are flushed from nests.”

The fourth painful thing is that Caspian Terns were deliberately pushed off from most of their other breeding sites in the Pacific Northwest in the past 15 years. They do not nest scattered across the landscape like robins or even gulls. Like many seabirds, they nest in tight colonies, packed together, one nest every few feet. In the Pacific Northwest, enormous colonies were hazed off Sand Island in

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Rat Island Caspian Tern colony, 11 August 2023; a few chicks being fed, with dead and dying terns in foreground.

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the Columbia River delta by government agencies because they were eating too many salmon smolts – which are endangered because of the dams. (Note, photos of prey items at Rat Island have shown the terns eating candlefish, herring, smelt, surf perch, and juvenile salmon – the latter only toward the end of their nesting period.) Many relocated to rooftops in Seattle or to empty lots in Bellingham. In recent years, they have been hazed off there, too. That is exactly why the Rat Island colony near Port Townsend grew so suddenly. It is a colony of refugees. We have photographed birds there that were banded at Sand Island, in Bellingham, even

from the Tri-Cities area. This spring, as the colony was forming, local experts concluded that **this was the only Caspian Tern colony in the Salish Sea.**

Now 80% of them are dead.

Like Covid, **HPAI has recently become part of our world.** The United Nations issued a concise report about it in July 2023. They open with this: “H5N1 high pathogenicity avian influenza (HPAI) is currently causing unparalleled mortality of wild birds and mammals worldwide...” They describe it as unprecedented based on the scale of mortality (often approaching 90%) and geographic spread (nearly worldwide). In Washington, it was first detected last winter in waterfowl (mostly Snow Geese) in the Skagit Flats.

This summer’s outbreak at the tern colony is the first known incidence of HPAI in wild birds in the breeding season in Washington. A smaller outbreak is on-going among Caspian Terns at the Columbia River delta. Fears that it would spread to the harbor seals or dogs at the Fort Flagler campground have not materialized. Some dead gulls, especially chicks, have tested positive, though in general, the gulls have been much less affected. There are several hundred “Olympic Gulls” – Glaucous-winged x Western Gull hybrids that nest at Rat Island near the terns. Bald Eagles and Black Oystercatchers are also

present near the colony and potentially vulnerable, though no dead birds of these species have been found. The largest seabird colony in the region is at Protection Island, with over 10,000 Rhinoceros Auklets. That is only nine miles away as the tern flies. While terns forage near Protection Island, and auklets forage near Rat Island, there has been no evidence of transmission to the auklets. In fact, HPAI is unknown in alcids so far.

Hope remains. On my last visit to the island, on August 11, there were still approximately 350 adults. Some were flying into the colony carrying fish. From the Fort Flagler beach, I could see about a dozen chicks of varying ages, adults offering them fish, as well as a few dead adults and others that appeared sick. I am hopeful that over 10% of the adults will survive. That sounds pathetic, but it’s a start. Perhaps they will be immune to avian flu

and so will their offspring. We don’t know yet. And, despite the carnage, it looks like this colony may actually produce more fledges than last year. So that’s another start. Chicks leave the colony about 45 days after hatching. That should be soon for some of them. They can’t get away fast enough. More photographs can be seen at <https://ebird.org/checklist/S147022148>.

Steve Hampton

Admiralty Audubon Conservation Chair



Rat Island Caspian Tern colony, with surviving adults feeding surviving chicks, late August 2023. Hope remains!

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An observant Cooper's Hawk, Port Townsend, August 2023

AAS Birdwalks September & October 2023

September

North Beach and Chinese Gardens
Sunday, September 10, 2023
8:00 AM - 11 AM

Meet at North Beach County Park. We'll scan the sea and the lagoon, as well as walk some of the neighborhood and Fort Worden State Park, searching for fall migrants and winter arrivals. Bring a scope if you have one, as we'll use them for scanning the Strait. Expect to walk about a mile. 2 to 3 hours total. RSVP: *Steve Hampton at stevehampton@gmail.com.*

Third Saturday at Anderson Lake State Park
Saturday, September 16, 2023
8:30 AM - 12:30 PM

Meet at 8:30 AM at the parking area straight down the dirt road just beyond the meadows. Discover Pass required for parking. *You must contact leader Beverly McNeil to register: bevybirds53@gmail.com.* The group size is limited to 5. If the weather is bad we may cancel. Bring binoculars and water, if desired. Distance is 1.5 miles and time of outing is usually 3 to 4 hours. We normally go around the whole lake on Trail B, Anderson Lake State Park. Wear sturdy shoes and layered clothing for changeable weather. Please avoid wearing bright clothing

October

Third Saturday at Anderson Lake State Park
Saturday, October 21, 2023
9:00 AM - 12:00 PM

Meet at 9 AM at the parking area straight down the dirt road just beyond the meadows. Discover Pass required for parking. *You must contact leader Beverly McNeil to register: bevybirds53@gmail.com.* The group size is limited to 5. If the weather is bad we may cancel. Bring binoculars and water, if desired. Distance is 1.5 miles and time of outing is usually 3 to 4 hours. We normally go around the whole lake on Trail B, Anderson Lake State Park. Wear sturdy shoes and layered clothing for changeable weather. Please avoid wearing bright clothing.

Betty Renkor
Admiralty Audubon Field Trips Chair

AAS Community Program

October 19, 2023
Port Townsend Community Center
Tyler & Lawrence
7:30 PM - 9 PM

John and Donna Van Ackeren traveled in Guyana for four weeks and visited eight lodges. Besides presenting many of the wonderful birds, they would like to share several other experiences including a visit to Kaiteur Falls, a canopy walkway at Atta Lodge, searching for the Goliath Spider, observing a Black Caiman capture for a research project, as well as spotting Giant Anteaters and Golden Rocket Frogs. They have a variety of slides not only showing birds and a couple of unique bird calls, but also wildflowers, insects, reptiles, accommodations and landscapes.



© John & Donna Van Ackeren

Striped Heron on lily pad, Guyana.

AAS Workparties Kah Tai Lagoon Nature Park

Sundays, September 17 & October 15, 2023
9 AM - noon

Meet at the bench closest to Chase Bank parking lot at the corner of Kearney and Hwy 20. We will be pulling invasives (Scot's broom, spurge laurel, ivy, holly) and picking up garbage. If we get enough rain for the soil to be moist, we will be planting natives in October.

Rosemary Sikes
Admiralty Audubon Programs Chair



© Beverly McNeil



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photos clockwise from top left:

Clark's Nutcracker, Marmot Pass, July 2023;

Barred Owl, Kah Tai, August 2023;

Barred Owls, home landscape Port Townsend, July 2023;

Townsend's Chipmunk, Larry Scott Trail near Discovery Road, May 2023.



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AAS Membership Form 2023
<https://admiraltyaudubon.org>

name _____ date _____

mailing address _____

city, state, zipcode _____

email address _____ phone number _____

Would you prefer your newsletter by email? paper copy? amount enclosed \$ _____

Send \$20 annual membership to: **Admiralty Audubon, PO Box 666, Port Townsend WA 98368**
or pay online at the 'Join' link via PayPal or credit card

Membership includes 6 issues of our newsletter per year and the right to vote in chapter elections. Chapter programs and field trips are free to the public. We always welcome donations! Dues and donations are tax-deductible to the extent allowed by law. Admiralty Audubon is a 501c3 nonprofit organization.

The Feather Forecast - September & October 2023

These two months are a changing of the guard from neotropical migrants to our hardy seafaring and wintering residents. We witness the departure of our breeding season visitors —birds such as Caspian Tern, Black-headed Grosbeak, Western Tanagers, Warbling Vireo, four kinds of swallow, Swainson’s Thrush, Rufous Hummingbird, Willow, Hammond’s and Pacific Slope Flycatchers, and the migratory warblers - Yellow, Black-throated Gray, MacGillivray’s, and Common Yellowthroats.

As they vacate our woods, our resident birds are beginning to flock (The Flocking Season) in interspecies groups. As you walk, just listen for a gaggle of birds and then bother to take up the binoculars. Returning from their summer away from our area are fall/ winter passerines - the Fox and Golden-crowned Sparrows, the Hermit Thrush, and the Ruby-crowned Kinglets. Skeins of migrating geese such as Cackling and Greater White-fronted Geese can be seen overhead heading south.

Shorebirds are pretty much done migrating, though we get a few at Oak Bay, and look for American Pipit in the wrack lines and driftwood strands of the beaches. Our wintering resident birds remind us of our luck that they stay with us all year. Chinese Gardens and Kah Tai Lagoon become flush with a great diversity of ducks. The seabirds of the Alcid family (Common Murre, Ancient Murrelets), an occasional pelican, and our winter sandpipers - Dunlin, Sanderling and Black Turnstones also return. Black-bellied Plover, the occasional Whimbrel or Godwit, and the various saltwater grebes and Red-throated Mergansers return to the winter shorelines. We are never too lonely here when it comes to birds and the company they provide!



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© Andrea Guarino-Slemmons



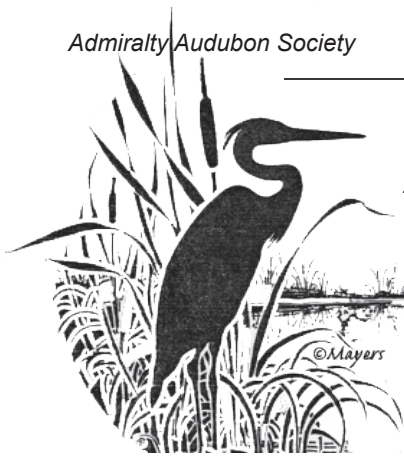
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photos clockwise from top left: Semipalmated Plover, Oak Bay County Park, August 2023; Eastern Kingbird, North Beach, August 2023, the third recorded county appearance; Song Sparrow eating a spider at Kah Tai, August 2023; Common Yellowthroat,, Anderson Lake, July 2023.



Admiralty Pippings

Admiralty Audubon Society of East Jefferson County
PO Box 666 Port Townsend WA 98368

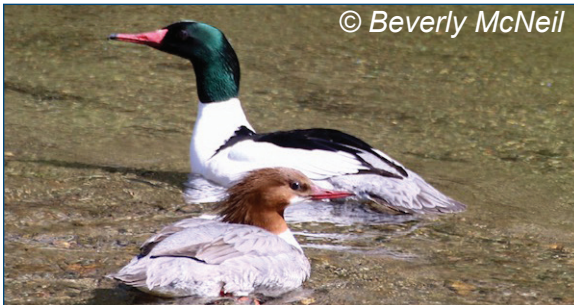


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Acorn Woodpecker, Cape George, May 2023.

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left: Common Merganser pair, Quinault Rainforest, May 2023; right: Bonaparte's Gull, East Beach, Marrowstone Island, August 2023.



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