



A Taste of Champagne...Island

By Todd Pover, Beach Nesting Bird Project Manager, CWFNJ

The name *Champagne Island* conjures up images of exotic revelry, even if according to local lore it derived its name during prohibition when bootleggers trying to evade authorities would dump their liquor there. Ironically enough, today the island is a magnet for boats and jet-skis, whose owners go there to enjoy its less regulated and sometimes party-like atmosphere. The island is also an extremely attractive site for endangered beach nesting birds and migratory shorebirds. Herein lies the conflict that plays itself out up and down the New Jersey coast – how to balance human recreational activities with endangered species protection.

Situated within Hereford Inlet in Cape May County, Champagne Island is a small sandbar island that changes in size and shape from year to year, sometimes disappearing altogether. In those years when its elevation is high enough to avoid flooding, it is typically one of the state's most important locations for nesting birds, especially the state endangered black skimmer. In 2007, for instance, over 1600 skimmers, nearly 85% of the entire state population, nested there. State endangered piping plover and least tern, as well as species of special concern, such as common tern and American oystercatcher also nest there. Shorebirds, including the red knot, which rely on our state as a critical stopover during their spring migration route, use the island as well.

Adding to the island's importance, in 2007 a small colony of royal terns nested within the large skimmer colony, making this the northernmost royal tern colony in the world and the first royal tern colony known in New Jersey. Royal terns returned to Champagne Island to nest in 2008, in fact, the colony grew considerably to over 150 pairs. During the breeding season the island is a tremendous "National Geographic worthy" wildlife spectacle—right here in our own "backyard."



When the birds begin arriving back in the state to nest in April and May, Champagne Island is largely deserted, not a boater or person in sight. Adding to the island's appeal, it doesn't support

any mammalian predators (such as red fox), which decimate ground nesting birds at many other coastal locations. Indeed, recent research conducted in New Jersey has shown that isolated predator-free inlet islands, such as Champagne Island, are especially important for nesting species such as American oystercatchers.

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As Memorial Day and the traditional Jersey Shore tourist season arrives, the picture changes dramatically. As if a switch was turned on, locations throughout the coastal area are deluged with visitors. Depending on the species, this is the same time beach nesting birds are about to lay their eggs or hatch their young. Because they are particularly sensitive to human disturbance, safeguards must be in place if the birds are to successfully produce young.



So how does the Conserve Wildlife Foundation of New Jersey (CWF) fit into this story? At the most basic level, through a contract with the state funded by the Anitra Oil Spill Settlement, we oversee the beach nesting bird project for the state’s Endangered and Nongame Species Program (ENSP). Champagne Island is one of about 30 breeding sites statewide we closely monitor and manage through this project, including everything from intensive breeding surveys, to the placement of fence and signs to protect nesting sites, to public outreach.

Our involvement with Champagne Island doesn’t stop there. This year we secured a two-year grant with the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation for the stewardship of beach nesting birds and migratory shorebirds within Hereford Inlet, including Stone Harbor Point, North Wildwood’s Inlet Beach, and Champagne Island. As part of the grant, we hired a seasonal steward who was able to help increase the level of monitoring (i.e. bird surveys and patrolling to help control human disturbance) at all three of the sites. This effort, which will continue again next year, was particularly important at Champagne Island because the state’s Division of Fish and Wildlife embarked on a more aggressive strategy to control the unfettered recreational use of the island this year. We were able to work alongside Division law enforcement officers and ENSP seasonal monitors to accomplish this goal. Our Hereford Inlet monitor also helped usher in new conservation policies at Stone Harbor Point and significantly increased the number of migratory shorebird surveys conducted within the inlet, including into the fall season.

We have also been working with the state and other conservation groups to develop long term policies to protect the wildlife using Champagne Island. The island has long been a favored destination for local boaters, but recent economic and social trends have incrementally increased the pressure on wildlife at Champagne Island and along the entire coast. Where once boaters and wildlife were able to better co-exist at Champagne Island, the sheer number of boat and jet-skis landing there has tipped the balance. Dogs running rampant, volleyball nets set up on weekends, and partying were no longer isolated incidents. A commercial jet-ski operator even began shuttling customers to the island for various recreational activities.

On July 4th 2007, these activities peaked. At this time the situation came to the attention of several conservation groups within the state, who immediately began pressuring the state to address the matter. The situation was potentially most dire for the state's endangered black skimmers, as nearly the entire population was at this one site. Failure of the Champagne Island colony, which was a real threat, could wipe out productivity for the entire season. The state responded by increasing law enforcement at the island, expanding the protective buffer around the nesting colony and increased patrolling by ENSP seasonal monitors. These efforts led to success – over 700 young skimmers or nearly one chick per nesting pair fledged from the site.



Instead of this being the happy ending of the story, in some ways it was just the beginning. Portions of Champagne Island lie within the boundaries of three municipalities - Stone Harbor, North Wildwood, and Middle Township – although none of them have taken a stake in managing or regulating the island. This was part of its popularity as it helped create an “anything goes” attitude with some of the public using the island. The state's ESNP realized it needed to change this. Last winter, with the assistance of our Beach Nesting Bird Project Manager, it began formulating a long-term strategy for the site. Record searches revealed that Champagne Island is actually on lots/blocks owned by the state, so plans were made to designate it as part of the nearby Cape May Wetlands Wildlife Management Area. This would allow the state to better enforce rules to prevent people from entering critical nesting, foraging, and migration areas, and in particular from bringing dogs to the island. Appearances were made before the state's Tidelands Resource Council to secure management rights for the Division of Fish and Wildlife over the tidal waters immediately surrounding the island. A management plan was developed to guide how conservation would be implemented at the island. Key to the plan was the concept that human use would be accommodated when, where, and to the extent it didn't jeopardize the island's nesting and migratory birds - protection of wildlife would take precedent.

With these steps accomplished, ENSP and CWF were more prepared than ever for the bird's arrival when the spring of 2008 rolled around. Unfortunately, Mother Nature had some other ideas. A series of moderate coastal storms over the winter had all but destroyed a dune system that had formed on the island and was previously the centerpiece of the nesting colonies. Not only was there less area for birds to nest on the island, but it was much lower too, making it more susceptible to flooding. Nonetheless, protective fence was erected and monitoring began. By late

April, American oystercatchers, typically the first of the beach nesting bird species to establish breeding territories, were sitting on nests and other species had begun to appear on the island. It was clear fewer birds would probably nest on the island in 2008 but some were finding room. The royal terns even made a return to the island after their maiden nesting attempts the previous year. And then suddenly on Mother's Day, a particularly powerful and unusually late nor'easter swept up the coast. Not only were all the nests at Champagne Island (and at many other locations) destroyed by the storm's tidal surge, the island was also entirely flattened – leaving virtually no suitable nesting habitat.

This was a disheartening turn of events for all the agencies and groups, including CWF, who had put so much effort into the conservation effort at Champagne Island over the past year. But the birds were not entirely done. No oystercatchers re-nested at the island, and piping plovers, which had been prospecting prior to the storm, did not return afterwards. The royal terns, however, almost immediately claimed the little remaining high ground, and began to lay eggs. And little by little black skimmers began to appear. At first they didn't have room to nest, but as the island began to slowly recover and build up sand as the summer progressed, they nested too. By July, of the nearly 400 royal terns present, over 150 had nests – each pair lays just one egg and so has no more than one chick – and the colony went on to successfully fledge over 125 young. By late July, just over 2000 skimmers were present on the lower margins of the island, including about 800 pairs with nests.

ENSP and CWF monitors were present on a near daily basis, especially on the busy weekends to make sure the colony was protected from human disturbance. Although the state had considered completely closing the island to human use, in the end it allowed portions of the low tide sandbars to remain open as they were far from the nesting colonies and important shorebird areas. Still the area closed to human use had been greatly expanded and a no tolerance dog policy was in place. An important part of the monitor's job is to talk to the public about these changes and explain why they were implemented – a tireless job but a critical one nonetheless.

In this rollercoaster season, Mother Nature had one more surprise waiting. Even as the royal terns were flourishing, on the last day of July and first few days of August, high tides washed away the entire skimmer colony. Within a few more days, not a single skimmer could be found on the island. The success of the royal tern colony was exciting, but the skimmer's failure was a bittersweet ending to the nesting season at Champagne Island.

Reflecting on the saga of Champagne Island we ask ourselves some questions. How do you measure success in the conservation field? Is it breeding success in a particular year, over an extended period, or the overall recovery of a species? Is it the development of long-term strategies to protect species (such as the management plan for Champagne Island)? Or is it the implementation of policies as was accomplished this year? Do outreach efforts count or make a difference? We work to *Keep Wildlife in New Jersey's Future* – if we are going to succeed in this endeavor we will have to accomplish a combination of successes in the areas of policy, stewardship, species management and education.

Postscript: In early August 2008, about a week after the black skimmer colony was flooded out at Champagne Island, monitors began noticing an influx of skimmers at another small colony about 20 miles north. It started as a trickle but by late August about 1500 skimmers had joined the Seaview Harbor Marina colony and more amazingly, considering how late it was in the breeding season, about 300 pairs re-nested at the site. By mid-October about 300 young skimmers were preparing to fly south for the winter. So in a season of twists and turns, in the end, the Champagne Island skimmers may have failed there, but they eventually achieved some success.