

GULL EXCLOSURES INSTALLED

by Dan McAskill

On April 22nd and 23rd, volunteers of the Natural History Society of Prince Edward Island loaded heavy cod line, 2 X 4s, metal strapping, and tools in a Boston whaler and a Zodiac raft so that gull exclosures could be installed on four of the Hillsborough Bridge Piers. The two boats were used in conjunction with up to four climbers to install the monofilament lines in a manner similar to the gull exclosures developed by Hans Blockpoel of the Canadian Wildlife

Service in Ontario. The exclosures consist of parallel heavy monofilament lines stretched between upright poles. These lines discourage gulls from landing because they tend to land in a swooping glide whereas terns settle slowly from a hovering position.

This work is a continuation of over 20 years of monitoring the Common Terns nesting on the old bridge piers (refer to Island Naturalist Issue 111 for the history of this colony). This monitoring has shown that the Great Black-backed Gulls, a single pair of which started nesting on the site in 1985, are causing a serious decline in the terns using this site and have reduced the production of tern young to very low numbers. This spring there were four pairs of Great Black-backed Gulls occupying four piers and experience has shown that the gulls will eat either the eggs or the young of the terns nesting on the same pier as well as adjacent piers.

In 1988, the Society had two summer students monitor the gull and tern interactions at the old bridge piers and, since then, the Society has gathered scientific information on these interactions from throughout eastern Canada and New England. In Atlantic Canada, declines and abandonments of tern colonies have been frequent in the past few decades. An estimated 44,000 pairs of Common and Arctic terns still nest in Atlantic Canada but this is a substantial reduction from tern numbers at the turn of the century when 100,000 to 500,000 pairs nested on Sable Island alone. Tern numbers in the Great Lakes have decreased from 16,000 pairs to 3,000 pairs in the past 20 years. Monitoring in New England has shown that once terns abandon a nesting site, it is difficult to encourage their return. Research over the past 30 plus years indicates that action should be taken before terns abandon a nesting site.

Great Black-backed Gulls and Herring Gulls populations have increased dramatically in response to garbage, human waste, and fish waste handling practices. There are healthy breeding colonies of both species in Hillsborough Bay and the movement of the 4 pairs of birds away from the Hillsborough piers will have a negligible impact on their population.

The Society will be monitoring the site throughout the breeding season to determine how the terns and gulls respond to the exclosures. The Society hopes that this non-destructive technique will be sufficient to protect the terns nesting at this site. The work was carried out in conjunction with the advice and permission of the Canadian Wildlife Service.

Thanks to Bruce Smith, Al McLennan, Phil Ward, Gerald MacDougall, Ted Currie, Robert Redmond, Todd Dupuis, and Bruce Pigot who volunteered their time and expertise to assist with the climbing and/or planning for this project. Thanks also to Hans Blockpoel and Tony Locke of the Canadian Wildlife Service who provided valuable advice on the exclosures.

