

A Good Tern

For the last nine summers Drs. Steve Oswald and Jennifer Arnold from Penn State University and their family have been coming to Presqu'île. While the kids might be on vacation, the couple are here to work. They have been studying the Common Tern colony on Gull Island. This colony is unique in the lower Great Lakes, being the only long-used colony on a natural, rather than a man-made (breakwaters etc.), structure. The Common Tern has also shown a marked decline across its North American range. Their research, which has been supported in part by grants from the Friends of Presqu'île, has been instrumental in the protection of this declining species.

Their early work showed that almost no baby terns were surviving. Cameras placed in the colony found that Black-crowned Night-Herons, and to a lesser extent Herring Gulls, were eating all the babies. In 2013 an experimental grid system of wire was placed over the colony. This was found to be effective at keeping the larger predators out and most chicks survived to fly away. The grid was adopted as part of the park management of this species in 2015 and its use was expanded. This expansion had the added benefit of increasing the number of terns nesting here. 158 nests were present in 2015, an 80% increase from years prior to the grid being used. Not all nests were within the grid, however, and there was a marked difference in how many chicks survived inside compared to outside the grid.

Last summer saw an expansion of the grid, though tern protection took a step back when remote cameras saw a Great Horned Owl within the grid eating chicks! How did such a large bird get inside and how was it able to leave? No answer to those questions has been forthcoming yet but modification made to the grid may have helped as the owl seemed to leave and with the larger colony, chick productivity was still good.

There is no doubt that work by Drs. Oswald and Arnold has greatly increased the long-term survival of Common Terns at Presqu'île and helped this declining species keep its Ontario populations healthy, thus doing a good turn for us all.



Tern Researcher at work. The stick on the hat keeps the terns from dive-bombing.

A. Parker



Tern colony protection grid – Gull Island.

Baby Terns in a bag await their bands.

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