

NOTES

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SEABIRDS OF GREAT ISAAC CAY, THE BAHAMAS

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Seabirds nesting in the northern Bahamas have, until recently, been poorly known, despite the nearness of the islands to Florida and visits by large numbers boaters and others. Pelagic terns appear regularly off Florida, on the western edge of the Florida Current but do not nest in North America, other than on the Dry Tortugas off the extreme southwestern tip of Florida. Several nesting sites of seabirds have been found along the eastern edge of the Florida Current, in The Bahamas, mostly on small cays (islands) south of Bimini (Kushlan and Steinkamp 2007). The present paper documents the existence of an additional, relatively large and regionally significant, seabird colony site at Great Isaac Cay.

Great Isaac Cay (26°2.0' N, 79°5.0' W) is located on the northwestern edge of the Great Bahama Bank, adjacent to the Florida Current, between Bimini and Grand Bahama, 54 nm from the Florida coast. The island is a rocky outcrop of limestone, much of it without vegetation but also having grassy areas, cactus, coastal shrubs, and a patch of Australian pines (*Casuarina* sp.). Observations reported in this paper were made as part of an ongoing program inventorying seabirds and other waterbirds in the northern Bahamas (2002-2009). The methods and extent of coverage are described in detail elsewhere (Kushlan and Steinkamp 2007). We conducted ground surveys of seabirds on Great Isaac Cay on 10 June 2008 and 19 June 2009. We counted birds and nests during a complete ground coverage of the island.

The species found and nests counted in the two censuses are shown in Table 1. The results were similar in the two years. In each year, over 4,000 birds nested on the island. Most numerous was the Sooty Tern (*Onychoprion fuscatus*), with about 1,400 nests. The next most numerous was the Bridled Tern (*O. anaethetus*), with about 580 nests. Brown Noddies (*Anous stolidus*), Roseate Terns (*Sterna dougallii*), Least Terns (*Sternula antillarum*), and Laughing Gulls (*Leucophaeus atricilla*) also nested there.

There are two notable findings of the study. The first was the diversity and conservation status of seabird species nesting on the island. Six species nested on the island. Of

Table 1. Seabirds nesting on Great Isaac Cay, The Bahamas, 2008-2009.

Species	Number of nests	
	2008	2009
Bridled Tern	597	568
Sooty Tern	1,498	1,380
Brown Noddy	67	64
Roseate Tern	6	6
Least Tern	0	8
Laughing Gull	81	83

these, three (Bridled Tern, Least Tern, Roseate Tern) are considered to be of high concern in the context of hemispheric waterbird conservation (Kushlan et al. 2002) and three (Sooty Tern, Least Tern, Roseate Tern) are considered to be at risk within the context of Caribbean seabird conservation (Bradley and Norton 2009).

The second finding was the relatively high numbers of nesting Bridled Terns. It has been estimated that 2,300-2,500 breeding pairs of this species occur in The Bahamas (Bradley and Norton 2009). Thus, the Great Isaac Cay population is a significant portion of the national total. This is a species that generally nests in small numbers at any particular site; on average in the Bahamas a nesting site holds 20 pairs (Kushlan and Steinkamp 2007). Larger sites are very few. The numbers of Bridled Terns nesting on Great Isaacs are comparable to the presently-known largest colonies in the Bahamas, North Riding Rock, Romeros Cay, and Bushes Cay (Kushlan and Steinkamp 2007). The abundance of Bridled Terns certainly qualifies this site as a nationally and perhaps regionally Important Bird Area.

From the point of view of both diversity of seabirds and to afford protection to one of the nation's largest Bridled Tern colonies, Great Isaac Cay may be worthy of special protection and management. Great Isaac is only 16 nm from Bimini. The island and its waters are often visited by cruisers, fishermen, and day visitors. Birds nesting there can be adversely affected by unaware visitors, and even more so by fishermen and others who take seabird eggs for food, despite this being illegal in The Bahamas. The latter management challenge is acknowledged by the local name for these terns, "egg birds."

In addition to the seabird colony, this island has historic significance to The Bahamas as the site for Great Isaac Lighthouse (Langton-Jones 1944). This light was erected in 1856, but its origin was even earlier. It was built in England for the Great London Exposition of 1852 and then sent to the Bahamas, where initially it was known Victoria Light in honor of the Queen. Thus for over 150 years, the light has stood as a critical navigation aid along the Florida Current and Northwest Providence Channel. The light is now automated and the station buildings are abandoned and crumbling. Visitation, including organized tours from Bimini, occurs but is unregulated and unsupported by interpretive materials.

As a potential park, Great Isaac Cay offers multiple opportunities for environmental and historic conservation. The island itself is an inviting place, accessibly by dinghy or small boat with a landing site built for the lighthouse. The surrounding areas, including nearby Hen and Chickens rocks, offer visitors snorkeling and fishing opportunities. Providing protection for this important seabird colony site from unregulated intrusion on the colony portions of the island, disturbance to nests, and eggging is a primary need. In addition to protection, an opportunity exists to provide educational materials on the value of seabirds and their colonies. Interpretive signs could be erected. These might describe the natural history of the birds, how they are used by sport and commercial fishermen to locate concentrations of fish, and how the practice of taking eggs of such birds is detrimental to the long-term conservation of the population. The lighthouse offers opportunity for historical interpretation, including history of the light, nearby shipwrecks, and the still mysterious disappearance of its keepers in 1969. The light is often the first sight in the Bahamas seen by cruisers; designation might increase public interest in the resources of the island. Official designation, monitoring, protection, and interpretation would help protect the colony, better manage the nearby marine environment, and conserve the historic site of Great Isaac Light.

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