

100 Years Ago in *The Auk*



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From "The Terns of Great Gull Island, N.Y., During 1897"

BY J. HARRIS REED (*Auk* 15:40-43, 1898)

"GREAT GULL ISLAND is the smallest of the group of islands situated at the eastern end of Long Island, and contains about eleven acres. Its shape is long and narrow, with an irregular shore line, especially on the south side, and varies in width from about three hundred feet across its centre, to long narrow ends, making a total length of about three-quarters of a mile. The beach is rough and stony, and contains a great many large boulders scattered along the shore, especially at the east end, where they form, as it were, a broken reef reaching from the main land to the lighthouse, about a mile distant. At low tide these rocks stand well out of the water, and present a very conspicuous appearance, with their white caps, stained and streaked with the excrement of the Terns, from their constant use as resting places from year to year.

"The main land rises abruptly from the beach, with a perpendicular bank, from ten to fifteen feet high; its surface is treeless, but is clothed with a coarse growth of grass and wild flowers, and a few small patches of shrubs or low bushes. Much interest has been taken during the last few years, in the protection of the colony of Terns, which makes this island its breeding grounds, and we are informed (*Auk*, Jan., 1897) that last year their numbers reached about seven thousand pairs of birds. The Lighthouse Board has been called upon to assist in this work, and the keeper of the light has placed rude signs at different points along its banks, with a notice prohibiting the disturbing of their eggs.

"During the present year, the United States Government has ordered the erection of a fortification on this island, the work being contracted for by J. W. Hoffman & Co., of Philadelphia, Pa., who last April took possession of the island and made preparation for erecting the work. The plant consisted of a wharf on the north side of the island, about its centre, with a derrick thereon for the unloading of vessels. Five other derricks were also erected at different points on the island, for the construction of the work. Among the buildings erected, were a boiler house, storage house for the cements, tool house, blacksmith shop, oil house, steam concrete mixer, water tanks, cracked stone bin, hay shed and stable for a dozen horses, ice house, commissary, comprising a store, two dining-rooms, two wash rooms, and a kitchen,

with sleeping apartments above, eight shanties for the accommodation of a hundred or more workmen, an office for the contractors, and three shanties for the use of the Government engineers. A line of railroad tracks was also run from the wharf to different parts of the work, for distributing materials with the aid of a small locomotive. A small electric light plant was also run, for the accommodation of the night workmen. Piles of various kinds of materials were also scattered about the island, such as stone, sand, coal, lumber, etc.

"The whole plant took up over one-half of the area of the island, leaving only a small portion of the two ends for the accommodation of the Terns, who were compelled to divide themselves into two distinct colonies of about one thousand birds each. In these crowded quarters they congregated and laid their eggs, some in the grass, while others took to the bare patches of sand and tops of the large boulders along the beach. No sooner had the workmen discovered this than they began collecting them for eating purposes, as fast as they were laid. This was principally done by the negroes and Italians, who provided their own meals, and I was told by them that in some instances as many as a dozen eggs were eaten daily, by an individual. A great many were also collected out to curiosity, which were blown and carried away as keepsakes. On one occasion, a New York man visited the island, and collected a large basketful, which he was permitted to take away with him, with a promise not to return again. The crews of the vessels which landed there also participated in this shameful work.

"This wholesale robbery was kept up the entire season, and not a Tern's egg was permitted to hatch on the main land during the whole period; and but few, if any, escaped undisturbed among those which nested on the boulders. I would say that it was almost impossible for Capt. Henry P. Field, or any one else, to do any protective work, under the circumstances, this season, for most of the depredations were done about daybreak, before the officials were up. Discouraged with such a reception, fully one-half of the colony of Terns disappeared, probably to breed elsewhere, but about eight hundred birds remained until late in September when they disappeared after the line storm, which occurs at this season.

"The Terns at all times seemed to be unsuspecting of harm, and could often be seen sitting on the guy ropes of the derricks about the work, or flying to and fro overhead, keeping up their continual cries from sunrise to sunset. At low tide they congregated along the beach in search of food, or sunned themselves from the tops of the large boulders. I have observed them at times following up and feeding on the schools of mackerel, which is certainly a beautiful sight, reminding one, as they dodge about each other, of a kaleidoscope in rotation.

"The five weeks which I spent on the island, from August 26 to October 1, inclusive, being after the

breeding season had closed, my information has been carefully collected from a large number of persons whose statements I have no reason to doubt, and who were not only eye witnesses, but participants in the spoils.

"I am also informed by good authority that the Government intends erecting another gun on the east end of the island; if such be the case, it will consume all the earth from the remaining portions of the island, to form the breastworks, which will virtually leave nothing of Great Gull Island beyond the fortifications, and will completely destroy it as a resort for Terns."