North Cape Oil Spill Restoration Bird Restoration Program

United States Fish and Wildlife Service
NOAA Restoration Center
Rhode Island Dept. of Environmental Management

Background

In January 1996, a 340-foot oil barge, the North Cape, ran aground off Trustom Pond National Wildlife Refuge, spilling 828,000 gallons of home heating oil that resulted in the deaths of millions of lobsters, surf clams, and fish, and billions of invertebrates. Over 2,000 birds were killed, including numerous loons and sea ducks. The piping plover, a federally-listed threatened species, was impacted by reductions to its food base.

USFWS

On January 19, 1996, the Tug Scandia and barge North Cape ran aground, spilling 828,000 gallons of home heating oil.

Restoration

In August 2000, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), and the State of Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (Trustees) reached a settlement agreement with the insurer of the companies responsible for the North Cape oil spill. As part of the agreement, $3.5 million was paid to the Trustees to restore loons, sea ducks, and piping plovers.

Loons

To restore loons impacted from the spill, the Trustees focused on protecting breeding populations in the northeast, since loon populations in New England are primarily limited by nesting success. Working with an array of partners, the Trustees assisted with the permanent protection of nearly 1.5 million acres of Maine forests and lakes that provide nesting habitat for at least 125 loon pairs.

The Trustees contributed over $3 million towards the protection efforts and helped leverage over $100 million from a variety of federal, state, and local agencies, as well as conservation groups and foundations. Partners included the New England Forestry Foundation, Downeast Lakes Land Trust, Forest Society of Maine, The Nature Conservancy, The Conservation Fund, State of Maine, International Paper Co., Wagner Forest

Highlights

Assisted with protection of 1.5 million acres of land that provide nesting habitat for at least 125 common loon pairs in Maine.
Increased productivity of federally-listed threatened nesting piping plover pairs in Rhode Island.
Protected more than 600 pairs of nesting common eider in Maine.

USFWS

Management guidelines recorded with fee acquisitions and conservation easements help ensure long-term loon protection.

C. Ayres

North Cape settlement funds have helped leverage in excess of $100 million to protect over 200 lakes and ponds in Maine.

USFWS

Five years after the piping plover monitoring and management effort began, more than 20 new pairs nested and three historic beaches were re-colonized.

Management LLC, Typhoon LLC, numerous local communities, Passamaquoddy Tribe, USDA Forest Service, more than 50 foundations, and thousands of individual donors.

Piping Plovers

To restore piping plovers, the Trustees used settlement funds to support a monitoring and management program in Rhode Island. Since 2001, biologists from the Rhode Island National Wildlife Refuge employed a number of protection and management activities, including exclosing nests to protect against predation and installing symbolic fencing to limit pedestrian access to nesting areas. With the help of volunteers, biologists educated beachgoers about dog leash laws and minimizing disturbance to nesting piping plovers. Numerous partnerships have also been developed with local landowners to cooperatively manage beaches to protect piping plovers. As a result of these efforts, piping plover nesting pairs have increased from 35 pairs on nine beaches in 2000 to 56 pairs on 10 beaches in 2005.

Sea Ducks

To restore sea ducks, the Trustees decided to protect nesting habitat to prevent future habitat degradation associated with development. In partnership with the Maine Coast Heritage Trust, the State of Maine, the Nature Conservancy and the Casco Bay Estuary Project, the Trustees provided funds to permanently protect Flag Island, a 42-acre island in Casco Bay, Maine. The island is home to more than 600 pairs of nesting common eiders. Biologists from the State of Maine and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are currently monitoring nesting and fledging success on the island to determine potential threats to the common eiders' productivity.

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USFWS

Over 600 common eider nests were protected with the purchase of Flag Island.

USFWS

Mother common eiders lead newborn ducklings to feed along the shore of Flag Island.

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Piping plover nests are exclosed with wire fence to protect against predation.

Stephen Rubicam Photography

Forty-two-acre Flag Island was protected with funds from two settlements: North Cape oil spill and Julie N oil spill.