

# Providence Sunday Journal

DISTINGUISHED NEW ENGLAND NEWSPAPER



# For The Birds

Conservation and recreation are colliding on tiny Gould Island, a crucial nesting site for waterbirds once hunted to near extinction in RI  
**Pages 18-21A**

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# Gould Island, for some, is for birds

Demise of a portion of the population a concern for local, state groups

Alex Kuffner Providence Journal | USA TODAY NETWORK

JAMESTOWN —

There was a time when the skies over Rhode Island were all but absent of waterbirds. There were no cormorants, oystercatchers or plovers, only a few gulls and terns and next to no egrets or herons along the state's shores. Around the turn of the 20th century, these birds were hunted to near extinction, killed for their feathers and eggs, for food, for sport and curio collectors, or simply because they were treated as pests that had to be exterminated. Their presence in the Ocean State today is due in large part to the shelter offered by a smattering of islands in and around Narragansett Bay. Places like Gould Island, which has become a bird sanctuary over the nearly 50 years that it's been mostly off-limits to the public.



## More online

Scan the QR code to see Gould Island through the years.

▼ Gould Island comes into view on a boat ride in 2019. The 53-acre island, tucked between Jamestown and Newport in the East Passage of Narragansett Bay, has become a bird sanctuary since public access was restricted nearly 50 years ago. DAVID DELPOLO/THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL

► Gould Island, seen from above in 1945 just days after World War II ended, from the north end, with the fring pier and overhaul shop in the foreground and the hangar at the opposite end. PROVIDED BY NAVAL TOPPED STATION, NEWPORT/PHOTOGRAPHIC DEPARTMENT

COVER AND INSIDE ILLUSTRATION BY BRITNEY JACKSON/USA TODAY NETWORK AND GETTY IMAGES

To bird enthusiasts, the island off Jamestown is a rare treasure in densely populated Rhode Island: an enclave uninhabited by humans and free of coyotes and other predators that offers prime habitat for colonial waterbirds that nest together in big groups for protection. They include gulls that prefer grassy areas for their ground nests, along with egrets and herons that build their stick nests in low trees. Colonial nesting birds are known to be extremely sensitive to disturbance, so a proposal to allow camping on part of the island during the spring and summer nesting season has been met with consternation in the state's conservation community. The idea originated with a group of Jamestown residents who have been working with federal and state officials to clean up Gould Island, which was used as a Navy installation for several decades until it fell into disuse in the years after World War II. They believe their plan would have only a small impact on the island's nesting birds and would go a long way in helping secure the necessary federal funds for remediation. If people were able to use the island year-round for recreation, the government would be inclined to spend more money to remove toxic hazards from the land, they argue.

"This is a jewel in Narragansett Bay," said David Sommers, a member of the Gould Island Restoration Advisory Board. "We believe this will benefit the wildlife there, too, not just people."



Opponents like the Audubon Society of Rhode Island argue that expanding use of the island during nesting season could do irreparable harm to species that have only recently reestablished their numbers and are already facing other threats from pollution, habitat loss and climate change.

"This has the potential to severely reduce the populations for some species," said Charles Clarkson, director of avian research for Rhode Island Audubon. "It may seem like a small change, but even small changes can have dramatic impacts on a statewide basis for certain nesting birds."

The story of Gould Island and its future is intensely local, the fight over a speck of land in tiny Rhode Island, but it also touches on national issues of conservation, spanning past abuses of America's birds to present efforts to save their plummeting populations.

## Hunted to near extinction for feathers and eggs

The history of waterbirds in America is a tragic one. Gulls and other birds found along the coast are a common sight these days, but for decades from the late 1800s onward, they were all but eradicated up and down the Atlantic seaboard, victims of habitat loss and hunting.

Great and snowy egrets were prized for their feathers, especially the long breeding plumes that early 20th century zoologist William Hornaday compared to "spun glass." Known by the French name aigrette, the delicate feathers were used to adorn women's hats and other fashion accessories.

Hunters were able to sell the feathers from the egrets they shot for as much as \$32 an ounce, "which makes the plumes worth about twice their weight in gold," according to a 1905 study by ornithologist Herbert Job. He wrote that it took the killing of four adult birds to collect enough feathers for a single ounce.

By the late 1800s, the elegant, long-legged wading birds were wiped out across much of their historical range, with only remnant populations left in remote Southern swamps.

Gulls met a similar fate even earlier. They were hunted for their eggs and later their feathers, and the only numbers that remained on the Atlantic coast were on far-flung islands off Canada.

Double-crested cormorants were also wiped out in New England in colonial days. Despised by many in the fishing industry for their voracious appetites, the southern populations were killed off, leaving behind only colonies in the Canadian Maritimes.

Even the black-crowned night heron, the only wading bird to survive all the killing in Rhode Island in any real numbers, was pushed to the brink, its colonies on Prudence and Hope islands raided "to feed the pigs," according to historical accounts quoted by the Second Atlas of Breeding Birds in Rhode Island, of which Clarkson is a co-author.

Piping plovers and American oystercatchers were hunted mercilessly. Of the latter, Edward Howe Forbush, author of an early study of birds in and around Massachusetts, wrote, "Its extirpation in New England has served no good purpose, but merely adds another item to the accounting that shall put our race and time to shame in the age to come."

It wasn't until conservationists banded together, forming the first state Audubon societies, starting with Massachusetts in 1896, Rhode Island and others the next year and more to follow, that a movement

took hold to protect America's bird life. Their federation, the National Audubon Society, adopted the great egret as its symbol. The work culminated in the passage of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918, which put a stop to the unregulated killing of avian species.

It would be years before birds started to return to the places where they had once thrived, but the act and other statutes that followed were so successful that some species started to not just repopulate areas but also expand their ranges to new frontiers.

It's impossible to say with certainty what species were originally found in Rhode Island. Reliable ornithological recordkeeping only began in the 1880s. But Richard L. Ferren and James E. Myers, in their seminal study on waterbirds in Rhode Island, said it's likely that most species that started showing up in the state in greater numbers were "merely returning from a long exile rather than pioneering our area for the first time."

## A long path to recovery for bird populations

The first waterbird that appears to have started nesting in Rhode Island after the federal protections were enacted was the herring gull.

Unfledged young of the species, which had previously only been a winter visitor to the state, were found on Hope Island in 1927, according to Ferren's book "Birds of Rhode Island." The first colony appeared a decade later in the Sakonnet River.

The great black-backed gull, another bird that hadn't previously nested in the state, began breeding in Rhode Island in 1944, but not in any great numbers until 1960.

Egrets, which had been regular migrants to Rhode Island before the height of the plume trade, started appearing again in greater numbers in the late 1940s. The first sign of nesting, the sighting of a juvenile great egret, was made in 1964. Snowy egret nests were found around the same time.

Double-crested cormorants, which disappeared from New England after European settlement in the 1600s, took even longer to come back. It wasn't until 1981 that the first new nests were discovered in Rhode Island, something that seems to defy belief, considering their ubiquity in coastal areas today.

Egrets and gulls, as well as herons and cormorants, are among the types of birds that nest together in big colonies. They do so to survive predation. With enough adults clustered together, the chances are greater that they'll spot danger and drive off a hungry raccoon or opossum.

The odds of survival are greater still because of the hard-to-reach locations in which these birds have chosen to nest in Rhode Island. The rocky islands near Sakonnet Point, Little Gould Island off Tiverton and the uninhabited islands in Narragansett Bay — Hope, Rose, Dyer and Gould islands — have been the most commonly used sites for breeding colonies.

At various times since the mid-1970s, great egrets, snowy egrets, cattle egrets, little blue herons and glossy ibises have nested on Gould Island and its 53 acres tucked between Jamestown and Newport in the East Passage of Narragansett Bay.

These days, it's home to large breeding colonies of herring gulls and great black-backed gulls as well as smaller numbers of American oystercatchers, black-crowned night herons and double-crested cormorants.

See GOULD ISLAND, Page 20A





### Meet the birds

Though it's not a complete list, these are some of the birds known to nest on Gould Island.

1. Glossy Ibis
2. Herring gull
3. Cormorant
4. Black-crowned night heron
5. Great egret
6. American oystercatcher

## Gould Island

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### A former Navy base becomes a bird sanctuary

Gould Island wasn't always a haven for birds. Known as Aquopimoquk by the Narragansett Indians, it was renamed when English Colonist Thomas Gould bought it in 1657 from a grandson of the noted Narragansett chief Canonicut, according to the Jamestown Historical Society.

It remained in private hands for generations, used as pastureland and as a summer getaway, until shortly after World War I, when the Navy bought it for use as part of a torpedo station based on nearby Goat Island.

The Navy built hangars for seaplanes, piers, a rail line and warhead-storage buildings on the island. The first successful drop of a torpedo by a U.S. plane was made in nearby waters in 1921. The station expanded during World War II with antiaircraft guns, barracks, an air detail and a new firing pier that by the end of the war had test-fired more than 65,000 torpedoes.

But in the years afterward, torpedo operations were moved to another naval station on the West Coast, and Gould Island fell into disuse. In two transactions, in 1975 and 1989, the Navy transferred the southern two-thirds of the island to the state while retaining control of the northern third, though activities there have been minimal.

The two state-owned parcels, totaling 39 acres, were deeded a wildlife sanctuary and put under the care of the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management. The many buildings that remained began to crumble and the manicured landscape gave way to forest and scrubland. The vegetated middle portion was soon settled by egrets and herons and the open expanses along the southern shore were taken over by gulls.

For four decades, the birds largely had the island to themselves. While the only formal restriction on public access was between April 1 and Aug. 15 when waterbirds nest, the location in the Bay naturally limited the number of people who could get there.

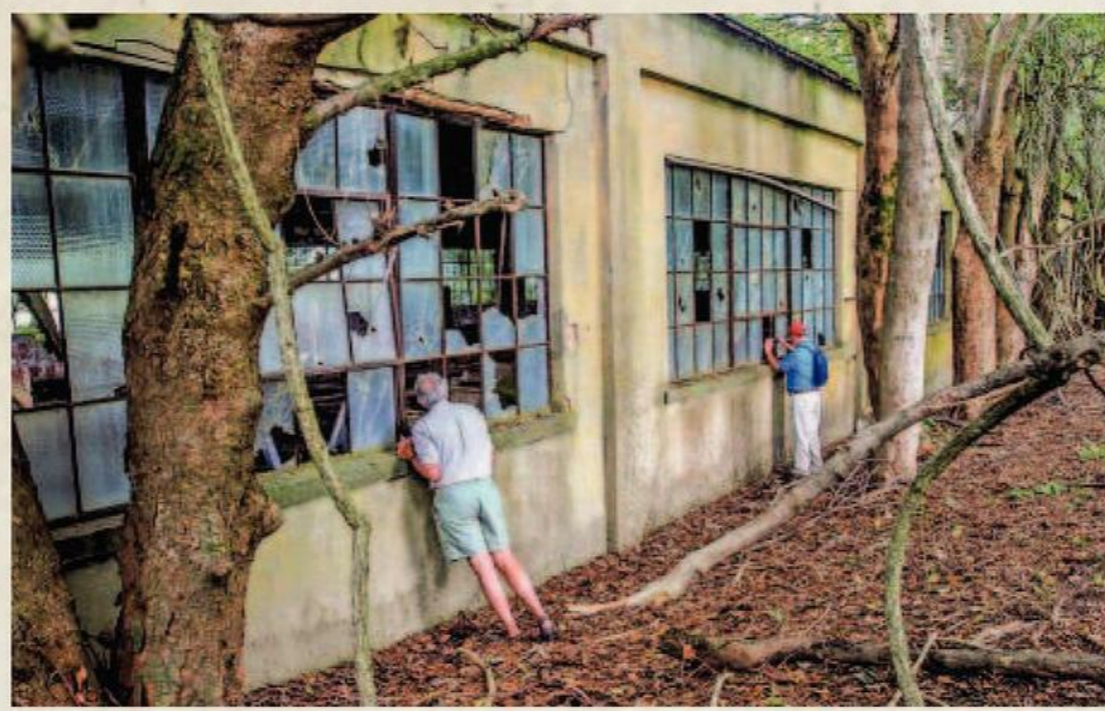
Nothing changed until 2018, when the Army Corps of Engineers finally embarked on a long-anticipated project to clean up the island by removing derelict structures and digging out soils contaminated by chemicals. The DEM has since extended the ban on public access year-round while the work has continued.

To date, the Army Corps has torn down a torpedo assembly warehouse, a fire station, three other buildings and a pier, in the process hauling nearly 1,600 tons of debris off the island and spending more than \$7 million on planning, demolition and other site activities.

What's gone on so far has drawn little attention and no opposition. It's the next steps in the process – and what they could mean for the future use of the property – that have sowed division.



A 1983 file photo shows Gould Island, facing south in Narragansett Bay, where the U.S. Navy had a torpedo testing facility in World War II. BOB THAYER/THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL, FILE



Visitors look inside the former torpedo assembly building during a 2019 tour of Gould Island. DAVID DELPOIO/THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL



A bunker built to house torpedoes on Gould Island is explored by visitors on a 2019 tour. After World War II, torpedo operations were moved to another naval station on the West Coast, and the island fell into disuse. DAVID DELPOIO/THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL



A 2019 file photo shows a toppled water tower lying next to the water tower maintenance shop and firehouse on Gould Island, among the relics of the U.S. Navy's torpedo testing site on the island during World War II. DAVID DELPOIO/THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL

### Public access versus wildlife protection

On one side of the issue is the Gould Island Restoration Advisory Board, a volunteer group of residents of Jamestown – of which Gould Island is a part – that has been pushing the Corps to do a more extensive cleanup than originally planned.

The board wants to see the land restored to the point that authorities would deem it safe to allow camping on the southern end of the island.

For its members, that only makes sense if those activities are allowed year-round, which would mean lifting the restrictions on access to the 17 southern acres during the bird-breeding season while maintaining only the 22-acre middle portion of the island as a protected wildlife sanctuary.

The Town of Jamestown supports the board's proposal. Councils from the nearby communities of Newport, Middletown, Portsmouth and North Kingstown have also passed resolutions in favor of the plan.

Sommers, who chaired the advisory board from its establishment until last year, calls the restoration of the island a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. He's been pushing the Army Corps from the very beginning to expand the scope of its cleanup. William Keough, the new head of the board, agrees that it makes sense to maximize what the federal government does.

They see their plan for expanded access to the southern end of the island as a compromise. It makes no sense to keep the restriction in place and only allow visitors during the colder months, they argue.

"If we're going to have a plan that benefits everyone, we can't just start recreation on Aug. 16," Sommers said.

On the other side of the debate is Rhode Island Audubon, which is firmly opposed to any plan that could potentially disturb nesting.

"We will not let that happen," said Jeff Hall, executive director of the organization. "The deed is clear. It's only to be used as a bird sanctuary."

Save The Bay shares these concerns, and individuals in the state's birding community also agree. Mark Baker, a former member of the Jamestown Conservation Commission, says that colonial birds can be disturbed by boat noise, the smoke from campfires and even the voices of campers.

"We have so many public parks and recreational opportunities, but there are so few nesting sites for colonial birds," said Baker, who lives in Jamestown and travels to the Amazon to lead eco-tours.

They point to Rose Island as a cautionary tale. It was once a popular breeding location in the Bay, with hundreds of nesting ibises, egrets, herons and gulls recorded during the peak years in the 1990s. But, though numbers have rebounded somewhat in recent years, since around 2010 they have been nothing like they were.

Carol Trocki, a conservation biologist and expert on wading birds, was on the board of the trust that manages the island in the mid-2000s when it started to expand historic preservation efforts.

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## Gould Island

Continued from Page 20A

She acknowledged that others have different opinions, but she believes the increased activity resulting from that decision caused the collapse of the island's nesting colonies.

### Regulators consider all options

In the middle of all this is the DEM, which still maintains stewardship of Gould Island.

When discussions started around the cleanup, the agency supported maintaining both properties on the island as wildlife sanctuaries with the idea that camping and other passive recreation activities would be allowed only outside the nesting season. It communicated as much to the Army Corps.

But after listening to the case made by the advisory board, the DEM decided to open a master planning process that would consider easing the restrictions, said supervising engineer Nick Noons, who is overseeing the project for the agency.

While the Gould Island advisory board supports this process, conservationists are opposed.

Noons said the question of how much time camping is allowed on the island each year is relevant not because it creates different risks of human exposure to pollutants through soil or dust, but because it may increase the frequency of exposure. If year-round camping were to be allowed, the Army Corps would probably have to do a more extensive cleanup.

When the Navy installation was in use, it burned the island's garbage in an incinerator and dumped ashes believed to be laced with dioxins on the shoreline. The island's wells are suspected to be contaminated from firefighting foam made with PFAS, known as "forever chemicals" because they don't break down in the environment.

Also thought to be present in places are PCBs, heavy metals and other compounds that have been linked to cancers and other health problems.

While the DEM hasn't ruled out lifting the nesting restrictions, Noons emphasized that no decisions have been made.

### A network of island nesting sites

The DEM has been monitoring the nesting

colonies in Narragansett Bay since the 1970s. Ferren, who was then a professor at Berkshire Community College, began studying the sites alongside Myers and, later, Chris Raitchel, both DEM biologists.

Sam Miller, who took over the study in 2022, said the islands in Narragansett Bay are "highly important" for Rhode Island's colonial nesting birds.

"For most species, they are the only areas in which they nest in our state," said Miller, the non-game bird biologist with the DEM.

The islands form a complex network of suitable nesting habitats that allows birds to move from one site to another over time. Natural habitat changes can influence these dynamics, as scrubby areas shift to taller, denser vegetation, as can storm damage or even the harm to plant life caused by the birds' acidic droppings.

While gulls and cormorants are the dominant species nesting on Gould Island today, wading birds nested in larger numbers in past years and may do so again. As recently as 2008, there were 45 black-crowned night heron nests on the island. At other times, cattle egrets and great egrets were nesting in larger numbers. The largest colony of glossy ibises known to have occurred in Rhode Island, with more than 300 nesting pairs, was recorded on Gould.

The island has seen reduced use from these birds in recent years, but that may not be so surprising.

"This is probably due to a variety of factors, including changes in habitat, but falls within the expected 'boom-bust' pattern of waterbird occurrence and distribution throughout the state," Miller said. "It remains a vital part of the colonial waterbird bay island nesting system."

### Bird populations plummeting

Despite conservation efforts, the nation's bird life is experiencing monumental declines. Since 1970, the total bird population in America and Canada has plummeted 30%, a loss of nearly 3 billion adult breeding birds, according to a landmark 2019 study.

Waterbirds are among the species losing numbers, due, among other reasons, to disturbances to nesting sites and rising seas that have degraded foraging grounds in salt marshes. One third of all colonial nesting species are at risk of serious declines, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

In Rhode Island, great egret numbers increased steadily from the 1960s to the early 2000s but have since dropped from a 2002 peak

of 251 breeding pairs to about 150 today. The breeding population of snowy egrets has fluctuated more widely, with an average of 134 pairs through the years, but the species is in decline nationally.

Even gulls, which aren't as specialized in their needs as other shorebirds, are in trouble. Great black-backed gulls are estimated to have experienced a 50% decline in their total population since the mid-1980s. Herring gulls have lost about 82% of their numbers since the mid-1960s.

### What's next for Gould Island?

It's going to take years to decide the fate of Gould Island. The DEM doesn't have the money to open the master planning process yet, so it probably won't begin until 2026 at the earliest.

And while the Army Corps has agreed to expand the scope of future work to accommodate the potential for more camping on the island, doing so requires a change in the contract for the project and new cost estimates, neither of which have been completed. As it stands, a final decision on the remediation plan and the schedule for it to be implemented aren't expected until 2027, said Rachel Leonardi, the Army Corps project manager for the Gould Island work.

Sommers says he wishes the concerns about birds had been raised earlier. He still hopes for some sort of agreement.

"We want to see if there isn't a way we can make all of this work together," he said.

But for Rhode Island Audubon, there's little room for movement. The debate over the island's future has ties to the very origins of the group, which is the oldest environmental organization in the state.

It was founded at a time of crisis for avian species. Now, with bird populations hemorrhaging numbers once again, Clarkson says it's incumbent on society to do all it can to stem the bleeding. That means lobbying to keep in place, or strengthen, protections for bird sanctuaries like Gould Island, not loosen them.

For those who may question the urgency of the situation, Clarkson points to what's happening to gulls. They're birds that many see as a nuisance, but Clarkson says we should be concerned when generalist species that are hardy and have adapted well to the human environment are also in trouble.

"It should raise some questions about how healthy our environment is," he said. "That's a warning sign."

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