

Conservation Photography: A One-Year Follow Up
Text and photos copyright Eleanor Kee Wellman, all rights reserved

While photographing the breeding cycle of Common Terns on a local lake during 2005 I discovered that none of the hatched chicks survived to fledge. As this did not bode well for the survival of the colony, I decided to see what could be done for the following season.

This Common Tern colony has long been under siege due to huge increases in populations of Ring-billed Gulls and Herring Gulls; scavenging birds that have located a food source in the mountains of garbage that humans produce every year. Tern colonies all over the world are in trouble as well.

Our local biologist with the provincial Ministry of Natural Resources agreed that zero fledged chicks called for action. We were advised to apply for a grant through our local naturalists' group. Research revealed several measures being taken in similar situations around the world and we planned to incorporate a few to start out our own recovery program.

The first measure was to level the nesting areas using pea gravel to ensure that the eggs would not end up sitting in water. The second was to build and place A-framed shelters for use by the chicks after hatching. As they nest on an island of bare rock with no shelter, this would allow the chicks a place to retreat from marauding gulls and other predatory birds, as well as from inclement weather.



Recovery Project Year 1: 2006

After the ice disappeared from the lake in the spring of 2006, about ten volunteers traveled to the island on a donated barge with the necessary pea gravel and flat stones. The volunteers spread the gravel and unloaded the flat rocks for later use. At this point gulls had already started nesting but the terns were not expected for a few more weeks.

At the end of June another contingent of volunteers boated out and placed shelters near the tern nests. This had to be done as quickly as possible, as the terns left their nests while we were present, making the eggs vulnerable. As we left the birds were back on their nests.

Although the start of a conservation program to last many years, it was the end of "photogenic" nest photography with the manmade mini-shelters constructed of ½" plywood, ten inches long, six inches high, nailed and glued at the top to form an A-frame.

During the remainder of the season I went out several times with friends by boat but also kayaked out on my own to check on the colony. I was thrilled to find the hatched chicks using the shelters and keeping out of harm's way. Thirty-five chicks hatched that season and twenty-five were seen to have fledged. Two pairs of terns nested on Goose Rock; a small rock outcrop with one tree. The six chicks that hatched there were included in the numbers.

The first season of the recovery program was considered successful, although the loss of the ten chicks nagged at me. The adults had left the colony early and we wondered if the chicks that were too young to fly had simply been left behind.



Recovery Project Year 2: 2007

During our first trip out to refresh the pea gravel in early May 2007 we were horrified to find Ring-billed Gulls had taken over 3/4 of the terns' areas of the rock even before the terns had migrated back. Not a promising initial visit. When taking on this project we realized one of the methods we might have to adopt was permits to destroy gull nests and oil the eggs. However, with more than 350 pairs of gulls nesting on the island it would require a large number of volunteers; we did not have permits for 2007.

On our next trip out to place the shelters we were amazed to find four tern pairs nesting, surrounded by gulls. The next surprise was seven pairs found nesting on Goose Rock. Terns were sitting on eggs and things did not appear nearly as bleak as they had during our initial trip to the island.

Although it appeared that early-hatched chicks on the island disappeared, the terns stuck it out and produced eight chicks with subsequent broods; the terns on Goose Rock produced sixteen. Generally the Common Terns leave our area for their southward migration a week or so into August. I have made my last trip to the colony and eighteen chicks have fledged! My hopes are high that some from this season and last season will eventually return to keep this colony alive.

Common Terns take four years to mature and breed, therefore it will be quite a few years before we see any increase in the numbers of nesting pairs due to the fledged chicks from 2006 and 2007. However, by next year we hope to be seeing some of these non-breeding adults around the colony. The year 2008 will be another step in our recovery program. We will be oiling gull eggs and putting up a wire grid over the original colony. This grid is accepted by terns but not by gulls.

I continue to use my photography to help document the colony and make our case, showing people just how beautiful these birds are and why we need to save them in our area. Photographs were used for illustrative purposes when applying for grant money and have helped enlist numerous volunteers for this cause. Wind and weather continues to be my biggest consideration in the monitoring and photography process. Typically I use a Canon EOS 20D and 100-400 IS lens, a very portable and lightweight setup. Other times I take a Canon EOS 1D Mark II and 300 2.8 IS with converters; although much heavier, it is a better combination for birds in flight.



Eleanor Kee Wellman lives on a small lake in south-central Ontario and has been photographing wildlife for 15 years. She has spent many hours watching and photographing the loons that nest nearby. Although animal behavior interests her most, she works at photographing all the flora and fauna living around her.

Feel free to send your comments on this article to the [editors](#) at NatureScapes.Net.

[COVER](#) [HOME](#) [GUIDELINES](#) [FORUMS](#) [MEMBERSHIP](#) [WORKSHOPS](#) [ARCHIVES](#) [LINKS](#)

All content on this site is copyrighted material as indicated. Unauthorized use or reproduction is prohibited.