



Irving Nature Park Shorebird Conservation and Education Project - 2021

Final Report - November 1, 2021

Background

In 2019, the Saint John Naturalists Club, the Irving Nature Park (J.D. Irving, Ltd.) and Nature NB partnered to engage and educate the public on the conservation threat posed by human disturbance of shorebirds roosting on Saints Rest Beach. The project included a trial basic shorebird census. Due to challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, the project was not conducted in 2020 but did take place in 2021.

The project began on August 21 with a Volunteer Workshop which covered shorebird identification and life history as well as strategies on how to positively engage with beach visitors. A well-attended public “Shorebird Talk and Walk” followed on August 28.

The three partners promoted the project through social media postings. A joint media release (Appendix B) was circulated which received considerable media coverage including in the Telegraph Journal.



The project involved visits by 17 volunteers (up from 14 in 2019) to the Saints Rest Beach during the three hour period (increased from two hours in 2019) around high tide on six consecutive weekends between August 22 and September 26. The volunteers, including an INP staff member, wearing blue volunteer “pinnies”, approached beach visitors and initiated conversations about the shorebirds of the park including their life history, migration and the importance of

allowing the birds the opportunity to rest on the beach at high tide. An information “postcard” (Appendix B) was offered to each contact. Visitors were asked to detour quietly around the birds and to consider leashing their dogs. The lead volunteer on each shift counted the birds on the beach during the shift.

A highly visible interpretation panel on “The Shorebirds of the Irving Nature Park” was commissioned and erected by INP staff. It received considerable praise from visitors and volunteers as it informed visitors about the shorebirds and the importance of minimizing disturbance.

Records were kept on the number of visitors on the beach, the number of people engaged by volunteers, the number of dogs on and off-leash, the meteorological conditions, the species and numbers of bird observed and the number of predator attacks. Notes were also kept on feedback from the public. Weekly reports were circulated to the volunteers, friends and partners in the project.



Results and observations

As noted in Appendix A, a total of 328 (290 in 2019) people were engaged in a shorebird conversation. Appendix A illustrates the numbers of beach visitors, people engaged, dogs leashed and unleashed, as well as the data collected respecting the birds present and disturbances noted. 90 dogs were recorded with 33 (37%) being off leash. This compares with 47 in 2019 with 15 being off leash (32%).

With only two years of rough data collected on numbers of shorebirds, a comparison of numbers would be meaningless. It can be noted that volunteers' comments repeatedly emphasized the observation that many flocks of shorebirds would circle over the beach and then divert to the marsh, giving every indication that human activity was dissuading them from roosting on the beach.

Feedback from Volunteers and Beach Visitors

Volunteers reported that most conversations were positive in nature with most visitors expressing interest in the birds and their life history. A few were indifferent, three were quite rude but not one was hostile. Many thanked the volunteers for the job they were doing. All agreed to detour quietly around the roosting birds.

Unleashed dogs were identified as being an issue of concern. Volunteers did not stress the on-leash park rule but did ask owners to consider leashing their dogs and to avoid areas where the birds were roosting. Most agreed. One incident of a dog chasing



birds was observed. A number of dog owners were not aware of the “dogs on leash” rule and volunteers reported that the signs were small and effectively camouflaged by their surroundings. The new interpretation panel was noted to be much more visible and will help with compliance with this rule.

The three hour shifts proved to be a little longer than optimal given the duration of the high tides, although volunteers usually managed to connect with visitors throughout the time period. Days with high winds and precipitation with fewer people on the beach resulted in some shifts being shortened.

The project covered only 11 high tides in peak shorebird season meaning that there was a minimum of 24 days when no educational effort took place.

The shorebird census effort remains challenging due to the numerous questions by beachgoers, the frequent disruption of the birds and the tendency of the birds to shelter in the marram grass on days of frequent disturbances and high winds.

Volunteers reported that they found their efforts to be positive and rewarding and believed their work contributed positively to public education and conservation.

Recommendations

The positive reception and noted changes in behavior by the public combined with the perceived contribution to the conservation of roosting shorebirds suggest that there is value in continuing with the project in future years should a sufficient number of volunteers be available. The following recommendations are offered:

1. Subject to the availability of a sufficient number of volunteers, the project in 2022 should comprise five weekends: August 26-27 to September 24-25.
2. The shift time should be reduced from three hours to 2½ hours with volunteers feeling free to spend more or less time meeting beach goers as conditions might dictate.
3. To the degree permitted by workload demands, Irving Nature Park staff should be tasked to do mid-week visits to the beach especially on days when the numbers of beach visitors are high and flocks of shorebirds are seen to be roosting or attempting to roost..
4. The partners should discuss the notion of a more formal project that would employ a project leader to be on the beach during weekdays. Volunteers could assist when available. The Saint John Naturalists Club is currently evaluating the notion of engaging an employee to assist with the club’s projects and administration.
5. The trial shorebird census should be repeated at a basic level with variables as reported in Appendix B) to give some year-to-year comparability. The full adoption of the “Atlantic Flyway Shorebird Initiative” protocols should not be attempted as it is beyond the capacity of the SJNC volunteers. Should the SJNC engage a coordinator, the protocols should be considered.

6. The pre-project volunteer workshop, media release and social media promotional efforts should be repeated.
7. The Shorebird Talk and Walk should be repeated during the last weekend of August.
8. Partners should consider rope lines angling down from the top of the beach in areas where the birds are resting to deflect beach walkers around the birds. These would only be deployed when volunteers or Irving Nature Park staff are on the beach. Space to Roost, Nature NB's Endangered Species Program and NB Energy and Resource Development could be consulted with about proven practices.

Recognition:

The Irving Nature Park Shorebird Project could not have happened without the contributions of:

- ⇒ Chrissy Cusack and the Irving Nature Park staff
- ⇒ Adam Cheeseman and Nature NB staff
- ⇒ Ray Riddell, President, the executive and members of the Saint John Naturalist Club
- ⇒ The many volunteers who took the time and interest to meet with park visitors and otherwise support the project (with apologies to anyone missed):
Vicki Cowan, Brian Comeau, Brigitte Green, Nancy Hamilton, Julie Bauer, Jan and Ray Riddell, Suzanne Bonnell, Thoryn Madill, Nancy Perry, Tracey Taylor, Amber Graham, Chuck and Jeannette Perry, Maureen Boone, Deb Grover, Hank Scarth.

Submitted by:

Hank Scarth, Project Coordinator

Appendix A

Data recorded During 2021 Irving Nature Park Shorebird Conservation Education Project

Date	Weather	Shift Time	# People on beach	# People engaged	Dogs on leash	Dogs off leash	# Predator attacks	# Semipalm SP	# Least SP	# Semipalm Pl	# Sanderlings	# "Peeps"	# Other Shorebirds
Aug 22	Clear, 25C Light winds		75	27	9	8	0	215	2	0	0	0	0
Aug 28	Clear, 25C Light winds	15:15 18:15	75	46	8	1	2 ¹	245	2	0	0	12	0
Aug 29	Clear, 20C 20 km/h	16:00 19:00	100	62	22	1	2 ²	300	15	37	0	300	0
Sept 4	30% cloud 17C 40 km/h	09:00 12:00	19	17	11	6	2 ³	380	85	52	0	250	0
Sept 5	Overcast 15C Light winds	10:00 13:00	76	37	9	6	1 ⁴	52	18	12	1	532	0
Sept 6	Rain, drizzle, fog 15 km/hr winds	10:30 13:30	16	6	2	0	3 ⁵	900	2	135	2	0	0
Sept 11	Clear 22C 20 km/h winds	10:30 13:30	94	93	10	0	3 ⁶	35	200	14	2	0	1 ⁷
Sept 12	Overcast 17C SSW 35-45 winds	14:15 17:15	42	32	4	0	0	75	500	65	26	0	0
Sept 18	Dense fog Light SW winds	15:00 18:00	12	10	5	3	0	225	0	17	25	160	1 ⁸
Sept 19	Clear 18C N 24 km/h winds	09:00 12:00	63	28	9	8	3 ⁹	43	32	3	15	60	0
Sept 25	Overcast with showers-partial clearing 21C S 10 km/h winds	14:00 17:00	25	10	1	0	2 ¹⁰	170	0	30	9	0	8 ¹¹
Sept 26	Rain, 17 C	14:30 17:30	Weather cancellation										
Totals			597	328	90	33	18						

¹ 2 Merlin passes

² 1 Merlin, 1 Northern Harrier

³ 1 Merlin pass

⁴ 1 Merlin pass

⁵ 2 Peregrine Falcons, 1 Herring Gull

⁶ 2 Merlin passes, 1 Northern Harrier

⁷ Buff-breasted Sandpiper

⁸ Dunlin

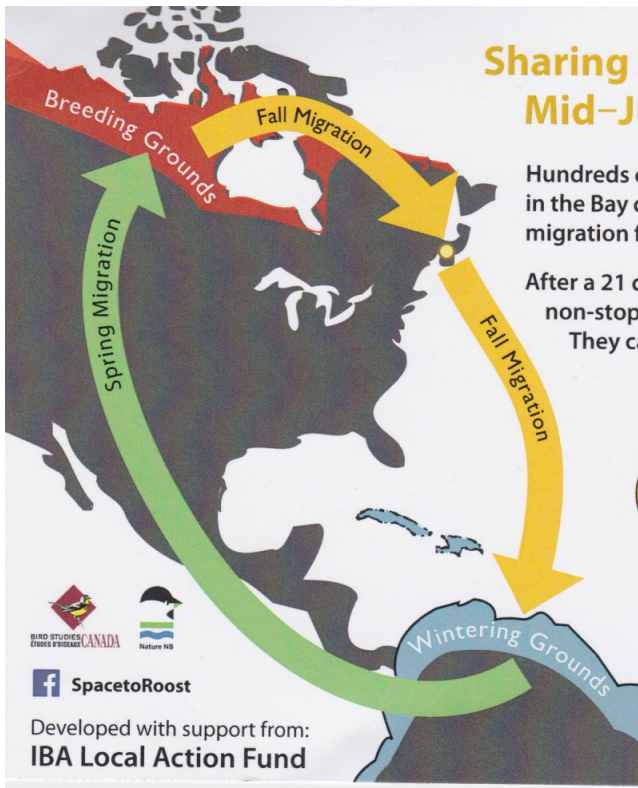
⁹ Peregrine Falcon, Merlin and Herring Gull

¹⁰ 2 Merlin passes

¹¹ 8 Black-bellied Plovers

Appendix B Information Post Cards

Sharing beaches with shorebirds Mid-July to Mid-September



Hundreds of thousands of migrating shorebirds stop in the Bay of Fundy to eat and rest during their Fall migration from the Arctic to South America.

After a 21 day stay in the Bay of Fundy they fly non-stop over the ocean for 3 days.
They can't swim!

Our population has **dropped by over half** since the 1970s. **Please give us space to rest** on Bay of Fundy beaches!

Photo: Richard Stern

BIRD STUDIES CANADA
Nature NB

f SpacetRoost

Developed with support from:
IBA Local Action Fund

Help shorebirds continue their migration

Shorebirds can't swim, so they must be well-rested and well-fed to fly 4,000 km non-stop over the ocean to their wintering grounds in South America!

What months are shorebirds present?

- Mid-July to mid-September
(highest numbers in August)

When is shorebird resting time?

- 2 hours before to 2 hours after high tide
(refer to tide chart on back side)

How do I view shorebirds safely?

- Use binoculars for a closer look
- Take photos with a telephoto lens

How do I avoid disturbing resting flocks?

- Stay as far away from flocks as possible
- Walk slowly when shorebirds are present
- Keep dogs on leash
- Explain to children why shorebirds need rest

What else can I do to help shorebirds?

- Keep beach litter-free (pack out used fishing line, hooks, bait, cans, bottles, plastics etc.)



Semipalmated Plover



Semipalmated Sandpiper



Photos: Richard Stern, Louis Rainville

Appendix C



News Release

Highlighting Incredible Shorebird Migration at the Irving Nature Park

SAINT JOHN, NB -- Visitors to the Irving Nature Park in August and September will have the opportunity to learn more about the tiny sandpipers that visit the park during their fall migration, thanks to a joint project of the Irving Nature Park, Saint John Naturalists' Club (Nature Saint John) and Nature NB.

A *Shorebird Talk and Walk* public event will be held at the Irving Nature Park on Saturday, August 28 at 2 p.m. Hank Scarth of the Saint John Naturalists' Club will tell the story of these amazing shorebirds and share tips on how to identify the various species.

"These shorebirds have one of the most fascinating migration stories in nature" said Ray Riddell, President of the Saint John Naturalists' Club. He noted that the tiny (16.5cm/6.5in) Semipalmated Sandpipers arrive in the Bay of Fundy between late July and late September, where they join several other species of shorebirds to feed on small invertebrates on the Bay's extensive mud flats. After doubling their weight over a two-week period, they depart on a 72-hour, 3,000-4,000 KM, non-stop flight to South America. "Sadly, the population of the Semipalmated Sandpipers has been declining since the 1970's, but we are optimistic that by getting as many people as possible interested in the birds, we can help assure that the Irving Nature Park will long continue to be an important stopover site for migrating shorebirds."

Chrissy Cusack, the Manager of the Irving Nature Park, notes that the Park was established by J.D. Irving, Limited (JDI) to help protect an environmentally significant and endangered area of the Fundy coast. "We welcome thousands of visitors each year who come to enjoy and experience the Park's great diversity in ecosystems, such as our salt marsh, forests, and beaches. This project is important as it will help bring awareness to our visitors of the presence of these amazing shorebirds and how they can help ensure the shorebirds migration story is a successful one. Educating park visitors on the importance of not disturbing roosting (resting) shorebirds found on the beach during high tides will be a key focus of this project. In addition, the Irving Nature Park will establish shorebird

awareness signs along Saints Rest Beach, as part of educating the public on the sensitivity around the migrating shorebirds during their time at the Park.”

J.D. Irving, Limited supports a fully funded calendar of outdoor experiences at the Irving Nature Park.

Vanessa Roy-McDougall, Executive Director of Nature NB notes that this broader area is designated as an “Important Bird and Biodiversity Area”. “The coastline and mudflats in this area play a vital role as a feeding and resting site for migrating shorebirds. We support the Saint John Naturalists’ Club in their efforts to engage and inform the public on the importance of the Bay of Fundy for shorebirds during their incredible annual migration.”

For more information about the August 28 public event, please contact the Irving Nature Park at 506-653-7367.

For more information:

Saint John Naturalists’ Club

Hank Scarth, Project Coordinator

hhcs@bellaliant.net

(506) 647-7511

Irving Nature Park

Anne McNerney

McNerney.Anne@jdirving.com

(506) 632-4649

Nature NB

Vanessa Roy-McDougall, Executive Director

executive.director@naturenb.ca

506-459-4209

Make sure to follow the Irving Nature Park and Nature Saint John on Facebook and Instagram!