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Sandy Point has gone to the birds

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Least terns like Sandy Point as much as humans do, maybe even more so. More than 443 nesting pairs of the endangered terns - the smallest of the American species - have staked out real estate on the sinuous island preserve located between Watch Hill and Stonington borough and bordered by Fishers Island Sound and Little Narragansett Bay.

A longtime popular haven for summertime boaters and bathers, Sandy Point has gone to the birds this summer.

Literally.

Preserve owners, the Avalonia Land Conservancy, partnered last spring with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS) to help better manage the island and protect it as a bird habitat.

And what a habitat it has become. In addition to the 443 pair of least tern (and yes, they are reproducing, on average two to three eggs per nest), six pair of piping plover, four pair of American oystercatchers, and one pair of common terns have nested on Sandy Point.

The federally protected plover is triple the number from last year; one plover chick has already fledged and seven others should grow their flight feathers soon.

The abundance of threatened and protected shorebirds on Sandy Point is good news to Avalonia and the FWS, who are monitoring species, numbers, fledgings, and where the birds are establishing nests. Nearly all the least terns have colonized on a washed out portion of sandy beach at about the island's mid-point. Wildlife biologist Wendy Green says the colony is the largest ever recorded in Rhode Island or Connecticut, and perhaps the largest anywhere ever in New England.

So what about the people?

Well, it turns out that most human visitors to Sandy Point have welcomed the FWS interns who are keeping tabs on the birds and educating anyone who asks about the plovers, oystercatchers and terns. But a handful of visitors have continued to ignore Avalonia's rules: No dogs, open fires, camping, fireworks, or kites.

FWS conservation officers will arrest anyone who is caught harming the endangered birds, but starting this weekend, Avalonia has contracted Stonington and Westerly town police to patrol and enforce its rules.

Officers will be on the beach at various times and at the behest of the land conservancy protect its property from visitors who blatantly disobey its house rules. Too bad Avalonia had to go to such means, but it has.

Anne Roberts-Pierson, Avalonia president, said the majority of the public has embraced the stepped up effort to accommodate the birds, but a few visitors are still camping at the beach, setting off fireworks and bringing their dogs.

"We're trying to address that," she said.

What those troublemakers don't understand is that above the high tide line they are on private property. Camping on the island or setting off fireworks at Sandy

Point is the same as camping or shooting fireworks from Roberts-Pierson's backyard. It's a no-no.

Avalonia received Sandy Point as a gift in 1982 with the understanding that it would be managed and protected as a nature preserve. But Avalonia is happy to have humans enjoy it, too, as long as they obey the rules.

And that is still their plan, even with all the new birds. Yes, there are hundreds of "kip-kip-kipping" least terns soaring through the air and dive-bombing for silversides right next to swimmers, but Avalonia and FWS say they plan to continue to balance the wants and needs of the shorebirds and humans.

"The birds are reproducing like crazy. It is the rich habitat we thought it could be," Roberts-Pierson said.

"We want people to enjoy all the birds," FWS biologist Green said. "We do our best to try to find a balance, to balance human and bird use, and we think we've been successful."

Clearly, they have.

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