

CHARACTER STUDY

A Revival, One Tern at a Time



Julie Glassberg for The New York Times

FOR THE BIRDS Helen Hays came to Great Gull Island in the 1960s.

By COREY KILGANNON

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IT is only several miles off the tip of Long Island's north fork, but Great Gull Island seems to be the middle of nowhere.

The Particulars

NAME Helen Hays

WHERE SHE'S FROM Johnstown, N.Y.

WHO SHE IS Chairwoman of the Great Gull Island Project for the American Museum of Natural History

TELLING DETAIL She never tires of the 24-hour screeching song of the terns.

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Signs on this tiny outcropping shout "Research Station, Do Not Land." More threatening still are the thousands of floppy-flying white birds that protect the island by divebombing visitors.

But then there is the smiling woman waving from the end of a high, narrow pier. This is Helen Hays, who began coming to Great Gull in the mid-1960s to study whether its decimated tern population could be revived.

To cut to the chase, it has been, thanks largely to Ms. Hays, who since 1969 has lived on the island six months a year. As chairwoman of the [Great Gull Island Project](#) for the [American Museum of Natural History](#), which owns the island, Ms. Hays leads a group of ornithologists and volunteers that improves nesting conditions and monitors the populations.

And after 43 years with a halftime resident at this

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The Bird Whisperer of Great Gull Island

technically nonresidential former Army base, Great Gull has become home to the largest nesting colony of common and roseate terns in the Western Hemisphere.

Ms. Hays, a legend among ornithologists, grew up in Johnstown, N.Y., near Albany and never married or had children. Regarding her age, Ms. Hays, who graduated from Wellesley College in 1953, said, "My grandmother died at 101 and she never gave her age until she was 100, so that's what I'm going to do, too."

She came to Great Gull to stay in April 1969 and remained through that September, keeping in contact through a marine band radio and sleeping in a handmade bed in a dilapidated Army barracks.

Now, she shares the barracks with much younger volunteers, who live communally with Ms. Hays as den mother and taskmaster. After a sunrise wake-up, she dispatches her bird-banding squads to work. There are no escapes to the mainland. Hurricanes and big northeasters are weathered and treasured as opportunities to see rare birds blown in.

Ms. Hays and the others use outhouses, and wash with rain water collected on the island, which lacks running water, plumbing and power lines. Bottled drinking water arrives on the weekly supply boat from Connecticut, which also brings new volunteer field assistants, who may stay a week or two and number up to 25 during the June nesting season.

"We're down to five right now," Ms. Hays said on Thursday, as she fixed her binoculars on a roseate tern perched on a sea wall boulder. She pointed out the difference between the roseate tern, an endangered species in the United States, and the common tern, a threatened species in New York State.

She stepped between the ground nests and wandering chicks on vine-covered paths. Her sun-washed pink shirt and pants were ornamented with bird droppings, but somehow it looked perfectly normal. Workers wear big hats with silly clown flowers to deter the divebombing and protect against the constant bird droppings. But the hatless Ms. Hays — now cradling a tern chick in her sun-weathered hands — just smiled up at the avian chaos, like a mother watching her romping children.

In April, she and the group clear out thickets and underbrush before the terns start to arrive in May and lay their eggs in June. In July, there is the joy of watching the young terns learn to fly and fish.

The remote island was historically a tern-nesting place, but the birds were hunted nearly into extinction even before the Army turned the island into a fort around 1900. When the federal government turned the island over to the Museum of Natural History after [World War II](#), museum researchers wondered if the island could rebound as a nesting habitat.

From 1969 to today, the numbers of common terns have risen to 9,500 pairs from about

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Julie Glassberg for The New York Times Ms. Hays holding a baby tern.



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3,000 pairs, Ms. Hays said, climbing up to an old gunners tower draped with a bedsheet that serves as an observation blind.

“The fort structures actually improve the nesting opportunities,” said Ms. Hays, who, when the last of the terns head south in September, heads west to her Manhattan apartment on East 85th Street. She spends the winter analyzing data and writing research papers in the museum’s ornithology department, and visits the South American coast, where many terns spend the nonbreeding season.

The welcoming woman of Gull Island said she had no plans to quit. The island keeps teaching her, and is an example that environmental damage can be undone, she said.

“I kept hoping that all the questions would be answered, and so far, they haven’t been, so it’s a good reason to come back,” she said.

E-mail: character@nytimes.com

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