Bird Island rises as natural, educational resource

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MARION — As the landing craft bounces closer to the stony beach that rings Bird Island, Marion harbormaster Mike Cormier lowers the aluminum bow ramp. At the throttle, his assistant, Isaac Perry, steadies the 24-foot workboat in the brisk November breeze. Cormier times his leap ashore between the surges.

It's a routine visit for the two men, part of their official duties in maintaining this windswept, 2-acre outpost that lies in the approaches to Sippican Harbor.

While harbormasters around New England share many of the same tasks — assisting boaters, maintaining mooring fields and enforcing shellfish regulations — not many have responsibility for a place such as the aptly named Bird Island, which was acquired by the town of Marion in 1966.

"You never know what you might find out here," Cormier says. "Last year a doe swam out from Butler's Point and gave birth to two fawns. Some minks appeared as well, but the state came out right away and trapped them. They would have played havoc with the terns' nests."

Dominating the low-lying island, the conical tower of the rubble stone lighthouse rises 37 feet to the lantern room. From here the light sends forth its revolving beam, flashing once every six seconds, to guide mariners safely into port.

Having suffered through decades of neglect, the Bird Island light is looking extremely shipshape these days thanks to the combined efforts of the harbormaster's department and the Bird Island Lighthouse Preservation Society, a volunteer group of which Cormier is chairman.

Along with the lighthouse, which is on the National Register of Historic Places, the island also provides one of the primary breeding grounds in the Northeast for the federally endangered roseate tern. Cormier trudges across the narrow wooden boardwalk, constructed to avoid nesting birds, toward the freshly painted lighthouse tower.

"We had to ferry 400 gallons of water out here for the pressure washer," he said. The tower was painted inside and out in late August soon after the terns had left the island for their winter grounds in South America.

"We used money provided by the Community Preservation committee," Cormier said, unlocking the heavy metal door at the tower's base.

The stone steps winding upward to the lantern room are worn smooth from the passage of countless feet over the hundred-year span when the light was manned. "Imagine having to come up here every hour to fill the lantern, day and night," Cormier said.

These days a solar panel charges a 12-volt battery that now illuminates the revolving light.

The lighthouse has developed quite a history since it first went into service on Sept. 1, 1819, with money appropriated by Congress, and it served mariners faithfully until its decommissioning in 1933.

In 1940 it was sold at auction to a private party after the huge waves of the 1938 hurricane crashed over the low-lying island, sweeping everything, except the light tower, into the sea. The deadly storm left a high water mark on the tower fully 16 feet above its foundation.

"The first light keeper's name was Moore, and his wife died out here," Cormier said, "But there is no grave site. It was winter and supposedly the only place he could bury her was on the sand spit because the ground was frozen hard."

An aura of mystery surrounds her death, with William S. Moore allegedly blaming her demise on tobacco. Lighthouse keepers over the years have reported a ghostly woman rapping at the lighthouse door.

Both the lighthouse and the island itself suffered from the long decades of neglect and the ravages of time but now that trend has been reversed. A Corps of Engineers plan to halt erosion, by rebuilding the seawall and introducing clean sand to expand tern nesting areas, is in the works. And the efforts of local volunteers have almost fully restored the lighthouse.

The panoramic view of Buzzard's Bay from the tower is something that Cormier is hoping he can now share with more people.

He is investigating the feasibility of bringing small groups to the island, perhaps a dozen at a time, at certain times of the year.

The island is off limits to visitors during the tern nesting season from mid-May until mid-August.

"This place is a wonderful natural and educational resource with the history and the nesting birds," he said. "We'd like to make more people aware of it and bring kids out here on field trips to learn more about what we have. It's a pretty unique place."

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