Solar Panels Light Up Historic Lighthouse

20 March 2019

By: Tim Wood

Topics: Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge



A new solar array will provide full-time power to the historic Monomoy Point Lighthouse for the first time.
PHOTO COURTESY OF MATTHEW HILLMAN

CHATHAM – The lights are on at the historic Monomoy Point Lighthouse.

That may not sound like a big deal, but thanks to a new solar array, for the first time in its 170-year history, the light and keeper's house has electricity year-round.

“For the first time ever, there's overhead lights, outlets in every room, and most importantly heat, which will keep it dry and reduce mold,” said Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge Director Matthew Hillman.

The antique iron lighthouse, which once guided mariners around the dangerous tip of Monomoy, was not wired, however, and won’t be lit again.

The 16 solar panels, which provide 4,400 Watt of power to a bank of batteries in the keeper's house basement, were assembled next to the 1849 lighthouse this winter by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service staff, Cotuit Solar, Glynn Electric and volunteers from the Friends of Monomoy. Prior to having the panels, refuge staff and others – including scientists who spend time on the island in the winter researching the island's seal population – relied on propane for heat and cooking when the building was occupied.

Upgrades have been made to the historic structure on a piecemeal basis since about 2010. The recognizable light tower – it's the logo of the Monomoy Regional School District – is a popular destination, even though it is no longer open for overnight stays like it was in the 1990s. But Hillman says the refuge wants more people have the opportunity to visit the National Register of Historic Places listed lighthouse, and now there's a way to get them out to the remote location at the southern tip of South Monomoy Island.



Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge staff help scientists land on Monomoy Island using the refuge's new landing craft. S. KEENAN/USFWS PHOTO

A new 38-foot landing craft purchased late last year for the refuge can carry 20 passengers, as well as an extensive amount of gear and material. It has been used for the past five months to get the solar panels and other equipment and material to the island, and last week ferried out seal researchers and their equipment, which included a generator, centrifuges and other scientific equipment, Hillman said.

“It's kind of unique to the area,” Hillman said of the multipurpose vessel, manufactured by the William E. Munson Company of Burlington, Wash. “This will be an offshore resource for the region.”

On Monday staff from the Stewart B. McKinney National Wildlife Refuge National Wildlife Refuge along the Connecticut coast were at Stage Harbor Marine to borrow the vessel for a few weeks to bring equipment out to the refuge's islands. After that the vessel will spend most of the spring and summer in Falmouth before returning to Chatham in the fall.

The vessel was purchased through a $400,000 federal transportation grant that was originally targeted at helping the town to expand parking along the Morris Island Road causeway. That project died after it was nixed by the conservation commission; Hillman said the money had to be spent on transportation, so it was decided to purchase the landing craft and a 16-passenger shuttle bus for use by the refuge.

The twin-engine landing craft is suited to Monomoy; it only draws about two feet, Hillman said, and the drop-down bow door allows it go right up to the beach to offload passengers and cargo. The engines are mounted on jack plates which allow them to be lifted out of the water rather than just tilted, providing more clearance. It can carry up to 10,000 pounds and its catamaran hull provides good stability even in rough seas; Hillman said it easily handled a trip in eight-foot seas.

“It's a very, very sturdy boat,” he said. Local marine officials attended a training session on the vessel back in September, and Hillman said he's told town officials the vessel is available if they need it. Falmouth recently used it to transport 10,000 seed oysters. It will be back in town briefly in June for Chatham History Weekend, when the refuge will use it to transport people to the island for free tours of the lighthouse; watch for announcements on the limited number of openings sometime in May. More tours will probably be offered in the fall, after the shorebird nesting season ends.

“People love that building,” he said. “We want to give people every opportunity to get out there and see it.”