Maine's Great Duck Island Light Station is for the Birds (and Students)



Great Duck Island Lighthouse in June 2002. Photo by Jeremy D'Entremont.

By Jeremy D'Entremont

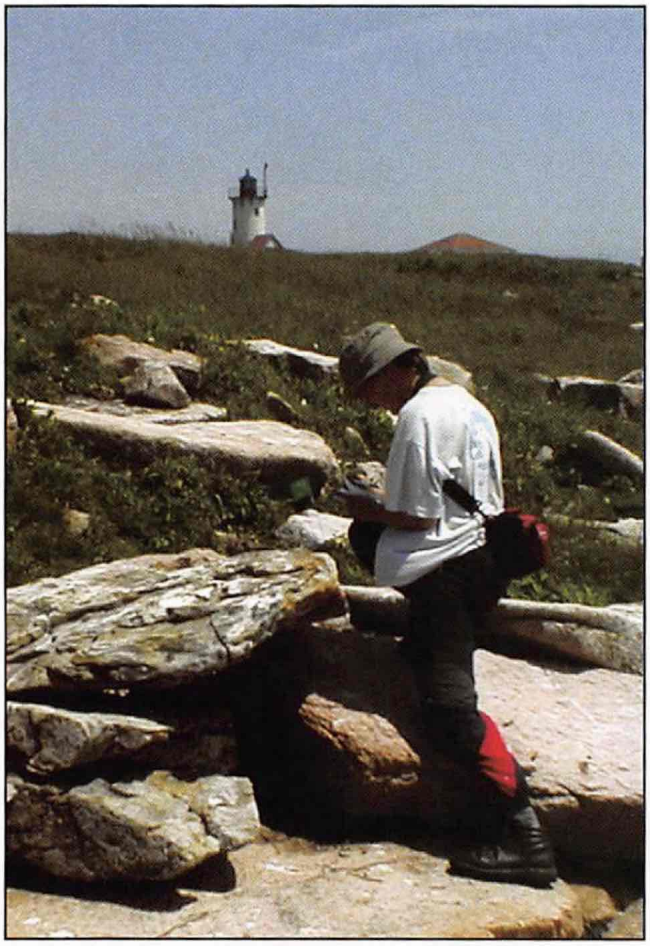
Great Duck Island, about 11 miles south of the entrance to Maine's Frenchman Bay, has a past that's liberally seasoned with dramatic and colorful incidents, but it's the feathered residents that matter most to the current custodians of the island's light station. The Nature Conservancy has estimated that Great Duck Island supports an astounding 20% of Maine's nesting seabirds. For Bar Harbor's College of the Atlantic, this makes the island an ideal field station for researchers and students. And happily, the college's interest points to a bright future for the light station.

Great Duck Island Light, first established in 1890 to help mariners heading for the Mount Desert area or Blue Hill Bay, was automated in 1986. Around the time they left the island, the Coast Guard destroyed all but one of the keeper's houses as well as most of the outbuildings.

The Maine Chapter of the Nature Conservancy purchased most of the rest of the island in 1984. In 1998, about 12 acres encompassing the Great Duck Island Light Station became the property of Bar Harbor's College of the Atlantic (COA) under the Maine Lights Program, along with Mount Desert Rock Light Station. The two lighthouses are used in the school's programs on ecology, botany and island life. Students and staff from the college now live in the former keeper's dwelling on Great Duck much of the year. The research station was named the Alice Eno Biological Station in 2000, after a longtime trustee.

The island's importance as a bird sanctuary dates back many years. In fact, for a time the Audubon Society of New York leased parts of the island and lighthouse keepers served as "wardens" to protect the nesting gulls. It now seems improbable, but the ubiquitous herring gull had been driven to near extinction before 1900 through a combination of egg poaching, habitat disturbance and hunters seeking feathers to supply the hat industry. The bird has made a strong comeback — in 2002 about 1,000 pairs of herring gulls nested on Great Duck Island, despite competition from the more aggressive and larger black backed gulls nesting close by. COA researchers are monitoring the black backed gull population carefully to assess their impact on the island's other birds.

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A COA student records data on the herring gull population. Photo by Jeremy D'Entremont.



Another view of Great Duck Island Light Station in the days when it had three keepers' houses. U.S. Coast Guard photo.

The Coast Guard repointed the lighthouse a few years ago. Says Anderson, "The tower is certainly currently in pretty good shape — long may it last!" Unlike some remote offshore lighthouses, this lucky little lighthouse has concerned guardians.

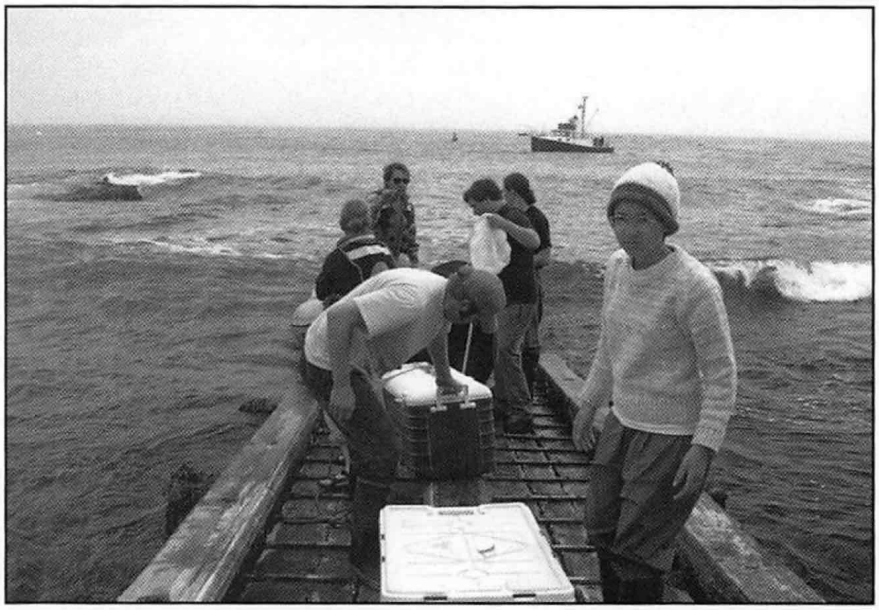
To learn more about the College of the Atlantic's research programs on Great Duck Island and their stewardship of the light station, contact: College of the Atlantic, 105 Eden St., Bar Harbor, ME 04609. Phone: (207) 288-5015 Web site: www.coa.edu

The COA's ongoing research projects on Great Duck Island also include detailed study of the relatively rare Leach's storm petrel. This small, dark, oily bird nests in burrows on the island, many of which are very close to the lighthouse station. Because the chicks remain in their burrows as late as October, the island is officially closed to visitors from spring until mid-fall. The birds forage for food far offshore during the day and are mostly only active outside their burrows on Great Duck after 10 p.m.

The College of the Atlantic must see that the properties' condition meets state historical preservation guidelines. John Anderson, director of the college's Marine Studies Program, says that funds for lighthouse station maintenance are scarce, but that in recent years the college has invested "well over $120,000 in rebuilding the boat ramps, re-roofing and re-flooring the western boathouse (which was converted into a bunkhouse), and restoring the keeper's house." In addition, COA has installed a solar energy system providing most of the station's power needs.



This is what the boathouse and landing ramp looked like, circa 1970s. It has always been a major ordeal to land a boat at Great Duck Island. U.S. Coast Guard photo.



Student researchers living on Great Duck Island prepare to carry supplies up the boat ramp. Photo by Jeremy D'Entremont.