



The Sounds Conservancy in Argentina

Article and photos by Greig Cranna

For nearly thirty years Greig Cranna has travelled widely, at home and abroad, photographing QLF programs. Five Summers ago, Greig made his first visit to the thriving tern colony on Great Gull Island in Long Island Sound. There he got to observe and photograph the research of Helen Hays and her long-time colleague Joe diCostanzo. In a piece for Compass called “It’s one of ours,” he recounted meeting their visiting Argentine counterparts that summer, and their excitement when they caught one of “their” birds on Great Gull Island.

In February of 2007, Greig was able, with help from TSC, to visit Punta Rasa in Argentina and see some of the same birds (and people) on their wintering grounds, 5500 miles from their summer homes in Long Island Sound.

Before leaving for Argentina in February, I loaded the Google Earth program into my computer and took a virtual journey. I started in Long Island Sound, zooming in closer and closer, easily finding Great Gull Island off the coast of Connecticut. It was incredible, zooming in closer and closer, immediately recognizing all the familiar landmarks; the blinds, the ramshackle barracks and old gun emplacements. The only thing missing was the swarms of



territorial Common and Roseate Terns that inhabit the island throughout the spring and summer and make working without head protection a dangerous and messy proposition.

After traversing the island with my mouse, I zoomed out until the island was a speck in Long Island Sound, and then further until Long Island Sound disappeared completely into the North Atlantic. Swinging south, the globe rotated as I began the hunt for Punta Rasa, the winter home of Great Gull



Island's Common Terns. With my mouse I traversed thousands of miles across the open ocean, across the Equator, finally zooming in on Buenos Aires, Argentina. I began to follow the big brown streak that was the muddy La Plata River, heading southeast out into the estuary. Like a bird, I swooped down closer and followed the shoreline until I came to the little hook of land known as Punta Rasa, just outside the town of San Clemente del Tuyu. Here, outside this popular seaside resort, I would soon be reunited with the terns of Great Gull Island.

They say the world is shrinking, and, indeed, if the measure of that is communication, air travel ease, or

economic interreliance they're probably right. However, geography isn't virtual, it's real, and when you're an animal, either human or non-human, getting from point A to point B still takes real energy, skill, luck and time. So, more remarkable than the technology that allowed me to take this tour, was the eye-popping enormity of the distance when you applied it to a nine inch bird that was making this trip not just once, but twice a year, year after year. In fact, one Common Tern on Great Gull Island has made this 10,000 mile round-trip journey 26 times. For the math challenged, that's 260,000 flying miles in this bird's life, ducking hurricane season, fishermen's

nets, oil spills, and unimaginable hazards to fulfill it's biological imperative.

With that in mind, I felt a little chagrined at being exhausted after my 14 hour flight from Boston to Buenos Aires, where my only hazards were the bad airline food, shifting contents in the overhead compartments, and the legs of sleeping passengers blocking the aisles.

I'm getting ahead of myself though, because Great Gull Island is where this story begins. It was here I first met Helen Hays and was introduced to the longest continually run seabird research project in the world. Sitting

off the coast of Connecticut in Long Island Sound, the island had long been owned by the War Department who constructed a fort in 1897 and kept a massive shore battery there until after World War Two. No terns had nested on the island through the war years, but there were small colonies throughout Long Island Sound. In 1949, the island was acquired by The Museum of Natural History in New York with the express purpose of trying to build up a tern colony. Under the direction of Richard Pough they set to work improving the habitat for terns. The War Department had removed the big guns, and the Museum began removing buildings and much of the vegetation. In 1955, terns began appearing and 23 Common Terns were on the Island that summer. Researchers started going out regularly in 1964 and 1965, but the "Project" really began in 1966. In 1967, people started making brief stays on the island, but after 1969 Helen and her volunteers stayed out the entire season, as she has every year since.

As the '60s drew to a close, both Common and Roseate Terns were thriving, with 3000 of each species summering on the island. The population continued to grow, but the equally thriving vegetation was beginning to have a negative effect by restricting good nesting areas. The Roseates generally nest amongst the large boulders placed around the island for shore protection, but the Common Terns prefer the barren gravelly areas of the island, and encroachment by vegetation was beginning to shrink the prime real estate. In 1980, Meadow Voles (*Microtus pennsylvanicus*) were reintroduced to eat the island's vegetation with spectacular results. Their population explosion in the first year led to a doubling of available nesting area, and in the next 5-6 years the tern



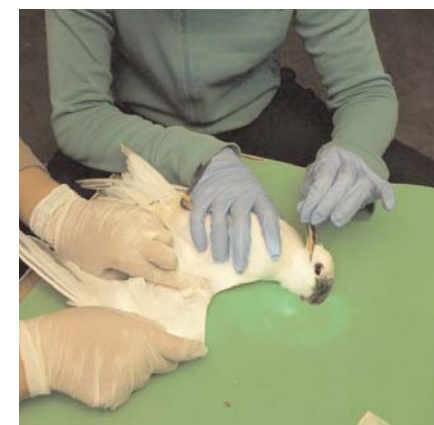
population tripled. By 2006 the Common Tern population was around 8000 pairs, the Roseates around 1700 pairs.

Throughout all these years, with many ups and downs, Helen and her long-time colleague Joe DiCostanzo, assisted by a hard-core cadre of volunteers have managed to band over 225,000 terns, creating a gigantic and invaluable database.

Anyone who has spent time on Great Gull understands the enormity of this accomplishment. Living in

slowly crumbling buildings, reliant on boat deliveries for food and water, everyone spends long days under clouds of unhappy, very aggressive terns, methodically locating and marking every nest on the island for trapping. However, living like ascetics, in the midst of a thriving seabird colony on a private island with like-minded companions, is the kind of experience that builds friendships, launches careers and changes many people forever.

For Helen and Joe, that family chugged along happily, growing steadily as every season brought a new crop of devotees to the island, most of whom were irrevocably altered by the experience. Then 1995 rolled around and the family was changed forever.



Up to this time, very little was known about where these terns wintered. The wintering grounds of the Roseate Terns, especially, were a big mystery, with many people believing they simply became pelagic, staying at sea the entire winter. That year some grant money became available and Helen





and Joe headed south looking for their birds. Remarkably, they found Roseate Terns on the coast of Brazil that first year. Then, after driving to the end of countless roads over 6 weeks, emerged from the Pampas grass onto the flats of Punta Rasa, Argentina. There, to their astonishment, at least 20,000 Common Terns roosted on the mud flats, many of them sporting color bands from Great Gull Island.

You couldn't script what happened next, but it would change their research forever. Standing on the beach with spotting scopes, they obviously stood out from the windsurfers and families of beachgoers enjoying their holidays on this popular beach. Out of the holiday crowd emerged a young woman, who asked, in English, what they were looking at. When they answered that they were looking at the

terns, she sized them up, turned to Helen and said "Are you the famous Helen Hays?" That bit of serendipity began a chain of events that is still unfolding 12 years later. Excitedly she told them of her boss, park ranger Esteban Bremer, who had been capturing and banding terns, many of whom were already sporting bands that said Helen Hays. No one knew for sure who Helen Hays was, but they knew she was banding a ton of birds somewhere in the United States. And now here she was on their beach. So at their new friend's insistence, off they went to meet Esteban, and the rest, as they say, is history. From that first meeting an unofficial, intercontinental tern cooperative evolved. Not long afterward, with help from The Sounds Conservancy, Esteban began bringing his assistants to Great Gull Island in the

summer, and Helen and Joe began regular winter trips to Punta Rasa.

My first summer on Great Gull Island luckily coincided with one of these visits. I remember Esteban's irrepressible smile beaming out from under his guano spattered hat, as he and his team worked side by side with Helen and her crew. In a jumble of Spanish and English the two crews worked together; the energy and excitement contagious as the Argentines trapped and banded "their" birds.

So, it was with great excitement that I headed off to Punta Rasa myself in February of 2007. I knew little of the area, but at a latitude below the equator roughly equivalent to Virginia above it, I knew it would be warmer than Massachusetts in February and there would be lots of new birds for me to learn.

As I drove out of Buenos Aires the city began to fall away and gradually gave way to small towns and vast vistas of grazing cattle, waving pampas grass and galloping gauchos. Trotting alongside the highway, or off on the distant pampas, these storied cowboys of Argentina provided an almost cinematic quality to the scene and were a constant reminder that I was, indeed, in a new environment. As we got hours outside of the city and closer to the coast there were other clues. Every other fence post had a Chimango Caracara on it, Greater Rheas trotted across the grasslands, and at the coast flocks of bright pink and black Chilean Flamingoes jumped out of blue skies.



My "Google Earth" satellite tour of Punta Rasa had prepared me for the physical layout of the town, the coast and the estuary, but not for how events would unfold there. I'm not sure what I

expected at Punta Rasa... I guess some kind of variation on the Great Gull Island theme of trapping, banding, releasing. Of course, the piece I hadn't thought enough about is that these birds are not nesting here, so there is no nest to trap them on. As grueling as the work is on Great Gull Island, once all the nests are located and marked the actual trapping is fairly easy. Adults returning from sea with fish for their chicks are easily caught, because their nest has had a large wire mesh trap placed over it. One simply reaches in, snags the bird, drops it in a little cloth bag and heads back to the ranch for banding, weighing, etc.

The process is immensely more complicated and labor intensive at







Punta Rasa, because the birds are roosting in huge flocks on sand bars and mud flats and generally look askance at being approached, let alone caught. A further complication I hadn't anticipated was that at Punta Rasa all the catching and banding was going to take place at night, making my job as photographer infinitely more difficult.

Sitting a couple of hundred yards off shore was a sand bar that stays dry at high tide. The concept here is to place long rows of mist nets at one end of the bar, then as the rising tide drives the terns off the mud flats and dark descends, to catch the terns as they seek the high ground of the sand bar.

It all sounded good in theory as we were driving out the dirt road from

town, past the the town square's grazing ponies, through towering pampas grass, emerging on the vast flats of Punta Rasa as the quickly disappearing sun cast long warm shadows across the beach. My first sense that maybe this was going to be tougher than expected was when I stepped out of the car to photograph a Burrowing Owl on top of a post at the edge of the dunes. I was immediately slammed back into the car by wind gusts coming off the water, and talk in the car turned to the feasibility of putting up mist nets in this wind. The complexity and difficulty of the operation became even more apparent as we drove farther out on to the flats and approached the cluster of vehicles waiting for us. I

looked out at the sand bar in the distance, and the cluster of kayaks on the beach with cardboard boxes bunjied to them and the logistics of this operation suddenly became crystal clear.

Light was disappearing fast, and chatter accelerating as people quickly fell to the task of getting the large tent erected, propane cylinders connected to lights, tables set up and all the tools of the trade unpacked and laid out. I was scrambling, trying to shoot as much as I could before I lost the light. Another group quickly jumped on the task of unfurling mist nets and attaching them to poles that were stuck in the sand. With the light going fast, everyone put on their waders and

headlamps, grabbed a pole, and with the wind howling marched across the flats in a long sinuous line, the nearly invisible nets flapping madly above them.

Not long afterward, with a crescent moon on the horizon and the rhythmic sweep of the Punta Rasa lighthouse's beam passing over us, the bobbing headlamps of the net setters began to appear in the distance. One by one, people emerged from the darkness, seemingly out of the ocean, and flopped down in and around the tent on any available seat. Immediately, as usual, Esteban set to the task of heating water for mate (pronounced ma tay), the herb drink that is very popular in much of South America. I never fully understood the ritual of mate, but the mild caffeine-like stimulant and the social aspect of passing the bombilla became a welcome part of what would turn into one of a string of very long nights. So, with the nets set and the table's equipment prepared, it was now time for conversation and mate as Esteban and his team waited for the invisible nets to catch terns.

The wind continued unabated and there was much discussion in Spanish and English about how much noise the nets were making out on that wind-whipped sand bar, and whether there would be any birds caught.

These concerns would soon be borne out when, as if by signal, Esteban and crew stood up, pulled on their waders, and headed into the dark toward the sand bar that would soon be an island. Not many years ago it would not have been an island at high tide, but a long, easily accessed peninsula, with much potential for humans negatively affecting roosting birds. Storms of the last few years had gradually cut away this little land bridge, and what was



once an easily accessed peninsula was now, at high tide, a defacto refuge. On the face of it a good thing, and for the birds it unquestionably was. But for Esteban and his crew it deeply complicated the already difficult and labor-intensive capture of terns. This first trip out wouldn't be too bad, because they could still walk it; later would be a different story.

It seemed like hours before we started to see headlamps, like fireflies flickering in the dark, making their way towards us once again, and everyone perked up and got ready to work as



they got closer. The paltry handful of birds was disappointing, but the night was still very young, and everyone went enthusiastically to work. Each bird was carefully weighed, measured and banded and then passed to another team that was collecting blood samples that would be used to sex the birds, and more ominously, check for any sign of avian flu. There has been no sign of avian flu in the Western Hemisphere, but it is a concern for anyone handling birds, and this night everyone wore masks and gloves. After being carefully poked and prodded, each bird was carried away from the lights and activity of the tent, into the darkness of the now deserted beach to be released. Usually they would sit quietly in the open palms of their caretaker, seemingly taking stock of the unusual twist in their evening. Then, without a sound, a flash of white would suddenly spring off and disappear instantly into the dark.





With the last bird disappearing into the night, it was back to the tent, now a glowing orange orb alone on this vast Argentine beach. As the mate got passed, a half dozen conversations began quietly around the tent. Time slowed down as we slipped into our own thoughts or conversations, the wind howling and the Southern Cross glowing brightly above our heads. Sitting out there in the dark somewhere, now surrounded by water, was a tiny little sand island covered with terns. Hopefully, while we relaxed in the tent, those hidden mist nets were doing their work and the next foray into the night would reap a bonanza of terns.

Time had practically ground to a halt when, once again, Esteban and company began suiting up for the next net check.



frankly, what they were about to do scared me. They strapped boxes to their boats, and with the wind tearing at them, immediately disappeared into total blackness. Periodically, a head lamp would shoot a pencil thin line across the water, but soon, even those faded. It was well past midnight now, and for us it was back to the tent and the now familiar ritual of talking, dozing and staring into the propane lights. It seemed like hours later that we heard boats scraping on the sand, and after Esteban and crew emerged from the dark, the whole bird-handling frenzy began all over again.

And so this is how it went. Nights were long affairs, punctuated by the arrival of birds, friends (one with a dead sea turtle in his pickup and 4 boxes of pizza) and the stabbing light sabre of the lighthouse. It was often 4 AM by the time we got to bed, and with exploring and birding to do in daylight, we were progressively more sleep-



deprived as the week went on.

We would get little sleep throughout that week, not just because of the long nights and constant birding, but also due to the Argentine's incredible hospitality.

In a classic case of international cooperation, and even more unusual, mutual stewardship of a single species, the researchers of Great Gull Island, N.Y. and Punta Rasa, Argentina have become colleagues, friends, and allies in conservation. The connection that has evolved between these geographically separated researchers is a wonderful thing to be around. When Helen and Joe go South or Esteban and company head North, it is more like a family reunion than a collaboration of scien-

tists. At the risk of embarrassing Helen, it has to be said that this is largely due to her. Not to diminish Joe's role, but Helen obviously means a lot to everyone who has come in contact with her. She is at once researcher, camp counselor, den mother, surrogate parent, a shoulder to cry on, and a friend to all. To watch the Argentines around her is like watching Mother Teresa pass through the streets of Calcutta. Sorry, Helen, it's true. One day we headed down the coast to an asada in our (read Helen's) honor. After a remarkable drive across a vast estancia, or ranch, replete with Rheas, Aplomado Falcons and road-blocking cattle herds, we arrived at a park ranger's station in a small wood at the

base of massive sand dunes. There we sat at a long, outdoor table and were feted with unimaginable quantities of Argentine beef and side dishes of every description. As the day wound down and we prepared to make the long trek back to San Clemente, one of our hosts got out his guitar and sang a song about Helen that he had written for the occasion. She obviously has made a deep impression on her Argentine counterparts. Her dedication to her research and her undiminished enthusiasm after all these years is infectious, and it's thrilling to see it rubbing off on, and inspiring the next generation of seabird researchers in both North and South America.





So, yes it is still a very big world, but sometimes events happen that do make you feel like it's shrinking. I had just made a 5000 mile trip to see people I had first met in Long Island Sound, introduced to me by a migratory bird. Remarkable in itself, but not the only incredible connection that week. On one of those long, sleep deprived nights, a bird was

brought into the tent for processing that was banded in the United States, but not on Great Gull Island. This one had been banded in Massachusetts by an old QLF friend, Tom French. Now at MassWildlife, Tom and I first met in 1978, working with QLF on St. Mary's Island on the Quebec North Shore. Now, here we were, almost 30 years later, 5000 miles apart, connected by

this banded Common Tern and the ever-expanding, now global reach of the QLF experience. As big as the globe remains, I believe it is these connections formed between like-minded individuals, through shared experiences and passions, that will truly shrink the globe and enable us to plow forward into the global issues that impact us all equally. ▮