2020 was a remarkable year at Napatree; visits up, rare birds spotted

- By Dale P. Faulkner Sun staff writer

A woman with her dog heads out for a sunset walk under threatening skies at Napatree Point on Friday, February 26, 2021. Harold Hanka, The Westerly Sun

WESTERLY — The 2020 season on Napatree Point was the second busiest for visitor activity in the past six years. The year was also distinguished for rare bird species spotting and the discovery of an old wooden coal-barge remnant.

Those and many other findings can be found in the 2020 "State of Napatree Point Report." Napatree Point is managed by the Watch Hill Conservancy and the Watch Hill Fire District, which recently released the ninth annual edition of the report.

The conservancy and fire district, the report states, are committed to providing a safe environment for visitors and "protecting the beaches, dunes, salt marshes, tidal waters and other habitats" that support the area's diverse flora and fauna. Napatree staff and volunteers engage in public education, ecosystem monitoring and research.

The report provides a summary of the results of environmental and educational programs at the 86-acre Napatree Point Conservation Area.

According to the report, it appears that the Napatree dune system has fully recovered from the erosion caused by Superstorm Sandy in 2012.

"This is an excellent example of the resilience of pristine coastal dune systems, such as Napatree, to sea level rise and storms," the report states.

Water quality at Napatree remained at healthy, stable levels for the 2020 season. Dissolved oxygen levels remained high for most of the season. Because 2020 was a relative dry summer, scientists found lower bacterial loads from stormwater runoff, and greater water clarity than in some other years.

The 2020 season on Napatree was the second busiest in the past six years. July weekends had the largest number of visitors (706 people per day). Visitor numbers on rain-free days were twice as large as on rainy days. Visitor arrivals to Napatree by boat (versus by foot at the entrance gate) can be extremely high on summer weekends, according to the report. Napatree naturalists count visitors at the gate.

According to the report, least terns, a species of "greatest conservation need," successfully fledged a chick on Napatree in 2020 and a "number of very rare bird species were spotted." Two pairs of piping plovers nested in 2020 and one chick fledged. Monitors observed high levels of predation on nestlings. One chick, according to the report, was likely killed by a peregrine falcon, and fish crows, another predator, were commonly seen.

For the first time in many years, a least tern fledged from a nest on Napatree. Two unexpected visitors spent time on Napatree — a terek sandpiper for, according to the report, only the fourth observation in the lower 48), and an Arctic tern (the first sighting ever in the state).

"As a globally important bird area (National Audubon Society designation), Napatree is living up to its reputation," the report states.

Programs for children were not offered on Napatree in 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Local historian Captain Jack Spratt made a number of interesting discoveries on the Napatree beach this year. One find was a "barge knee," a large timber that was an integral structural part of wooden coal barges. The one Spratt found is believed to come from a 1907 coal scow sinking off Napatree.

The report is made up of several chapters, some of which are updated annually. Janice Sassi, who manages the conservation area, and Peter August, chairman of the Napatree Science Advisory Board, coordinated the writing, review, and final report production.

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