2012 Annual Habitat Assessment for Prenesting Closures

The prenesting closure delineations were based on the breeding history of the protected species at Cape Hatteras National Seashore (CAHA) and the actual habitat conditions at the time of the annual habitat assessments. National Park Service (NPS) Resources Management staff conducted breeding habitat assessments for piping plover (PIPL), Wilson's plover (WIPL), American oystercatcher (AMOY), and colonial waterbirds (CWBs) from January 30 to February 7, 2012. Many of these species exhibit strong site fidelity and if the nest site characteristics were still present, prenesting closures are being established to protect these areas.

The prenesting areas described below have been determined to be potential nesting habitat and will be protected through the establishment of a prenesting closure as described in Table 10-1 in the FEIS which states:

> "Areas of suitable habitat that have had individual PIPL, WIPL, or AMOY nests, or concentrations of more than 10 CWB nests in more than one of the past five years and new habitat that is particularly suitable for shorebird nesting, such as the habitat at new inlets or overwash areas, will be posted as prenesting closures using symbolic fencing (string between posts) or with other closure signs by March 15 at sites involving PIPL, WIPL, and/or AMOY; and by April 15 at sites involving only CWBs…The NPS will determine the configuration of specific prenesting closures based on an annual habitat assessment."

Pedestrian shoreline access is allowed at most, but not all, prenesting areas <u>below</u> the ocean high tide line until such time that shorebird breeding activity is observed, then standard species-specific buffers will be implemented as described in Table 10-1. Dogs are generally prohibited in the pedestrian shoreline access corridor below the high tide line adjacent to the prenesting closures and within any posted resource closure. Three CWB prenesting areas (Ramp 23, closure just north of Ramp 27, and Ramp 34) will involve upper beach closures. At these three sites, properly leashed dogs will be allowed along the shoreline until breeding activity is documented. Properly leashed dogs are otherwise allowed in open ORV routes and pedestrian areas.

<u>Prenesting Areas to be installed by March 15</u>

Bodie Island Spit- This area was heavily impacted by Hurricane Irene and resulted in the formation of a new inlet and island. The large sands flats were heavily scoured and flooded with debris being deposited throughout the area. Potential nesting habitat still exists however the configuration of it has changed when compared to previous years. Currently there is no vehicle or pedestrian access to the new island (Bodie Island Island). Because of the high potential for PIPLs, AMOYs, and CWBs to nest on this difficult to access area, the perimeter of the island will be signed with no landing signs. The prenesting closure on the attached side of Bodie Spit will encompass what remains of the sand flats. This prenesting closure is located within a seasonal Vehicle Free Area. Pedestrian access will be allowed below the oceanside high tide line until breeding activity is documented. See Proposed Prenesting Closure Map # 1.

Green Island- The island is becoming more vegetated with each passing year but the AMOYs and CWBs have continued to successfully nest on it. The perimeter of the island will be signed with no landing signs to prevent disturbance to nesting birds. See Proposed Prenesting Closure Map # 2.

0.05 to 1.5 miles South of Ramp 27- AMOYs and least terns (LETEs) have consistently utilized this area for nesting for a number of years. Banded AMOYs have shown that lost mates are quickly replaced with new individuals and this stretch of beach appears to be a preferred nesting area. The beach in this area erodes and accretes throughout the year but the habitat maintains the characteristics of potential nesting habitat. This prenesting closure is located within a Vehicle Free Area. Pedestrian access will be allowed below the high tide line until breeding activity is documented. See Proposed Prenesting Closure Map # 3.

2.3 to 2.8 miles South of Ramp 38- An AMOY pair has consistently utilized this area for nesting for the last 5 years. This closure also encompasses the CWB nests documented in this area in 2010 and 2011. The habitat maintains the characteristics of potential nesting habitat. This closure is located within a Vehicle Free Area. Pedestrian access will be allowed below the high tide line until breeding activity is documented. See Proposed Prenesting Closure Map # 4.

Ramp 43 to Ramp 44- An AMOY pair has consistently utilized this area for nesting for the last four years. The habitat maintains the characteristics of potential nesting habitat. This closure is located within a designated ORV route. Pedestrian access will be allowed below the high tide line until breeding activity is documented. See Proposed Prenesting Closure Map # 5.

Cape Point– This area has historically been one of the most productive breeding locations for PIPLs at CAHA. The PIPLs will utilize the ephemeral pools and pond drainage areas for foraging and will nest in the upper and lower shell beds. AMOYs and CWBs have also consistently utilized this area for nesting. The habitat maintains the characteristics of potential nesting habitat for all of the above mentioned species and was not dramatically modified during Hurricane Irene. The eastern shoreline as well as a portion of the hook (up to the Vehicle Free Area) will remain open to ORVs and pedestrians until breeding activity is documented. Salt Pond Road will be closed to pedestrians. Pedestrian access will be allowed below the high tide line in the Vehicle Free Area of the hook until breeding activity is documented. See Proposed Prenesting Closure Map # 6.

South Beach (Includes the 2 Miles of Beach West of Salt Pond Road)- This stretch of beach has consistently provided nesting habitat for AMOYs, CWBs, and PIPLs. The habitat maintains the characteristics of potential nesting habitat for all of the above mentioned species. This closure is located within a Vehicle Free Area. Pedestrian access will be allowed below the high tide line and via Ramp 45 until breeding activity is documented. See Proposed Prenesting Closure Map # 7.

Sandy Bay- This soundside prenesting closure between the villages of Frisco and Hatteras has consistently been utilized by an AMOY pair for seven of the last eight years. The prenesting closure will encompass all of these past nesting areas. The habitat maintains the characteristics of potential nesting habitat. The sound shoreline will be closed to all access due to the narrowness of the habitat and the high potential for disturbance to the AMOY pair. See Proposed Prenesting Closure Map # 8.

Hatteras Inlet- Over the last five years, the southern tip of Hatteras Island has been continuously eroding with old nest site locations now occurring in the water in the inlet. An AMOY pair has continuously utilized the inlet for nesting for the past five years even though the habitat is constantly changing from year to year. During the habitat assessment, suitable nesting habitat was identified along the ocean shoreline just east of the terminus of the Pole Road. This closure is located within a Vehicle Free Area along the ocean shoreline. Pedestrian access will be allowed below the high tide line until breeding activity is documented. The designated ORV route along Pole Road to the Spur Road parking area and pedestrian access to the "rip" will remain open until breeding activity is documented. See Proposed Prenesting Closure Map # 9.

North Ocracoke- Hurricane Irene impacted this area by heavy scouring and flooding. A high potential for nesting still exists in the elevated shell beds at the toe of the dunes as well as on the accreting sand/mud flats. This prenesting closure is located within a Vehicle Free Area. Pedestrian access will be allowed below the high tide line to an area approximately 1 mile north of Ramp 59 until breeding activity is documented. See Proposed Prenesting Closure Map # 10.

0.5 to 1.1 miles South of Ramp 68- An AMOY pair has utilized this area in all but two years since 1999. The habitat maintains the characteristics of potential nesting habitat. This prenesting closure is located within a Vehicle Free Area. Pedestrian access will be allowed below the high tide line until breeding activity is documented. See Proposed Prenesting Closure Map # 11.

South Point- Hurricane Irene impacted the habitat on South Point. Several new overwash fans were created and the areas around the inlet shoreline developed elevated shell beds creating new potential habitat for nesting shorebirds. The ORV route will remain open to ORVs until breeding activity is documented. Approximately 0.2 mi of inlet shoreline beyond the terminus of the ORV route will be open to pedestrians. The remaining inlet and sound shoreline will be closed to public access. See Proposed Prenesting Map # 12.

Prenesting Closures to be installed by April 15

Ramp 23- The areas to the north and south of this ramp have been utilized by nesting least terns (LETEs) since 2009. The upper beach area maintains the characteristics of potential nesting habitat. The area north of Ramp 23 is a seasonally designated Vehicle Free Area that goes into effect on April 1; south of Ramp 23 is a year-round Vehicle Free Area. Use of the ramp and shoreline access for pedestrians and properly leashed dogs will be allowed until breeding activity is documented. See Proposed Prenesting Closure Map # 13.

1.5 to 1.7 miles South of Ramp 23- A LETE colony has utilized this same general area for more than one of the last five years. The habitat to the south, where a colony was located in 2008 and 2009 has become too narrow with the high tide line coming up to the toe of the dune. This prenesting closure encompasses the best remaining potential habitat and includes the majority of the habitat for the LETE colonies from 2010 and 2011. Although this closure is located partially within a designated ORV route, ORV access to this area is blocked by another CWB prenesting closure to the south. Pedestrian access will be allowed below the high tide line until breeding activity is documented. See Proposed Prenesting Closure Map # 14.

1.0 to 1.2 miles North of Ramp 27- A LETE colony utilized this area for nesting in 2008 and 2009. The area maintains the characteristics of potential nesting habitat. The prenesting closure boundary encompasses the best remaining potential habitat and includes the majority of the habitat for the LETE colonies from 2008 and 2009. This closure is located within an ORV route and ORV access will be restricted beginning 1.0 mile north of Ramp 27. Pedestrian access will be allowed below the high tide line until breeding activity is documented. See Proposed Prenesting Closure Map # 15.

0.05 to 0.2 miles North of Ramp 27- A small LETE colony has utilized this area for nesting since 2008. The upper beach area maintains the characteristics of potential nesting habitat. This upper beach prenesting closure is located just to the north of Ramp 27 in a designated ORV route. ORVs and pedestrians (and properly leashed dogs) will be allowed access until breeding activity is documented. See Proposed Prenesting Closure Map # 15.

Ramp 34– A LETE colony utilized this area in from 2007-2009. The areas north and south of Ramp 34 still contain suitable nesting habitat for LETEs. The closures just north and south of the ramp are located in a Vehicle Free Area. (Note: South of the ramp is a seasonal Vehicle Free Area effective April 1- Oct 31). The ramp as well as the boardwalk will remain open to pedestrians and properly leashed dogs to allow access to the shoreline until breeding activity is documented. See Proposed Prenesting Closure Map # 16.

0.9 to 1.3 and 1.6 to 2.0 miles south of Ramp 38- These adjacent areas have been consistently utilized by LETEs for nesting. While the colonies have been compact in some years, in other years they have been more dispersed resulting in a longer continuous closure. The southern closure is located within a Vehicle Free Area while the northern closure is located within a designated ORV route and will limit ORV access at 0.9 miles south of Ramp 38. Pedestrian access will be allowed below the high tide line until breeding activity is documented. See Proposed Prenesting Closure Map # 4.

South Beach (Western End of AMOY/CWB/PIPL Prenesting Closure)- The CWBs will typically nest further west in this closure than the AMOYs and PIPLs. On April 15, the western end of this closure will be extended to include an area that has only been utilized by CWBs in the past. This closure will then end at the ORV Route and Vehicle Free Area transition zone approximately 1.7 miles west of Ramp 45. Pedestrian access will be allowed below the high tide line until breeding activity is documented. See Proposed Prenesting Closure Map # 7.