

Cape Hatteras National Seashore 2015 Habitat Assessment for Prenesting Closures

The prenesting closure delineations are based on the habitat conditions at the time of the annual habitat assessments and the breeding history of the protected species at Cape Hatteras National Seashore (CAHA). Natural Resource field staff conducted breeding habitat assessments for piping plover (PIPL), Wilson's plover (WIPL), American oystercatcher (AMOY), and colonial waterbirds (CWB) from February 16 to February 27, 2015. 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. Dogs will only be allowed along the shoreline of prenesting closures at Bodie Spit or in areas with upper beach closures (e.g. Ramp 23, closure just north of Ramp 27, and Ramp 34).

The 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 CWB...The NPS will determine the configuration of specific prenesting closures based on an annual habitat assessment.”

In general, the 2015 prenesting closures are commensurate with the prenesting closures established in previous years. Changes were made where accretion and erosion resulted in changes to the shoreline and potential nesting habitat. The spit at Hatteras Inlet continues to erode with the Pole Road shortening visibly on a regular basis. Two new prenesting closures were installed based on breeding activity that occurred in the previous two years.

Closures to be installed by March 15

Bodie Island Spit - The prenesting closure on Bodie spit will be very similar to the 2014 closure. Due to recent excessive erosion, the shellbed near Bonner Bridge is currently in poor condition, which reduces the closure area in this location. A new elevated portion of the Bait Pond will bring the closure farther north into the pond and follow the shallow topography; access into the pond still exists. The prenesting closure is located within a seasonal Vehicle Free Area. Pedestrian access will be allowed on the ocean shoreline until breeding activity is documented.

Green Island - Sufficient breeding habitat is still present on Green Island as CWB and AMOY continue their nesting attempts. The perimeter of the island will be signed with “no landing” signs to prevent disturbance to nesting birds.

0.05 to 1.5 miles South of Ramp 27 - AMOY and CWB have consistently nested in this area for a number of years. Banded AMOY have shown their willingness to tolerate multiple pairs within close proximity and excessive habitat use by large CWB colonies. The beach in this area erodes and accretes throughout the year but the backshore 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.

1.5 - 1.7 miles North of Ramp 34- An AMOY pair has shown breeding behavior and nested in this area for three years. The area was also utilized by nesting CWB in 2014. The habitat maintains the characteristics of potential nesting habitat. The prenesting closure will encompass all of the past nesting areas within the last three years, spanning approximately 0.2 miles. Pedestrian access will be allowed below the high tide line until breeding activity is documented.

1.6 - 2.0 miles South of Ramp 38- An AMOY pair has consistently utilized this area for nesting for four years. Before 2011, this area had previously only been utilized by LETE. This closure falls within a Vehicle Free Area. Pedestrian access will be allowed below the high tide line until breeding activity is documented.

2.3 - 2.7 miles South of Ramp 38- An AMOY pair has utilized this area for nesting for five years. This closure will also encompass the CWB nests documented in this area in 2010. The habitat maintains the characteristics of potential nesting habitat. This closure falls within a Vehicle Free Area. Pedestrian access will be allowed below the high tide line until breeding activity is documented.

R43 - 0.3 mi N R43- A PIPL pair have utilized this area for foraging, breeding behavior, chick rearing, and nesting for two years. The habitat maintains the characteristics of potential nesting habitat. The closure will be installed from Ramp 43 and will extend northward for ~0.3 miles along the shoreline. This closure falls within an ORV route, which will prohibit ORV traffic from Ramp 43 - 0.45 miles north of Ramp 43 (VFA boundary). Pedestrian access will be allowed below the high tide line until breeding activity is documented. Pets, kites, and horses will be prohibited along the shoreline in front of this closure.

Ramp 43 - Ramp 44- An AMOY pair utilized this area for nesting from 2009 - 2012. In 2013, a PIPL nest was documented within this area. In 2014, several PIPL scrapes were documented within this area. The habitat maintains the characteristics of potential nesting habitat. This closure falls within an ORV route and will prohibit ORV traffic between Ramps 43 and 44. Pedestrian access will be allowed below the high tide line until breeding activity is documented.

Cape Point– This area has historically been one of the most productive breeding locations for PIPL at CAHA. The PIPL utilize the ephemeral pools and pond drainage areas for foraging and nest in the upper and lower shell beds. AMOY and CWB have also consistently utilized this area for nesting. The habitat maintains the characteristics of potential nesting habitat for all of the

above mentioned species. At the time of the habitat assessment, the east facing beach from the Bypass Road to Cape Point was significantly narrower than in previous years. To maintain ORV access to Cape Point, the Bypass Road will remain open until breeding activity is documented. A portion of Cape Point's west shoreline will also remain open to ORVs and pedestrians until breeding activity is documented. Salt Pond Road will be closed to pedestrians. Pedestrians will be allowed up to the high tide line in the Vehicle Free Area of the hook until breeding activity is documented.

South Beach (Ramp 45 – 1.4 miles West of Ramp 45)- This stretch of beach has consistently provided nesting habitat for AMOY, CWB, and PIPL. The habitat maintains the characteristics of potential nesting habitat for all of the above mentioned species. This closure falls within a Vehicle Free Area. The shoreline up to the high tide line and Ramp 45 will remain open to pedestrians until breeding activity is documented.

Sandy Bay- This soundside prenesting closure between the villages of Frisco and Hatteras has consistently been utilized by an AMOY pair for ten of the last eleven years. The prenesting closure will encompass all of the nesting areas from the previous five years. 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.

North Ocracoke- 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 up to the high tide line until breeding activity is documented.

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 up to the high tide line until breeding activity is documented.

South Point- A high potential for nesting success exists in the overwash fans and the areas of elevated shell beds along the dune line. The flats area to the south of the dune line is prone to tidal inundation and flooding. This area is considered prime foraging habitat but the successful nesting areas will be limited to the small areas not prone to tidal inundation and flooding. 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.

Closures to be installed by April 15

Ramp 23 to 0.3 miles North of Ramp 23 - The area to the north of this ramp has consistently been utilized by nesting CWB as well as AMOY displaying breeding behavior. 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. An upper-beach

closure will be installed; the use of the ramp and shoreline access for pedestrians and properly leashed dogs will be allowed until breeding activity is documented.

Ramp 23 to 0.3 miles South of Ramp 23 - The area to the south of this ramp has consistently been utilized by nesting CWB as well as AMOY displaying breeding behavior. The upper beach area maintains the characteristics of potential nesting habitat. The area south of Ramp 23 is a year-round Vehicle Free Area. An upper-beach closure will be installed; the use of the ramp and shoreline access for pedestrians and properly leashed dogs will be allowed until breeding activity is documented.

Ramp 34 - 0.3 miles South of R34– A CWB colony utilized this area in 2009, and 2012 - 2014. The area to the south of Ramp 34 appears to contain the best potential nesting habitat for CWB. Use of the ramp as well as the boardwalk by pedestrians and properly leashed dogs to access the shoreline and Vehicle Free Area will be allowed until breeding activity is documented.

South Beach (Western End of AMOY/CWB/PIPL Prenesting Closure)- The CWB will typically nest further west in this closure than the AMOY and PIPL. On April 15, the western end of this closure will be extended to include an area that has only been utilized by CWB in the past (2007-2009, and 2011). This closure will end at the ORV Route and Vehicle Free Area transition zone. Pedestrians will be allowed up to the high tide line until breeding activity is documented.