

MATINICUS ROCK
ONCE AGAIN A NATIONAL AUDUBON SANCTUARY

Talk given by Carl W. Buchhester
at the celebration of the establishment of
Matinicus Rock, Maine, as a National Audubon Sanctuary, Hog Island, Maine,
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For ages Matinicus Rock, a small 30-acre island lying far out off the coast of Maine, was an ideal home for seabirds. In 1827, with the establishment of the Lighthouse, man co-habitated the island with the birds. Since the Lightkeepers and their families did little, if any, harm to the birds the latter continued to use their ancestral nesting grounds.

As far back as the 1880's we have records of the existence of a large colony of Arctic terns on the Rock. The Lighthouse keepers frequently mentioned the "Medricks", (local name for the terns). When the Arctic terns returned at dawn on or about May 15th, the cry went up on the Rock "The Medricks have come!" After an absence of eight months, as beautiful harbingers of Spring they brought life and spirit back to the Rock.

Despite the remoteness of the Rock, in the 1880's it was no longer a paradise for its nesting seabirds. The killing of the birds for the millinery markets was raging from the Maine coast south. Seabirds, especially terns, the favorites, were killed in great numbers.

I vividly recall an interview with Marion Young, a grand old lady of Matinicus Island, an island five miles from the Rock. Then in her nineties, she gave a most lucid account of the destructive killing on the Rock. She recalled that each summer a man came "from away", meaning of course from outside Maine. He would go to the Rock to kill the terns. Returning to Matinicus Island, he would unload barrels of terns. Island women were hired to skin the birds and prepare the skins with preservatives for shipment to New York City feather markets. She remembered the year 1886 in particular, because she was eleven years old, the same age as the daughter of the man "from away".

So bad was the killing on Matinicus Rock, it moved the head Lightkeeper, William G. Grant, to write a letter denouncing it to the Editor of Forest and Stream, an excellent national publication devoted to hunting, fishing and natural history, and it was carried in the January 13, 1887 edition. Smarting from Grant's charges, the killer responded with a letter to the Editor justifying his "collecting". It appeared in the February 10, 1887 edition. For your interest, may I quote a few lines of his justification: "My business at present is collecting bird skins, for both scientific and millinery purposes. As long as the people demand bird skins, I shall probably make collecting my business, and as long as I never kill or collect either insectivorous, song or game birds, I do not see how I can consistently be found fault with. I pay attention to the tern entirely. This bird, as all naturalists know, is of no use whatever, except for decorative and millinery purposes---. In nature's economy it is a destroyer feeding entirely on young fishes such as the mackerel, bluefish, etc., which it destroys in large numbers."

This quotation is an awesome description of the abysmal ecological ignorance and prejudice of the time. It makes us realize what the founders of the Audubon movement in 1900 had to contend with. We have so much reason to be proud of our Audubon heritage.

The slaughter of the terns and other birds continued unabated in Maine and elsewhere until 1900. In that year--note it well--William Dutcher, acting for the Bird Protection Committee of the American Ornithologists Union and disturbed by the situation in Maine, engaged the services of William Grant, Lightkeeper of the Matinicus Rock Light, as a warden to protect the birds on the Rock. As far as I know that was one of the earliest, if not the first appointment of a warden to protect non-game birds. So our Matinicus Rock actually became a bird sanctuary 84 years ago. Dutcher continued engaging successive Lightkeepers through 1904.

In 1905 the newly-born National Audubon Society took over the appointments of and payments for the Lighthouse keeper-wardens, and continuing through 1935. Thus, in 1905, Matinicus Rock became the first sanctuary of our National Audubon Society. William Dutcher, founder of our Society, became its first President--a truly great hero of the Audubon movement.

In 1900 two puffins were reported to be on the Rock. Their number increased with the passage of years. If one doesn't count Machias Seal Island, whose ownership both the U.S. and Canada claim, the Rock was the only place in the U.S. where the puffin nested. That made it a mecca for birders who wanted to add the puffin to their life lists.

With the opening of the Audubon Camp of Maine in June 1936, at Roger Peterson's urging we made our first trip to the Rock. Harriet and I and other staff members would spend our one-week vacations there. After my retirement we spent most of the summers there, Harriet studying the plants and I the birds. Both of us became more and more concerned over the increase of visitors, at times as many as 20 in a boat load. Some heeded our instructions about not going into the nesting colonies and others arrogantly didn't. So while still President of the National Audubon Society, I made a date to see the Admiral of the U.S. Coast Guard in Washington. Explaining the situation on the Rock, I urged him to have the Coast Guard make the Island a sanctuary with enforcement of visitor regulations by Coast Guard personnel. This the Admiral did not think should be the Coast Guard's responsibility, but rather that of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. So I petitioned the Fish and Wildlife Service, happily with success. Thus, in 1967, Matinicus Rock became a National Seabird Nesting Refuge, administered jointly by the Coast Guard and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The Service made Harriet and me cooperators with full authority to report any violations of sanctuary regulations. The bird colonies were roped off with signs reading "Do not cross lines. Birds are nesting." And that ended violations.

In 1982 the Coast Guard in Southwest Harbor notified us that the light on the Rock would be automated. Realizing this would leave the Rock without human inhabitants and its fragile nesting colonies open to intrusion, we went to the Commanding Officer of the Coast Guard in Southwest Harbor, Captain R. F. Melsheimer. I explained what lack of protection would mean to the birds and asked if the Coast Guard would permit the National Audubon Society, because of its history of protecting the birds on the Rock, to place its own wardens there and that they be permitted to use the Coast Guard

buildings and facilities. The Captain assured me that his Station would approve, but that I should have the President of the Society write higher authority requesting these privileges. I then wrote President Russ Peterson and he wrote the Coast Guard, and he placed our request that the Society make the Rock its sanctuary on the agenda of the next Board meeting. The Board gave unanimous approval and the Coast Guard gave its whole-hearted approval. By their respective actions Matinicus Rock again became a National Audubon Sanctuary with assurance of full protection for its puffins, Razorbill auks, guillemots, Leach's Storm petrels, Arctic terns and other species nesting there.

Lt. Kent Mack of the Boston Coast Guard headquarters worked most cooperatively with our Vice President Glenn Paulson and with Steven Kress in completing all arrangements for the Society's wardens to use the Coast Guard facilities.

One has the greatest gratitude and admiration for all the Coast Guard has provided throughout the years of this story. Its Officers in Southwest Harbor and Rockland, and its personnel on the Rock, were always most helpful to Harriet and me, in every way, and to Steve Kress and his biologists.

And we are most grateful to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for all it has done to maintain the Rock as a Federal Sanctuary.

In conclusion, President Russ Peterson, today when natural areas in our country are still being destroyed, we can rejoice that Matinicus Rock with its life association of incredible beauty, has become another jewel in the Society's crown of wildlife sanctuaries.