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Island Refuge Saved for Migratory Birds

Yarmouth, NS (April 28, 2020)—As Nova Scotians stay close to home due to Covid-19, countless birds are beginning an amazing long-distance adventure to join us. From tiny hummingbirds to majestic ospreys, migratory birds have begun to fly thousands of kilometers back to their summer home in Nova Scotia. And this year, a delightful surprise awaits them. Peases Island, a critical first stop on their return home, is now protected, forever. The Nova Scotia Nature Trust hopes the good news story brings some light and encouragement to Nova Scotians.

Bonnie Sutherland, Executive Director with the Nature Trust, noted, “At such a difficult time, nature can be a great source of hope and inspiration. With spring comes renewal—our forests and backyards filling with colour and the joyful sounds of birdsong. And this year, the birds might just be singing a little sweeter knowing another important place for birds is protected forever.”

Amid alarming worldwide bird population declines, the Nature Trust brings timely and encouraging news for birds, and for bird lovers, with the acquisition of Peases Island. Located off the southwest corner of the province, near Yarmouth, the 28 acre property includes a diversity of coastal habitats from coastal barrens and beaches to salt marsh and lagoons. These habitats provide an important year round home for a variety of birds including several endangered species. It is also an essential resting and feeding stopover for birds along the migratory pathway known as the Atlantic Flyway.

Peases Island adds to a growing network of Nature Trust protected islands in “the Tusquets,” a chain of islands near the southwestern tip of Nova Scotia that is globally significant for bird recovery and conservation. The new protected lands complement over 1000 acres of protected habitat on the Nature Trust’s nearby Bald Island group, Bon Portage Island and over 650 acres on the renowned Seal Island.

“Amid staggering declines in bird populations here in Nova Scotia and all around the globe, we are delighted to achieve another major win for bird conservation with the protection of Peases Island,” noted Sutherland.

With 96% of coastal islands in the area privately-owned and only about 6 percent protected, island conservation is critical in protecting coastal biodiversity and recovering and sustaining bird populations.

A recent report, the State of North America’s Birds, raised the alarm about birds, estimating that 30 percent of birds, about one billion birds, have disappeared from North America since 1970. One third of bird species across the continent are threatened with extinction. Forty percent of migratory birds are in decline, with 430 species that migrate among Canada, the U.S. and Mexico considered “high concern” for conservation due largely to human-caused habitat loss and climate change. Scientists warn that if these trends are not turned around quickly, recovery will simply not be possible. Protecting important bird habitats is key.

Seabirds and shorebirds, two bird groups facing some of the most drastic declines globally, will particularly benefit from the island’s protection, including a number of species-at-risk. Roseate Tern, an endangered seabird species, have nested on the island. Their numbers have dropped by over half in the last decade, with only about 70 pairs still surviving in Canada. The surviving birds are found only in Nova

Scotia, with 75% in the Lobster Bay/Tusket Islands area. This is a bird in serious trouble, so every nesting pair saved makes a huge difference for the species' long-term survival.

"Protecting nesting habitat for Roseate Terns is absolutely critical to this endangered species' recovery and conserving biodiversity in Canada," said Bernadette Jordan, Minister of Fisheries, Oceans, and the Canadian Coast Guard. "The Government of Canada is proud to be a partner in this effort, which is an important step for the conservation of migratory birds and the protection of a quarter of Canada's lands and oceans by 2025. The Nature Trust's Peases Island achievement is great news for Roseates and for the many other seabird species too."

A diversity of shorebirds, from plovers and sandpipers to dowitchers and willets also use the island's wetlands to refuel and replenish during both spring and fall migrations, sometimes in great numbers. Red Knots, an endangered species known for having one of the longest bird migrations in the world, have been observed on the island in the fall as they return south from summer breeding grounds in the Arctic.

Peases Island also supports a variety of birds throughout the winter as well, including Harlequin Ducks, another species on Canada's endangered species list. Other interesting and less known species using the island include Snowy Owls, Horned Larks, Snow Bunting and Lapland Longspurs.

The Nature Trust is working collaboratively with the Canadian Wildlife Service (Environment and Climate Change Canada), Nova Scotia Environment, the Department of Lands and Forestry, Acadia University, other academic and conservation partners and local community members, to advance restoration, research, conservation and collaborative stewardship of this very unique and ecologically significant group of islands in Southwest Nova Scotia. Peases Island will add to that growing collaborative effort.

This project was undertaken with the financial support of the Government of Canada. Other generous supporters include the Nova Scotia Crown Share Land Legacy Trust, the Donner Canadian Foundation, William P. Wharton Trust, Bonnell Cove Foundation, R. Howard Webster Foundation, and other individuals, families and businesses supporting the Nature Trust's conservation efforts, and the island's owner, Dick Henry, the long-time steward of Peases Island.

Building on the growing momentum for coastal island and bird conservation in the region, the Nature Trust is gearing up for even more big conservation wins in the coming year, including purchase of another nearby island, Spectacle Island, slated for protection later this spring.

For more information or to make a charitable donation to support the stewardship of Peases Island, the purchase of Spectacle Island, or continued coastal island conservation and stewardship in southwestern Nova Scotia visit www.nsnt.ca or call (902) 425-5263.

The Nature Trust is also seeking volunteers to help with the long-term monitoring and care of islands in the region and over 118 other Nature Trust protected areas across the province.

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Photos and map available—www.nsnt.ca/media

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