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Wildlife Report

PROPOSED SHIP ISLAND NATIONAL MONUMENT, MISSISSIPPI

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Introduction

Ship Island, Mississippi, has been proposed for inclusion in the National Park System in order to preserve Fort Massachusetts and to depict a long series of historical events which occurred on this island. The Advisory Board on National Parks, Historic Sites, Buildings, and Monuments has approved this island for inclusion in the National Park System. Recommendation made by the Director January 7, 1938, that the island be established as a national monument, was approved by Acting Secretary Chapman on January 13, 1938. As Dr. Bumpus had recommended a wildlife investigation, the island was visited April 21 - 22, 1938, in company with Assistant Wildlife Technician D. B. Beard.

General Description

Ship Island is one of the Gulf Coast barrier islands separated from the mainland by Mississippi Sound. It lies 12 miles south of Biloxi, Mississippi. The island is about 7 1/2 miles long and 1/4 to 3/4 miles wide, averaging slightly over 1/4 mile in width. The narrow central portion of the island, about 3 miles in length, consists of low sand flats which are covered with water at the highest tides. West of these flats, and lying south of the lighthouse station, is a brackish marsh about 1 1/2 miles in length. This marsh is connected with the sea by a small creek and a drainage ditch.

Dominant plants are species of rush (Juncus and Scirpus). The western end of the island is a low sand flat about 1/2 mile in length. Vegetation of the quarantine station area and vicinity consists of live oaks (Q. myrtifolia and scrub oak) and some sweet myrtle and saw palmetto. There is also a small marsh which drains into the lagoon separating the quarantine station tract from an open forest of slash pine (P. Elliottii). Associated with the slash pine are scrub oak, sweet myrtle, saw palmetto and some prickly pear. Much of this pine woods area is marshy in nature.

Along the gulf side of the island is a series of small low-lying dunes, not more than 15 or 20 feet in height, covered with a few sweet myrtles and sea oats.

Fauna

Bird life of the area is rather limited, both in species and numbers, when compared with other barrier islands lying to the east and west. Summer song bird life is restricted to some 8 species which inhabit the open pine forest. Several pairs of ospreys nest in this woods and on the flats and dunes a few pairs of Cuban snowy plover and small colonies of least terns manage to exist. Colonies of barn swallows which nest within Fort Massachusetts and at the quarantine station represent the only breeding birds of this species found in Mississippi.

Shore bird migration is rather spectacular and the following species were observed in large numbers: Black-bellied, snowy, piping, semi-palmated and Wilson's plovers; semi-palmated, least, red-backed and spotted sandpipers; willet and dowitcher.

While shore birds may be observed throughout the year, migration of song birds is influenced to a great extent by climatic conditions. Many of our smaller birds visit the island in migration only in bad weather. We were interested to observe 4 species of warblers and a Baltimore oriole resting among the weeds on top of the fort. A number of migratory birds were observed in the vicinity of the quarantine station and in the woods nearby. For summer resident bird life the reader is referred to T. D. Burleigh's memorandum for Dr. Bell (copy attached). To this we added the mockingbird which was found feeding young at the quarantine station. Other species observed in the lagoon and adjacent waters included loons, red-breasted merganser, scaup, royal and gull-billed tern, and herring, ring-billed and laughing gulls.

Few mammals are found on the island. Red foxes were introduced some years ago and we saw one in the pine woods at the eastern end of the island. No raccoons are present. Evidence of cottontails and a mouse (Peromyscus) was seen. The only reptiles observed were a garter snake and a few chameleons. Green snakes have been seen and moccasins are reported in the marshlands. The amphibians are represented by a toad and a tree frog, both of which are common. A few loggerhead turtles, visit the island in May, laying their eggs in the sand along the beach.

The island is popular with sport fishermen who fish from the boat dock near the fort, from boats in shallow water adjacent to the island, or engage in surf-casting. There is also considerable commercial fishing in the vicinity. Species caught for sport include the flounder, sea bass, red snapper, blue fish, grouper, sheephead and Spanish mackerel.

Recreational Use

The island is a popular resort, particularly in the summer time. Thirty-five thousand persons visited the fort and patronized the American Legion restaurant last year. Swimming is popular as good sandy beaches are present. At times swimming is rendered disagreeable and hazardous because of hordes of Portuguese men-of-war which drift into the beaches. We are informed that these are sometimes abundant in winter. There is also a mosquito nuisance as these insects breed in the various marshes of the island. I am informed that waterfowl hunting is a popular sport on Ship Island during the hunting season and, of course, sport fishing is popular.

Conclusion

The island is a rather mediocre wildlife area when compared with adjacent better-wooded and less modified barrier islands. However, its value, particularly as a plover and tern nesting area, could easily be increased if protection were offered by the National Park

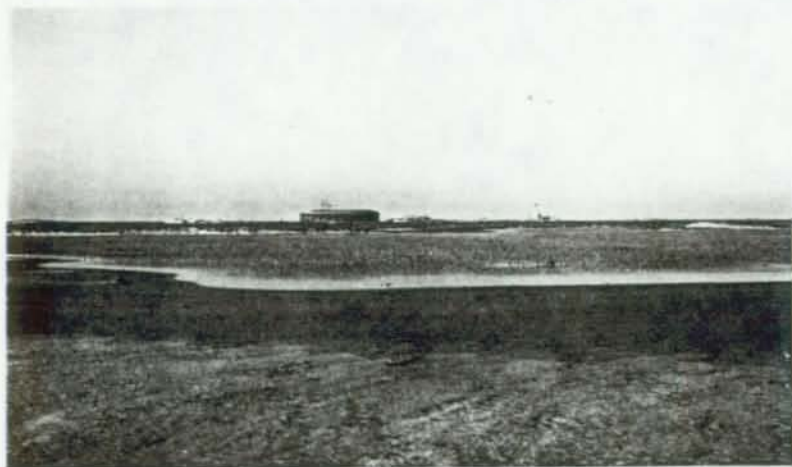
Service. Black skimmers and royal terns formerly nested in numbers but have left since cattle and hogs were released on the island. There are now approximately 60 head of cattle ranging near the fort and in the pine woods east of the quarantine station. Hogs are present near the American Legion concession and at the eastern end of the island. Some of these have become wild. Their rooting along the shores and in the dunes was noticed frequently and they no doubt destroy a large number of tern and plover eggs and young. Abolition of domestic stock and also the prohibition of hunting would greatly benefit wildlife interests.

With the increased development of beach areas along the gulf coast and the development of islands parallel to the coast, it is becoming increasingly difficult for certain of our sea and shore birds to find available, suitable, protected nesting sites. Any protection that can be given which will insure preservation of these species is therefore highly desirable. The situation at Ship Island does not seem particularly alarming, however, as there are a number of State and Federal refuges in the vicinity which provide excellent nesting and resting habitats for these species. Just west of the island is Cat Island, a State wildlife refuge. East of the island lies Petit Bois Island, a Federal bird reservation bi-sectioned by the Mississippi-Alabama State line. Ten miles southeast of Ship Island is the Chandeleur Island group, recently acquired by the Biological Survey as an addition to the Breton Island Bird Reservation. The

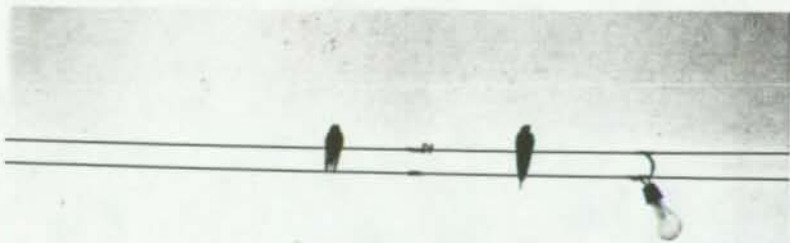
latter group is an important nesting ground for royal terns.

Neither existing nor potential wildlife values of the island would appear to warrant establishment of the area as a national monument on that basis alone.


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Tide flats southwest of Fort Massachusetts
favorite feeding grounds for sandpipers and plover



A pair of barn swallows - part
of the colony nesting in the fort



Slash pine and scrub oak forest at east end
of island — note the old osprey nest.



Part of an old wreck on the low sand flats
near the middle of the island.