Nova Scotia Nature Trust Undertakes Ecological Restoration at Hemeons Head

September 28, 2017 [Hemeons Head, NS] – The Nova Scotia Nature Trust is undertaking an ecological restoration project on the Hemeons Head Conservation Lands in Shelburne County. This protected area provides critical habitat for migratory shorebirds and a number of at-risk species, along with a variety of recreational opportunities and beautiful shoreline vistas.

The Hemeons Head Conservation Lands encompass the 170 acre Black Point Beach, protected in 2013 with a conservation easement in partnership with Acadia University, as well as the adjacent 150 acre Matthews Lake. This incredibly important site protects three kilometers of uninterrupted sand and cobble beach, sand dunes, coastal headland, tidal marshes, sandflats and mudflats, an extensive lagoon, freshwater wetland, bogs, barrens and coastal forest. They support a rich diversity of plants and wildlife.

View of the cobbled beach at Hemeons and saltmarsh. Photo: Kas Stone Photographic Art

Black Point Beach is found just west of the headland that gives Hemeons its name. Its cobble beach provides a natural barrier for the adjacent expansive saltmarsh which is protected from wave action. The area is part of an internationally designated Important Bird Area (IBA), and is a known as a migratory bird flyway that provides critical nesting and breeding habitat for shorebirds and wetland birds, some of which are rare and at-risk, including Piping Plover, Harlequin Duck, Roseate Tern, Baird's Sandpiper and Red Knot. The area also provides important habitat for other species such as Monarch butterflies, which were recently listed as endangered in Nova Scotia.

Baird's Sandpiper spotted at Hemeon's Head during the August Beach Cleanup and Bird Hike. Photo by Keith Lowe

The careful management and stewardship of the Hemeons Head Conservation Lands is very important because of the unique wildlife and plants that are found there. Many of these species have only a handful of remaining suitable habitats left in the province. During routine stewardship of this site, the Nature Trust identified a number of potential threats to its native species. In order to ensure the natural environment is not at risk the Nature Trust is developing a comprehensive management plan for the site, and part of this involves specific restoration actions to address disturbed habitats.

The first phase of this management planning and habitat restoration work began this summer with open houses in the community to gather information about current uses,

vision for the lands in the future, and potential solutions to some of the existing threats to the site's natural values.

The community, Nature Trust staff and volunteers have initiated hands-on habitat restoration, research and conservation efforts. Last month volunteers helped to gather over 400 pieces of garbage from the beach, garbage which poses risks to wildlife. Hemeons Head is prone to intense storm activity and strong wave action, which frequently causes marine debris to wash up on the beach. This waste, which is largely plastic-based, can be ingested by marine and shore life, including species important for human consumption. Its presence can also attract predators to nesting bird sites.

The restoration work continues on Saturday with another habitat restoration activity. Volunteers will be participating in an experimental restoration project for an introduced species (Beach Rose), a first for the Nature Trust.

Introduced Beach Rose along Hemeon's Head beach.

The Japanese Beach Rose was likely introduced to Nova Scotia in the late 1800s by garden enthusiasts and naturalists visiting from Europe. The rose has become invasive in shoreline habitats elsewhere in North America, but the unique environment at Hemeons, combined with little research to date on the impact of this rose in Nova Scotia, makes its invasion potential unclear. The Nature Trust will conduct regular monitoring and an experimental removal of this species on Black Point Beach to determine whether the species is likely to invade the natural beach ecosystem and to test a potential removal strategy if it is found that the rose poses a risk. The information gathered will then help to inform future management planning for the area and other conservation lands across the province

Another aspect of protecting the natural values of Hemeons Head is managing use and enjoyment of the site. It is a popular spot for recreation and is enjoyed by both locals and visitors to Shelburne County. Existing recreational uses include hiking, bird watching, all-terrain vehicle use, fishing, and clam-digging. Expanding all-terrain vehicle trails are of particular concern at Hemeons for the potential they have to degrade wetlands and coastal barrens. All-terrain vehicles cause disturbance and trampling of fragile native plants that can take many years to restore. They can also disturb birds that are nesting or foraging, which causes them to expend valuable energy needed for migration and raising their young.

The Nature Trust hopes to better understand the scope of all these potential impacts in order to plan for the long-term management of the valuable conservation features at the Hemeons Head Conservation Lands. A major part of this process is engagement with the community and other key interest groups.

Rebecca Parker, the Nature Trust's Stewardship Assistant notes, "Hemeons Head is cherished by local users, and the Nature Trust relies on them to help provide valuable monitoring and restoration information. This year we held two open houses in the local community which helped us to understand

from residents how they currently use the area and what they would like to do in the future. This information is vital to help inform our management strategies going forward."

On September 30th (from 10am-3pm at Black Point Beach), volunteers are invited to participate in the experimental restoration program by removing a section of the Beach Rose. Following the removal, volunteers are invited to take part in a guided interpretive hike by an expert birder. Participants will learn how to identify the birds commonly found in the Hemeons Head area and learn about potential threats to their habitat. The Nature Trust plans to use data collected during the hike to inform future management plans for the area. For further information and to register, please contact the Nature Trust (902)-425-5263 or events@nsnt.ca.

The Nature Trust is continuing to seek volunteers to help with future restoration activities, and to serve as ongoing Property Guardians to monitor Hemeons Head. Researchers and educators who may be interested in this project and potential collaboration or participation are encouraged to contact Rebecca Parker (rebecca@nsnt.ca).

The Nature Trust would like to recognize the support from the Government of Canada's Environmental Damages Fund to complete this conservation work.