

**Testimony for the Committee on Waterfronts  
of the New York City Council  
Re: Accessing Other Islands  
October 19, 2004**

My name is E. J. McAdams and I am the Executive Director of New York City Audubon. With over 10,000 members throughout the five boroughs, New York City Audubon is the City's leading environmental organization for conserving and protecting birds and bird habitat.

Many of the islands under discussion today (including Goose and North & South Brother Islands in the Bronx; U Thant in Manhattan; Hoffman and Swinburne Islands in Staten Island; and Canarsie Pol in Brooklyn) are major breeding grounds for colonial wading birds. Other islands, like Prall's, Shooters and Isle of Meadows in the Arthur Kill/Kill van Kull off Staten Island, were once large colonies that were recently abandoned but will likely be re-colonized. Because of these islands' importance to the region's breeding populations of Great and Snowy Egrets, Black-crowned and Yellow-crowned Night-herons, and Glossy Ibis, New York City Audubon **strongly opposes access to the islands during the breeding season, i.e., from March 1 – August 31 every year.**

For the last twenty years, NYC Audubon's Harbor Herons Project has surveyed nest abundance on the islands around New York Harbor. One of the longest studies of its kind, the scientific research from this project is continually cited in scientific papers, conservation plans, and other proposals. The project has literally changed the status of the islands in the City. Now, all but one of the previously unprotected islands are under the protection of a public parks agency. (Most recently, Goose Island was transferred from DCAS to Parks because of the work of this Waterfronts Committee and the Parks Committee.) In addition, most of the islands are designated Important Bird Areas in New York State. This year, over 1700 pairs of wading birds nested on these islands (see attached report), which constitutes a third of the northeast breeding population.

There are two reasons why the birds nest on these islands: 1) their traditional coastal breeding grounds have been degraded by human development and 2) the City's uninhabited islands offer ideal nesting habitat. **More and more, these islands are a last refuge.** Opening these islands to physical human access from March to August may cause, directly or indirectly, the abandonment of the islands by the birds.

However, NYC Audubon not only supports, but works to increase, "non-physical access" to these islands. **We want New Yorkers to see these amazing ambassadors of the bird world here in our City.** To connect residents of the five boroughs with the herons, we have started a shore monitoring program and an education program. Classes of schoolchildren and the general public went on free NY Water Taxi rides that circled U Thant and the Brother Islands to view the colonies. Another "non-physical access" project for which we are actively seeking funding is a web-cam set up so schoolchildren and New Yorkers can watch the herons from their computer. These kinds of "access" do not disturb the nesting herons and thus assure the success of the colony.

Outside of the breeding season, NYC Audubon is willing to discuss with the gathered agencies and non-profits the different ways to have physical access to the islands. But it is important that access be limited and thoughtful because any human access on the islands has the potential to change the dynamics of the island.

NYC Audubon is in a difficult position because there is nothing we would rather do than give New Yorkers access to these incredible islands. Nevertheless, the colonial wading birds are likely to abandon these islands unless certain limits are imposed. In this case, there should be no physical access to the Harbor Heron Islands during the breeding season.

On behalf of NYC Audubon, I thank you for this opportunity to offer comments.