

## Habitat preservation trumps development on small Casco Bay island

By Brendan Twist, The Forecaster  
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Ministerial Island

CHEBEAGUE ISLAND, Maine — In the 72 years since the Rutter family purchased Ministerial Island, dozens of parties have inquired about purchasing the 17-acre property in hopes of building vacation homes and spurring other development.

Now they can stop asking.

The island's owners on Dec. 12 donated a conservation easement to the Chebeague and Cumberland Land Trust that prohibits any development of the land beyond its current infrastructure, which consists of a shack and a shed.

“None of the family members want to see it developed, because we think it's our obligation to protect wildlife habitats in Casco Bay and the state of Maine, and we have the opportunity to do it because we own the island,” said Hannah Rutter Martin, one of three Rutter family members who comprise the Ministerial Island Trust, which inherited the land in 1998.



“Now you can't build or subdivide. You can't have gravel pits or airports or condominiums. It's a prime habitat for wildlife and seabirds,” she said.

Ministerial Island, which is part of the town of Chebeague Island and sits next to Eagle Island, was designated as a critical wildlife habitat by the state in 1978. It serves as a nesting place for common eider ducks, black-backed gulls and herring gulls and is a stop-over spot for a variety of migratory birds.

The conservation easement is designed to protect the island's wildlife, and its scenic beauty, from the development that has sprung up in recent years on many of Casco Bay's islands, most notably Hope Island, said Penny Asherman, president of the Chebeague and Cumberland Land Trust.

“There's a huge mansion, there's a barn, there's a church, there's fences,” Asherman said of Hope Island, which is owned by John and Phyllis Cacoulidis. “He has violated shoreland zoning laws and put up unattractive buildings. So people have been very upset about that.”

The conservation easement ensures an added layer of protection and allows for legal action. If, for example, future owners of Ministerial Island were to violate its terms, “We would have the legal right to go to court,” Asherman said. “We have enforceability.”

The Casco Bay Estuary Partnership donated \$8,500 to cover transaction and stewardship costs for the easement. The Chebeague and Cumberland Land Trust will be responsible for monitoring the island on an annual basis for compliance, as well as invasive species and other threats to wildlife.

Ministerial Island will remain private, but there may be opportunities for ecologists to visit the island and perform research, Asherman said.

The easement was a long time coming for the Rutters. They approached a larger land trust about a donation in the 1990s, but when that went nowhere, the idea languished until Hannah Rutter Martin began pursuing it again early this year.

This month's signing was an emotional moment for Martin and her family.

"My father was an extensive farmer in New Hampshire, and we grew up on a farm, loving the land," she said. "Ministerial Island was just a different type of land. It has the seashore, the wildlife, and none of us want to see it change."