

After the storm: Outer beach access limited



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Orleans -

Time passes and the wounds of last week's nor'easter are healing, with a little help.

The beach access road running south from the Nauset Beach parking lot in Orleans is expected to reopen Monday. Nauset

Spit (for Orleans residents only) opens today.

"We've been pumping water on the back trails the past three days," Orleans Parks and Beaches Superintendent Paul Fulcher said. "It's pretty dry from the parking lot to the Pochet washover. On trail one we had 5 feet of water. We're down to 3 feet now. We're getting everything protected for the birds (piping plovers)."

The new storm-created washovers are ideal piping plover habitat. The birds nest in open sand. Fulcher saw a pair of plovers in one of the three to four smaller washovers south of Pochet.

"We'll put up symbolic fencing around the nesting habitat," Fulcher noted and ORVs will drive around them. But farther down the beach, access will remain limited.

"Once it's opened up, there will be some public access but the Chatham police want to close access to North Village except for camp owners," Chatham Coastal Resources Director Ted Keon explained.

That is up to Exit 7 – in camp parlance.

South of North Village the new inlet punched through the barrier beach into Pleasant Bay by the storm has isolated about a dozen cottages in South Village and cut off the bottom three miles of beach. The breach is giving no indication of its intention.

"It may be widening or deepening but it doesn't appear to be as of yesterday (Tuesday)," Keon said. "We were not observing any infilling. There is still water flowing out at low tide, which is something we don't want to see, so the fact that there is a volume of water flowing there is concerning."

Keon discussed the break and showed aerial photos to various coastal experts.

"Everyone I've showed it to has concluded that it looks like a temporary thing but when you see it up close and see the water flowing, you pause at that conclusion," he said.

Fulcher also went out on Tuesday.

"I hadn't been out there for three days and it seemed like the current was a little stronger going out," he remarked. "We've taken some vertical aerial photos and there seemed to be no channeling effect."

Chatham ownership a 'hodgepodge'

Unlike in Orleans, where the town owns all the land, including that upon which beach cottages sit, the ownership in Chatham is a hodgepodge. Some people own both the cottage and the land. Cape Cod National Seashore owns land with cottages, some of which it leases back to the old owners. The town itself also owns beachfront without any cottages.

None of these homes are threatened by the break but they'll need a boat to reach them until the break fills in.

Anyone strolling Nauset Beach this week also noticed extensive overwashing north of the parking lot toward Nauset Heights. That's more potential plover habitat.

At the north end of the parking lot, the trail to the beach lost its brand new staircase. The storm scoured the beach and unveiled some relics of the past – bits of salt marsh, pilings and asphalt.

"Probably what's out there is from what used to be out there in the '30s, what they called Sand City,"

Fulcher said. "Prior to the '38 and '34 storms there used to be a lot of houses right along the beach. That will fill back in. Mother Nature moves a lot of sand. Probably in two weeks it will look more like summer."

He is concerned ORV permit sales may dip since there is less beach available to the south. On peak

days, 400 vehicles may head out. Last year, the town collected \$420,465 in permits, down from \$508,395 in 2005. Beach access was closed for 32 days due to nesting plovers in 2006.

Orleans residents used 2,031 of those permits, Chatham residents 713, at \$40 apiece. Nonresidents (1,714) paid \$180 for over sand access and the town sold 162 self-contained vehicle permits for \$250. So they're working hard to reopen access. Next year's permits take effect May 3.

"I would say, in the 33 years I've been here, I would rank this storm about No. 6," Fulcher reflected. "The no name storm in '91 was worse. And the storm of '87 that created the Chatham break, and the '78 storm did a lot of damage as well."

Damage from the '87 storm was due to erosion on the mainland shore of Pleasant Bay, after the break opposite Chatham Light opened. Nine houses fell into the sea.

"The concern would be in relation to what followed the break in '87, high energy waves coming straight through, severe erosion. Areas that are low lying could have additional flooding," Keon said.

Minister's Point is opposite the new break. The 1987 break also altered tidal flow in the bay, and led to shoaling and the attachment of South Beach to the mainland just south of the Coast Guard Station.

Nauset Beach erosion

The erosion caused by the nor'easter is hardly an isolated event. It's life as usual for the shoreline.

Tuesday night at Snow Library in Orleans the Orleans Citizens Forum hosted a presentation on past and future erosion of Nauset Beach based on a report prepared by the Woods Hole Group for the town of Orleans last January.

Leslie Fields of the group skimmed over the results for the good-sized audience. Nauset Beach draws 1.3 million visitors a year and adds about \$1.1 million into the town coffers so the town doesn't want to lose it.

The public beach area eroded at an average of 3.7 feet a year from 1938 to 1996. That rate has since increased and the 70-year average is up to 4.5 feet a year. At Pochet it's 5.9 feet per year. Opposite Nauset Heights, where prior to 1950 the Nauset Marsh inlet existed, erosion has been 9.8 feet per year. Fields said both Nauset Heights and Pochet could possibly breach creating a new islet to either Nauset Marsh or Pleasant Bay but neither was likely to remain open.

The report projected 30 more feet of dune erosion by 2017, (prior to the last storm).

"By 2025 it will be creeping up to the existing buildings and 30 years from now the buildings will be gone into the water," Fields said.

She recommended a "phased retreat" over 15 to 20 years and property acquisition so the town could have a new parking lot. The north corner of the parking lot is projected to be in the sea in 30 years. The passed retreat would include dune restoration, bringing the elevation up, sand fencing and beach grass planting along with moving the buildings.

There is a \$145,000 item on the town warrant for erosion control (mostly adding sand) but Fred Turner of the finance committee isn't in favor of it.

"Before the last storm the feeling on our committee was that the sea is a very powerful instrument. It brings in sand and also takes it away and we've seen we haven't stopped it," he declared. "Eventually the sea is going to win. My feeling is if it is going to take it away, we don't need to spend \$145,000 and if it's going to bring it in, we don't have to spend \$145,000. When we had this storm this past week, I said, from my point of view, there goes \$145,000 worth of sand."

"That's just our simple approach to it," he concluded.

"It's a slow process to minimize flooding in the north end of the parking lot. Just to slow the rate of erosion in this area," Fields countered.

The selectmen do favor it and Turner seemed more receptive to planting beach grass and installing sand fences.

"We believe that the addition of various revenue reduces taxes to that extent making an investment to stabilize the dunes is a positive to the bottom line," Selectman John Hinckley said.