Atlantic Marine Bird Cooperative
Community Science and Marine Bird Health Working Group

Breakout Session Records

TIME: 12:45 - 2:15 PM, Tuesday, March 3, 2026
CHAIR: Liam Taylor, Stephanie Avery-Gomm

Total Attendance: 47

See other tabs for attendance, transcript, and public chat.

All comments are paraphrased.

Notes compiled by semi automated analysis of recording and transcript.

Introduction

- Liam Taylor - Introductions, brief overview of breakout session agenda
- Form to join WG is available here

Annual Report on Initiatives (20 min)

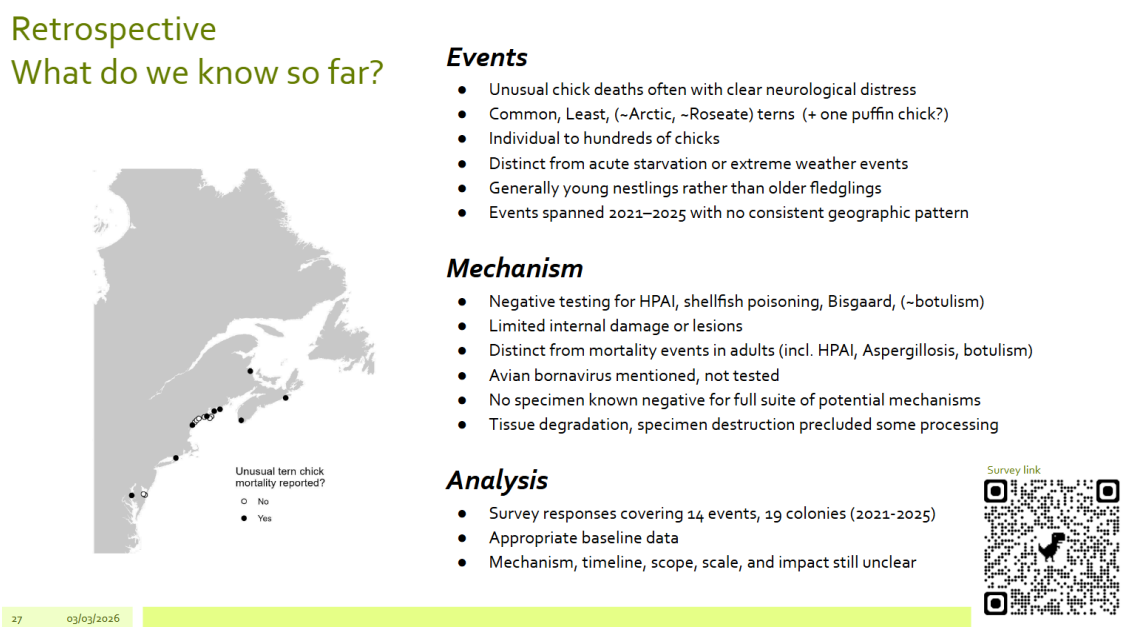
- Annual report document is available here
- *Complete initiatives*
  - iNaturalist Beached Bird Project
- *Ongoing initiatives*
  - HPAI Response Resources (requires support to complete)
    - **KEY TAKEAWAY: Final spot-check underway and needs to be posted to AMBC website.**
    - Trevor Thompson: Bevy of resources updated over the last six months. The latest version is available and time-stamped on the library document now. Final supported needed is closing spot-check and connecting Drive resources with AMBC website.
    - Diann Prosser: My lab is happy to help test/spotcheck the HPAI response resources site if someone else hasn't volunteered.
    - Caleb Speigel: We would have to figure out what format is most user-friendly for serving to the website (embedded files? Linked sheets?). After that, should be fairly easy to post to site.
    - Stephanie Avery-Gomm: Recommends close editing of Google Drive, leaving as View only, and then directly straight to the Drive with a blurb on the website.
    - Caleb Speigel: If there is capacity, also potential to link this to a 'news' alert post to refresh that part of the page.
  - Mortality Reporting Listserv
    - **KEY TAKEAWAY: List now serves globally and beyond seabirds, initiative stable and complete.**
    - Stephanie Avery-Gomm: This initiative in collaboration with Wendy Puryear and Johanna Harvey. After meeting at the International Avian Influenza Symposium in St. John's, there was a lot of interest in expanding the scope of the initial seabird HPAI mortality listserv. The updated listserv now serves HPAI mortality globally and beyond birds (including e.g., mammals). The seabird list is closed at the end of March and all users have been transferred automatically. This initiative is now complete / stable / closed.
- *On hold (pending volunteers)*

- Beached Bird Survey Program
  - **KEY TAKEAWAY: Rekindling interest by reconnecting with COASST and interesting parties in the working group.**
  - Caleb Speigel: Reintroduction to topic, initiated as idea to expand COASST program from west-coast beached bird surveys to a program in the east coast. Hosting data through COASST would give a more stable and accessible architecture than SEANET, which lacks an active data manager and takes only a small number of new records. When initiative was moving forward, initial steps was to identify a test location (e.g., Massachusetts) and there was a lot of initial interset. Recent funding and administrative changes have derailed things. But interest from additional parties could rekindle. Might also be possible to engage state partners (referencing the transflyway Natl Waterbird Coordinator efforts).
  - Key next steps: (1) Reconnecting with COASST, (2) Sharing visioning/scoping document with potential partners who would be interested in championing this initiative.
  - Interest noted from Mark Pokras, Ruth Boettcher, Eileen McGourty
- Avian Carcass & Sample Swap
  - **KEY TAKEAWAY: No lead for this specific initiative, but Mark Pokras pursuing related efforts specific to loons that will provide lessons that may be ported to broader seabird sampling.**
  - Stephanie Avery-Gomm: Original initiative lead no longer has bandwidth, this would need another person coordinating to push forward. An initial survey and preliminary draft spreadsheet were conducted but not yet available on our shared Drive.
  - Mark Pokras: Focus is on loon sampling, but small grant obtained to support pulling together protocols for collection, handling, retention. Can serve as test for organizing broader seabird collections. Major question for everyone working with this birds is: “what’s the need?” to fill key missing pieces, and what info do folks around have access to?
  - Caleb Spiegel: Available to share information regarding permitting.
- Seabird Rescue Coordination and Communication
  - Not discussed.

Unusual Tern Chick Mortality Initiative (50 min)

- Liam Taylor shared summary of the observed mortality events since 2023 (neurological symptoms, early chick deaths, no consistent infectious cause). At the time of meeting, survey info from 19 colonies in the AMBC region, covering 14 years where unusual chick mortality events occurred. See summary slide below.
- **Group determined goals for two separate initiatives:**
  - **Backwards-looking** (coordinated by Liam Taylor, l.taylor@bowdoin.edu)
    - Synthesize available data on tern chick mortality within the AMBC region to better understand spatial and temporal patterns and evaluate potential mechanisms driving these events.
  - **Forwards-looking** (coordinated by Rob Ronconi, Robert.Ronconi@ec.gc.ca)
    - Establish an information network and share best practices for documenting, sampling, and responding to future mortality events.
    - Direct interest noted from: Mark Pokras, Megan Jones, Laura Bourque, Dave McRuer, Johanna Harvey, Diann Prosser, Jolene Giacinti, Margaret Rubega, Wendy Puryear, Jeffery Sullivan, Liam Taylor
    - Coordinated by Rob, subgroup will meet prior to 18 March WG meeting and present initial steps then.

- **Resources**
  - Link to December meeting notes here
  - Link to survey for providing info on mortality events here
  - Initial survey summary:



- **Additional summarized points from discussion (see transcript)**:
  - Mark Pokras: Suggests standardized field protocols and triage guidelines to improve sample quality. Stresses providing researchers with better preservation methods and necessary permits to capture high-quality data during mortality events.
  - Linda Welch: Stresses preparation to be better organized for 2026 events. Analyzing 2025 colony data from fenced productivity plots could help pinpoint mortality timing and chick age. Reviewing last-recorded weights and growth rates from e.g., Ship Island, Petit Manan, and Matinicus Rock could better document the dynamics of previous die-offs.
  - Robert Ronconi: Proposes analyzing patterns in age, size, and timing across colonies to improve predictability for upcoming field seasons. Notes that even fresh samples from euthanized chicks to CWHC (essentially best-practices samples) have yielded inconclusive "mixed bag" results.
  - Margaret Rubega: Emphasizes that most mortality at Great Gull Island involves very young chicks. Notes logistical and legal constraints for non-agency researchers, including the need for specific euthanasia permits and guidance on whether to freeze or chemically preserve samples for different lab types.
  - Dave McRuer: Stresses defining specific clinical criteria and triage guidelines before the field season to identify which chicks should be prioritized for euthanasia or monitoring. Offers to collaborate on drafting unified North American sampling protocols to ensure consistent data collection across international borders, even in cases with no significant findings.
  - Mark Pokras: Mark Pokras Emphasizes that protocols must account for varying field site capabilities (e.g., cold chain). Maximizing data from single specimens by dividing tissues between multiple preservatives.
  - Jeffery Sullivan: Advocates for developing standardized sampling protocols to guide field efforts based on site-specific capacity. Consolidating laboratory analysis would empower monitoring.

- Jolene Giacinti: Suggests narrowing research targets by building on existing necropsy findings—specifically ruling out causes linked to the elevated sodium levels identified in previous samples. Proposes correlating die-off events with environmental data (e.g., temperature) as "low-hanging fruit" to identify potential climate-driven patterns. Noted similar tern mortality events in Israel (https://doi.org/10.1093/ornithapp/duaf073). Will follow-up to learn more about those Israel events.
- Robert Ronconi: Clarifies that negative paralytic shellfish poisoning (PSP) tests were based on regional environmental monitoring of shellfish, not direct bird or prey sampling.
- Ruth Boettcher: Reports symptomatic common terns and black skimmers with bill lesions at an industrial barge project site in Virginia, raising questions about whether artificial substrates and containment influence mortality patterns.
- Sarah Karpanty: Confirms that despite rapid necropsy collection results remain inconclusive, showing only minor bacterial levels that do not fully explain the mortality.
- Diann Prosser: Confirms the Chesapeake Bay team's commitment to bridge the gap between field collections and pathology, with Johanna Harvey leading their involvement. Reports anecdotal observations of chicks exhibiting neurological signs similar to those seen in the larger mortality events. Currently compiling a comprehensive status report on HPAI in terns across the region.

Open Floor: New Initiatives or Working Group activities

- None raised or implied (though limited time noted)