

*Wildlife managers increasingly face this decision:  
whether to slaughter one species in order to save another*

## WEEDING THE GARDEN

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**F**OUR MEN ADVANCED IN A RAGGED LINE ACROSS Green Island, a low, treeless bit of windswept land emerging from the Gulf of Maine. Eyes to the ground, the men called out to a fifth who trailed behind them, taking notes. Gulls floated lazily just overhead, while waves of sibilant chatter rose from a raft of eider ducks sheltered in the lee of the island, waiting for the men to depart. The rocks and grassy hummocks were thick with nests, and the searchers stepped gingerly.

"Eider nest. Eider nest."

"Yup."

"Gull nest."

"Yup."

"Eider nest."

"Gull nest."

"Yup."

"Eider nest. Eider flush."

A female eider leaped into the air and shot low over a tangled ridge to join the waiting raft. Four olive-drab eggs snuggled in a bowl of down that she had plucked from her own breast. Passing these nests, the men plucked at the down themselves in a token gesture at covering the unprotected eggs.

"Two eider nests."



"Gull nest."

"Gull nest."

The gull nests also held eggs—the larger eggs of great black-backed gulls and the slightly smaller eggs of herring gulls, both splotched with brown. Into each gull nest surgical-gloved hands deposited two or three "baits"—or little sandwiches made of margarine spread between cubes of bread.

"One eider nest."

"Gull nest. Wait—make that two gull nests."

Mixed into the margarine was a powdery white substance that Thomas Goettel, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist in charge of the operation, had carefully measured out from a canister the day before. The label on the canister read RESTRICTED USE PESTICIDE. 1339 GULL TOXICANT 98% CONCENTRATE. DANGER—POISON. The label went on to describe human-health hazards, proper methods of application, and the toxicant's effect on gulls, causing death from kidney failure within twenty-four to forty-eight hours. It was Goettel's hope that the gulls flying overhead would return to their nests, eat the poisoned bait, and quietly keel over and die.

"You know, I didn't join Fish and Wildlife to kill gulls," Goettel says. He just wanted to save terns.

## Striking Back

**H**ERRING GULLS AND GREAT BLACK-BACKED gulls are notorious predators of the eggs and young of terns and other seabirds, and they easily outcompete the smaller and less aggressive terns for island nesting sites. Petit Manan Island, just half a mile south of Green Island and connected to it by a cobble beach at low tide, was historically one of the most important tern colonies in Maine. Petit Manan's flat terrain and low vegetation provided abundant nesting sites for terns, and the island's lighthouse keepers, perennially at war with the pestiferous gulls, killed any that tried to nest there. But when the Coast Guard automated Petit Manan Light, in 1972, and the last lighthouse keeper departed, the gulls took over and chased out the terns. Within a decade the Petit Manan tern colony had been wiped out.

In 1984 the Fish and Wildlife Service struck back. That spring Goettel



