

If we build it,

they will come



RICARDO ZAMBRANO

A seabird success story

By Dani Moschella

After four hurricanes left a tiny island off the coast of Key West submerged in the Atlantic in 2005, FWC biologists studying the roseate tern knew there would be trouble for the threatened seabird. So, the scientists hatched a plan.

Pelican Shoal, once covered in coral rubble and sand, had been the perfect habitat for the hundreds of roseate terns that migrated there each summer. The quarter-acre island was one of only two places in Florida where the birds could lay their eggs. FWC biologists watched closely each summer as the birds returned to Pelican Shoal from South America, laid their eggs and raised their chicks for about a month before flying south again.

Hurricanes Dennis, Katrina, Rita and Wilma left Pelican Shoal 1 to 2 feet underwater. FWC biologists knew that when the colony of roseate terns returned to the site, about 5 miles south of Boca Chica Naval Air Station, in summer 2006, the seabirds wouldn't be able to find suitable habitat and possibly wouldn't be able to breed.

Desperate for a solution, FWC biologists Ricardo Zambrano and Sharyn Hood decided to try "social attraction" techniques such as using decoys and recorded bird calls to attract the returning roseate terns to another possible habitat – the Dry Tortugas National Park. The area also was impacted by the hurricanes, which cleared

vegetation, replacing it with sand and coral rubble, creating an ideal spot for roseate terns.

But there was one glitch.

“Commercial decoys are pretty expensive,” Zambrano said.

So he went to his wife, Elvia, a detailer at K & T Stoneworks in West Palm Beach, for help. Her colleague, Steve Riner, developed a mold of a roseate tern, Zambrano and Hood supplied the plastic material to pour into the mold, and just like that, he created 40 roseate tern decoys. With only a few days to get the decoys to the park, the biologists relied on family and friends to help paint the small, plastic birds, which took about three days.

With help from National Park Service biologist Sonny Bass, Zambrano and Hood planted 40 plastic roseate tern decoys

at the park in April. Next to the decoys, they put a solar-powered compact disc player, amplifier and water-resistant speakers constantly playing a recording of roseate tern calls.

“Our hope was that the birds would mistake the decoys and bird calls for other roseate terns and stop there to nest,” Zambrano said.

They monitored the area for any signs of the returning birds. By July, Zambrano was disappointed. He thought his ruse had failed. He made a trip with Hood and Bass to retrieve the decoys and audio equipment.

“When we got there, we kept hearing roseate tern calls, but we thought it was our recordings. Then Sonny Bass noticed a white bird fly by. All of a sudden, we realized there were several

roseate terns nesting there. That discovery was the most exciting part about this whole project,” Zambrano said.

The group counted 33 roseate tern nests at the site. On July 27, they found 42 adults and 16 chicks, indicating the adult birds had stayed long enough to lay eggs and raise their chicks. Zambrano later visited the site, which is accessible only by air or water, during a rainstorm to make sure the chicks were going to thrive. Sure enough, they had grown feathers and were fending for themselves.

FWC and the National Park Service will continue placing social attraction equipment until they determine roseate terns have established themselves at the Dry Tortugas National Park permanently. **FW**



RICARDO ZAMBRANO



ELVIA ZAMBRANO



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Facing page: This year, roseate terns, attracted by decoys, nested at Dry Tortugas National Park. **Above:** The nesting site is accessible only by air or water. **Right, from top:** Steve Riner pours plastic into the tern mold he developed; Sonny Bass of the National Park Service places decoys; one of the tern decoys at the park.