



Florida's beaches are prime wildlife nesting areas

By Gary Morse



Top: A killdeer fledgling remains still in order to escape detection from predators. **Above:** Least tern eggs rest in a "nest" – a shallow depression in beach sand.

Danger lurks everywhere for Florida's nesting shorebirds and other wildlife adapted to secluded beaches. Beachfront development has altered or destroyed much of the coastline habitat where shorebirds and other critters once nested and raised new generations in relative safety.

To make matters worse, human recreational activities and shorebird nesting peak at about the same time. Imperiled species find themselves competing with humans for the narrow strips of sand along the state's barrier islands and mainland beaches, with mixed results.

That's why professional wildlife biologists and volunteers mobilize to post areas, gather data, inform the public and monitor progress of wildlife offspring. The process generally starts in April, when beach-nesting birds stake out suitable sites, followed by sea turtle nesting in May.



A pair of least terns engage in a mating ritual.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), in cooperation with other local, state and federal agencies, coordinates efforts to educate the public and protect beach-nesting wildlife during critical nesting periods. A group of volunteers from the FWC and private organizations like the Audubon Society maintain watch over nesting sites and aid educational efforts.

Beach-nesting birds often get nervous around human recreational activities like beach volleyball, kite surfing or the family pet romping after a windblown Frisbee. Frightened birds sometimes flee their nests, leaving their chicks or eggs vulnerable to a variety of hazards.

Officials protect bird colonies by posting signs, roping off affected areas and contacting local residents about temporary beach closures. Posted areas are closed to public access from the time the signs go up until Aug. 31, when the young leave their nests.

The FWC and its partners try to contact residents adjacent to the affected beachfront. Most residents and visitors support protective measures and take responsibility for keeping a watchful eye on nesting colonies.

“Shorebirds, marine turtles and their nests and eggs enjoy protection under state and federal laws. It



Many countershaded birds, such as this Wilson's plover, easily blend into their surroundings.

is, however, the public's sense of stewardship for the resource that's the real key to protecting future generations of beach-nesting wildlife,” said Nancy Douglass, regional nongame wildlife biologist for the FWC.

Disturbances by people or their pets pose serious problems for beach-nesting birds.

“It's not so much that people don't care, it's that beach-nesting birds are difficult to detect,” Douglass said.

The nests are simple, shallow depressions in the sand, and eggs are well camouflaged. People who inadvertently romp through nesting areas and fly kites, which nesting bird parents mistake for large predators, tend to cause the greatest problems. Once adult birds are frightened off the nest by people or pets, even for a short time, their young are exposed to the ravages of the summer sun. Without parent birds providing shade, it only takes a few minutes for temperatures in the nest to rise above 100 degrees, resulting in death for the chicks.



A flock of black skimmers nest close together on a beach.

Young chicks and eggs are also a favorite target of crows and gulls when parents are not immediately available to challenge hungry predators. People walking in nesting areas may inadvertently step on the well-camouflaged eggs as well.

Spring and summer on Florida's beaches are times of renewal for many of Florida's imperiled wildlife species. Tucked away among the dunes and shells of the Gulf Coast, least terns, skimmers, plovers, sea turtles and many other native species set about the age-old task of ensuring the survival of the next generation.

“We're asking those who use our state's beaches to avoid nesting areas where colonies of shorebirds are tending their eggs or young chicks. We're not asking people to stop kite-flying or enjoying the beach; we're just asking beachgoers to avoid a handful of areas close to where there are nesting birds,” Douglass said.

For more information about Florida's shorebirds, visit MyFWC.com/imperiledspecies. **FW**