

Finding Solutions: Decline of Beach-Nesting Birds



Project Team

Audubon Florida
Collier Bird
Stewards
Team OCEAN
Rookery Bay
Volunteers

Project Dates

2002 – present

Across the globe, many beach-nesting bird species are facing significant declines due to habitat loss from rapid coastal development and increased disruption of nesting activities. In Florida, the Least Tern, Black Skimmer, and Snowy Plover have been designated as Imperiled species by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) due to their declining populations and loss of habitat.

From March to September, Least Terns and Black Skimmers nest in colonies along open, sandy Gulf beaches. In contrast, Snowy Plovers and Wilson’s Plovers prefer solitary nests in nearby vegetation.

However, these birds face severe threats when disturbed, particularly by people or dogs. When disturbed, the birds are forced off their nests, leaving their eggs and chicks exposed to extreme temperatures and predators. Frequent disturbances, especially those that cause birds to flush their nests, jeopardize their survival. These beach-nesting birds rely on southwest Florida’s beaches not only for nesting but also to raise their young.



Monitoring and Protection

In collaboration with FWC, the Rookery Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve takes active steps to protect these vulnerable birds. Each nesting season, from early April to mid-August, the Reserve posts and closes off viable beach-nesting habitats within its boundaries to minimize disturbances. Staff, along with dedicated volunteers, erect signs marked “Important Nesting Sites,” connected by string and orange flagging to enclose the nesting colonies. These sites are closely

monitored throughout the nesting season. Data on the number of adults, nests, and chicks are regularly recorded and shared via the Florida Shorebird Database.

In addition, Audubon Florida volunteers serve as bird stewards on weekends throughout the summer, educating beachgoers about the nesting birds. Educational materials, such as posters and handouts, are distributed at local beach access points and visitor centers to increase public awareness.

Ongoing monitoring has shown that seasonal beach closures, combined with increased public education efforts, significantly enhance the success of beach-nesting birds in southwest Florida.

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Rookery Bay, located in southwest Florida, is recognized as one of the few remaining pristine, mangrove-forested estuaries in the U.S. As part of the National Estuarine Research Reserve System, it serves as an outdoor classroom and laboratory for students and scientists. For more information, visit www.rookerybay.org.

FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION / OFFICE OF RESILIENCE AND COASTAL PROTECTION

