

Black Skimmer colony thriving at Freeport Dow Chemical Plant  
Article by Taylor Bennett

What are Black Skimmers?

Black Skimmers are waterbirds that are found along beaches, bays, and inlets along the Texas Coast. They are identified by their black and white feathers, long wings, and their very unique black and orange bill which the top bill is shorter than the bottom bill. They get their namesake from the way they hunt which is by using their bill to skim across the water to catch small fish. They are



considered colonial nesters which mean they form large groups and nest together which provides safety from predators. They typically lay up to four eggs. Two to three chicks end up surviving and are able to fly within five weeks after hatching. Due to their unique bill they rely heavily on the parents for protection and food. Once they learn to fly they will often stay with the parents until they properly learn how to use their bill to feed themselves.

Why monitor?

In the past 40 years there has been a 70% decline in the breeding pair population. They are considered a species of greatest conservation need by Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and also by the Gulf Coast Joint Venture. They are at risk of becoming threatened or endangered due to human disturbance, loss of habitat and nesting sites, competition for resources, and disease. The biologists at Gulf Coast Bird Observatory monitor colonies along the upper coast well as at Dow Chemical Plant A located in Freeport, TX. We record the number of adults, nests, and chicks. We also band as many chicks as we can to keep track of their migration patterns and whether they return to nest.

Why are they nesting at Dow?

Turns out Dow is the perfect location and habitat for nesting Black Skimmers. The colony at Dow is one of the largest colonies along the Texas Coast and also one of the most successful. They first started nesting in an old parking lot there in 1961 and continue to nest there until this day. The parking lot is made out of finely crushed oyster shell and limestone which is what the Black Skimmers prefer to nest on. They are rarely disturbed by humans, so there is little chance

for the colony to abandon. The plant itself is located near marsh, bay, harbor, beach, and bar ditches which are their main feeding areas. The employees at Dow are extremely proud of their colony and they help maintain and protect it. They installed a fence with an electric wire around the entire lot to further prevent predators from getting into the colony. They also installed two shallow flumes which provide the skimmers with fresh water. During the non-breeding season, they herbicide the lot to keep vegetation from growing through the shell habitat that is preferred by skimmers.

Gulf Coast Bird Observatory started partnering with Dow in 2014 to monitor the colony and its productivity. The breeding season starts in early May and runs until mid-September. We along with a Dow employee survey the colony weekly until they all leave and migrate to their wintering grounds. This year has been highly successful compared to the past couple of years. The largest adult count was 1220 adults with the largest nest count of 167. 118 chicks and counting are able to fly. We also managed to band 22 chicks with the help of some folks from Dow, USFWS, and American Bird Conservancy. We would also like to thank Dow employees Willem deGroot, Ron Weeks, and Keith Wise for being our escorts for this year.

You can help us by reporting any banded skimmers that you see and contacting Sue Heath at [sheath@gcbo.org](mailto:sheath@gcbo.org) or Taylor Bennett at [tbennett@gcbo.org](mailto:tbennett@gcbo.org).

If you are a Dow employee in Freeport or Lake Jackson and are interested in learning more about the skimmers, we would love for you to contact us.