

Why Count Birds?

By Martin Hagne

You may know someone that is a bird biologist or you might have seen someone on the beach counting birds. You may know about an organization dedicated to the well-being of birds, such as the Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, that have big research projects focused on birds. But do you know why people count birds?

There are many reasons for groups to study birds in the field. Most biologists out there counting birds are doing a lot more than that during these surveys. It almost always includes gathering other data such as weather, habitat make-up or degradation, behavior, disturbance from human and wildlife, nesting success, migration paths, and other variables.

To get any idea of what is really going on in nature, one must collect long-term data. Just counting a certain bird species for a few months tells us nothing, except what was there at that moment. Collecting many years of data starts to show a trend in that species and its habitat... is it declining, holding steady, or increasing? Often studies find results that weren't even the focus of the study.

A study that was started by the GCBO to find out where American Oystercatchers wintered on the Upper Texas Coast, now in its 9th field season, has discovered some very important issues. Yes, we now know that they winter right here along our beaches and don't travel far, but more importantly we found out that their nesting "islands" are quickly disappearing. Some are islands created by dredge materials from when the Intercostal was created, others are small oyster reefs and similar.

American Oystercatchers rarely nest on mainland beaches due to human interference and wild predators. Unfortunately, their nesting islands are disappearing due to sea level rise, increase and intensity of storms, and erosion of the spoil islands. Storms are washing away eggs or chicks from reefs getting smaller and lower. If we (humans) don't build or refurbish the nest islands, oystercatchers will disappear from the Texas coast.

The somewhat crazy-looking, yet beautiful, Black Skimmer is also heading towards local extinction in Texas within 15 years unless we can give them help. Studies have found that they are highly susceptible to disturbances during nesting season. They nest on beaches, small islands in the bays, and even on oyster shell parking lots. If a boater lands their boat on a nesting island, or a truck drives down the beach, the parents will fly up, and it only takes 2 minutes for the sun to bake the eggs, or even less for gulls to swoop in and eat the eggs or chicks.

The Smith Point Hawk watch, run by the GCBO, counts every species of raptor from mid-August through November each year for fall migration when birds are heading south for their wintering grounds. Now in its 23rd year, it has an invaluable set of data showing population trends of many raptor species. One such species is the Swainson's Hawk, which showed steep decline at several hawk watch sites. Biologists started looking into why in the environment and found a chemical used to spray grasshoppers on their nesting grounds in the Northwest was killing them. Once that chemical was changed out, both in North American and South America where they winter, the Swainson's bounced back.

This is the type of information the GCBO and other likeminded organizations are able to glean from avian studies. Being a bird is a tough life. They need all the help they can get and their health indicates

the health of nature. A healthy nature is needed for our own health, so let's do what we can to help birds!