

Wilson's Plover Population Thriving Amidst a Global Pandemic
Article by Taylor Bennett



Mother Wilson's Plover hiding chicks. Photo by Morgan Barnes.

I hope this article finds you safe and well. Despite the pandemic, the beach nesting bird season is in full swing for the Wilson's Plover.

The Wilson's Plover is a shorebird that breeds along the Texas coast on beaches. Though it is not federally protected, it is certainly a species that we should be concerned about due to its population decline. The Wilson's Plover is considered threatened and endangered in some parts of the country, but because the majority of the population nests in Texas, it

is not protected by the state here.

Due to its vulnerability to climate change, disturbance, and habitat loss, the Wilson's Plover is a species of high concern. One of the few organizations that are helping to protect and monitor this species is Gulf Coast Bird Observatory. GCBO monitors two Texas beaches, Bryan Beach and Matagorda Beach, for Wilson's Plovers. The habitat is varied between these areas due to disturbance and erosion.

There isn't much beach habitat at Bryan's Beach that is usable for nesting, so the plovers there tend to nest farther back in the dunes. This protects them from human disturbance, but increases their chance of being hunted by coyotes and feral hogs. The Wilson's Plovers at Bryan Beach had zero productivity last year and due to disturbance from construction, GCBO is expecting the same for this year, unfortunately.

The Wilson's Plovers at Matagorda Beach tend to nest in the sand close to the dunes. As well, some nest in the algal flats by the Colorado River Mouth Flats located near the beach access entrance. Both populations of Wilson's Plovers prefer a little bit of vegetation which can provide shade on warm days and cover from potential predators.

Wilson's Plovers nest on the ground, which makes them more vulnerable to disturbances such as vehicles, people, and dogs. Both the males and the females take turns incubating the nest. They can lay up to three eggs which hatch within 25 days. The adults and the chicks are banded to help keep track of the nests and broods. The adults are given a U.S. Federal Government metal band and a red band with a two letter code or a letter and number. The chicks are given a metal band and a plain red band.

This year at GCBO's study sites, there are currently 13 banded adults and 7 out of 11 chicks are banded so far. 17 nests and 4 mystery broods have been observed. More nests are expected to hatch within the next couple of weeks. The Wilson's Plover chicks are precocial, so they hatch with their eyes open, covered in downy feathers, and can walk, run, and feed themselves within hours after hatching. The parents will protect them from threats by performing a broken wing display (faking a broken wing) which distracts a predator or threat away from the chicks or nest. They can also hide the chicks under their wings. The chicks themselves are camouflaged and blend in with the sand and wrack.

April through August is the most vulnerable time for Wilson's Plovers and other shorebirds. Their nests and chicks are susceptible to predators, weather, and people. So if you do plan to go to the beach, please take extra precaution and practice social distancing with the birds as well.

Please stay 50 yards away from nesting birds and chicks. Drive slowly and be on the lookout for birds and chicks. Avoid the dunes where they nest and the wrack and tire tracks where chicks like to hide. Please be mindful of your children and pets and keep your dogs on a leash (plovers do not know the difference between dogs and coyotes.) Avoid littering and even pick up trash. On behalf of Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, we wish you and your family well during this tough time.