

Metal Detectors of the Shore: American Avocets
by Taylor Bennett

The Gulf Coast Bird Observatory continues to survey for non-breeding shorebirds along the Upper Texas Coast. We monitor Matagorda Beach, Bryan Beach, Quintana Beach, Follet's Island, and Surfside Beach. Our target species are Piping Plover, Snowy Plover, Red Knot, Black Skimmer, and American Oystercatcher. Along with these species, we often come across other bird species as well. One peculiar one is the American Avocet.

American Avocets are large shorebirds found year-round along the Texas Coast. They have white and black upperparts, a white belly, long blue-gray legs, and a gray head and neck which turns cinnamon during the breeding season. Along with these features, their long black bill make them stand out from the other shorebirds.

Instead of having a straight or a drooping bill like most shorebirds, American Avocets have a distinctive upturned bill which is an indicator between male and female. Male American Avocets tend to have a longer bill that is slightly straighter, but still has a slight curve. The females have shorter bills that are more curved. Another difference between male and female is the body size, as male American Avocets tend to be larger than females.

American Avocets can be found near beaches, mudflats, wetlands, and shallow lakes. During the winter, they often travel and feed in flocks in both freshwater and saltwater environments. They can feed in both shallow water and also while swimming in deeper water. Freshwater or wetland prey consists of boatmen, beetles, fly larvae, midges, and seeds of aquatic plants. Marine prey consists of amphipods, ostracods (seed shrimp), small polychaetes (marine worms), and small fish. Their specialized bill allows them to catch a variety of food and feed in a variety of ways..

There are two places that we observe them feeding at Matagorda Beach. The first is along the shoreline in the water near the eastern end of Matagorda Peninsula. The other is in the ephemeral lagoon of Colorado River Mouth Flats. Their unusual bill shape actually allows them to feed in various ways. They are both visual and tactile feeders which means they feed by sight and touch.

One way they feed is by sweeping their head from side to side with their bill barely submerged beneath the surface of the water and slightly open. The movement is similar to how one uses a metal detector and in this case the treasure is food. This type method is called scything which can be categorized as single, multiple, and dabble.

We often observe them feeding using the dabble scything method which is very similar to how a dabbling duck such as a Mallard feeds. Their long legs and slightly webbed feet allow them to wade and swim in slightly deeper water. With this method they fully submerge their head while maintaining their upright sitting position on the water with their tail fully elevated. Other ways they feed is by pecking, plunging, snatching, bill pursuit, filtering, and scraping.

American Avocets are considered a species of least concern, but still protected via the Migratory Bird Act, so as always please remember to fish, swim, and play from 50 yards away. On behalf of Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, thanks for reading.

IMG_4007: Flock of American Avocets feeding near the shoreline along Matagorda Peninsula at Matagorda Beach, TX. Photo by Taylor Bennett on January 15, 2021.