

Non-breeding Season Ends and Nesting Season Begins for Shorebirds
by Taylor Bennett

Non-breeding shorebird season has officially ended on the Upper Texas Coast. From August through March, Gulf Coast Bird Observatory conducted non-breeding shorebird surveys for Matagorda Beach, Bryan Beach, Quintana Beach, Follet's Island, and Surfside Beach. The target species we focused on were Piping Plover, Snowy Plover, Red Knot, Black Skimmer, and American Oystercatcher.

Starting next week, Gulf Coast Bird Observatory will be switching our focus to beach-nesting birds. We will be monitoring Wilson's Plover, Least Terns, and Black Skimmers for pairs, nests, and chicks. We will be studying only two sites this year, Matagorda Beach and Sargent Beach. Sargent Beach is a new site and we are very excited to include it this season.

This past non-breeding season was very active with hurricanes and tropical storms. We had three major storms come through; Hurricane Laura, Tropical Storm Beta, and Hurricane Delta. These caused floods, high tides, and debris that blocked access to some of our survey areas. Hurricane Laura in August caused the most damage to all of our survey sites and all of our beaches were closed for a considerable amount of time. The majority of the protective dune habitat was diminished as a result.

Due to Tropical Storm Beta in September, the easternmost portion of Follet's Island was closed to vehicles due to debris, damage to boardwalks, and construction to help restore the dunes. Lucky for us, we were granted permission to use our UTV to continue to survey this portion of the beach. The lagoon at Colorado River Mouth Flats at Matagorda was flooded throughout most of the season leaving only a small portion for plovers and Black Skimmers. More target species were observed toward the end of the season when the lagoon began to dry and the sand and mudflats were exposed.

On Matagorda Peninsula and Follet's Island, high numbers of birds, especially Piping Plovers and Snowy Plovers were observed. Despite the freeze that happened mid-February, we continued to observe high numbers. These two sites are critical migratory and overwintering habitat for our target species. We observed and reported 49 flagged Piping Plovers, 2 banded Snowy Plovers, and 20 banded American Oystercatchers. Most of the Piping Plovers came from the Great Plains region including North Dakota, South Dakota, Colorado, and Nebraska. Two were banded here in Texas and one was from the Great Lakes Region. Very few Red Knots were observed this season.

We also monitored for disturbances and threats such as vehicles, people, dogs, and balloons. At the beginning of the season, we experienced multiple instances of vehicles driving through our protected area, Colorado River Mouth Flats, disturbing our target species and destroying our posts and fencing in the process. Balloons are a major threat to wildlife as animals often get tangled in their ribbons or mistake them for food. This season, we collected over 900 balloons. The majority of the balloons collected were from either Valentine's Day or birthday.

All of the species we mentioned are considered threatened or species of high concern. Please remember to fish, swim, and play 50 yards away, drive carefully and keep dogs leashed. Not only is it breeding season for beach nesting birds, it is also nesting season for sea turtles as well. On behalf of Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, thanks for reading.



IMG_4333: The first banded Wilson's Plover (YC) to arrive this season on Matagorda Beach, Texas. More will be arriving and will begin nesting within the next week or so. Photo by Taylor Bennett on March 2nd, 2021.