

Beach Nesting Birds Update
Article by Taylor Bennett

One of Gulf Coast Bird Observatory's many research projects is the Beach Nesting Birds project. The target species we are focusing on for this project are Wilson's Plovers and Least Terns. The Wilson's Plover is a shorebird that prefers to nest in the soft sand along the dunes, mudflats, and shelly areas with vegetation. During the breeding season, they break up into pairs and create their own territories. The Least Tern is a water bird that prefers to nest in large groups mainly in open shelly areas.

Both of these species are protected by the Migratory Bird Act and are considered species of high concern due to habitat loss and disturbance. For each species, we monitor for pairs, nests, and chicks. We also band Wilson's Plover adults while they are incubating and their chicks when they hatch. Gulf Coast Bird Observatory is monitoring two sites this year: Matagorda Beach and Sargent Beach.

For Matagorda Beach, we monitor half of Matagorda Peninsula and three areas: Colorado River Mouth Flats (CRMF), Three-mile Cut, and Dunes Dr. The Wilson's Plover mainly nest along the beach in front of the dunes. So far, we have located five nests along Matagorda Peninsula. Two nests have already unfortunately failed due to weather and ghost crabs. But we have now found a re-nest (a second try) for one of the failed nests, so good news there. This brings our current nest count to four for Matagorda Peninsula.

This past week, we banded our first adult female of the season and she was given the band code V5. We also located a small group of four nesting Least Terns along the beach. For CRMF, the Wilson's Plovers tend to nest within the area we post signs and symbolic fencing around. We have located three nests there so far. One nest belongs to female (VJ) and male (E5) and second nest belongs to female (VU) and her mate. The third nest is yet to be determined. The first two nests are due to hatch very soon, so we hope they have chicks by the next article. We haven't observed any nesting Wilson's Plover or Least Terns at Three-mile Cut or Dunes Dr.

Sargent Beach is a new site this year and has proven to be quite productive. We split the island into two sections, Sargent North and Sargent South. We have discovered both Least Terns and Wilson's Plovers nesting in each section. For Sargent North, we located two Wilson's Plover nests and 32 Least Terns incubating so far. For Sargent South, we located three Wilson's Plover nests and 17 Least Terns incubating so far. We have yet to band any adults there. Most of the Wilson's Plover nests are actually within the Least Tern colonies, so they are a bit challenging.

April through August is the most vulnerable time for Wilson's Plover, Least Tern, and other nesting birds. Please remember to fish, swim, and play 50 yards away from nesting birds and chicks. Drive slowly, avoid the dunes and sandy areas where plovers tend to nest, and keep dogs on a leash. On behalf of Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, thanks for reading and stay tuned for next month's article.