

Wilson's Plover Chicks Take Flight at Matagorda and Sargent
Article by Taylor Bennett

As researchers at Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, we still have a month left of beach nesting bird season along the Upper Texas Coast. The target species we focusing on are Wilson's Plover and Least Tern. 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 and their chicks to help keep track of them. Wilson's Plover chicks are able to fly within 30 to 35 days after hatching. Chicks that are able to fly are declared fledged. The Least Tern chicks take 20 days to fly.

On Matagorda Beach, we monitor half of Matagorda Peninsula and three areas: Colorado River Mouth Flats (CRMF), Three-mile Cut, and Dunes Drive. At Matagorda Peninsula, we had three more nests hatch this month with a total of five chicks. We had four nests that were due to hatch, but unfortunately did not make it after the 4th of July due to disturbance from vehicles and people. All of the chicks have disappeared and have not been observed since the day they hatched. Hopefully they are safe and hidden in the dunes!

At Colorado River Mouth Flats, seven chicks that hatched last month have successfully fledged. We also discovered two more broods with three chicks total. We had one nest hatch with two chicks, but unfortunately, they have disappeared. The last active nest at CRMF ended up failing due to depredation by ghost crabs. We banded four more chicks and one female adult Wilson's Plover (M6). So far, we have zero active nests, three small chicks, seven fledged chicks, five banded adults, and 16 banded chicks total for Matagorda.

At Sargent Beach, we split the island into two sections, Sargent East and Sargent West. This past month we discovered six more broods with a total of 11 chicks. One of the two chicks from last month has successfully fledged. We had seven more nests fail due to either weather or disturbance. We banded two more Wilson's Plover adults: one female (N6) and one male (L6) and banded 10 more chicks. Two Least Tern chicks have been observed so far; however, one has already disappeared and the other is unfortunately in a bad spot in the way of vehicles. Very few Least Terns still have nests. So far, we have zero active nests, 11 small chicks, six banded adults, and 13 banded chicks at Sargent.

As you can see, it's extremely difficult for these birds to hatch and fledge chicks! April through August is the most vulnerable time for Wilson's Plover, Least Tern, and other nesting birds. So, please remember to fish, swim, and play 50 yards away from nesting birds and chicks. Drive slowly, avoid the dunes and sandy areas where birds tend to nest, and keep dogs on a leash. All of the Wilson's Plover adults and chicks we band this year will be available for symbolic adoption through our online nature store www.gcbo.org. On behalf of Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, thanks for reading!

IMG_6849: The first 2021 banded Wilson's Plover chick to successfully fly on Sargent Beach.
Photo by Taylor Bennett.