

The End of Nesting Season on the Beach
Article by Taylor Bennett

We are at the tail end of the beach nesting season along the Upper Texas Coast. The Wilson's Plover are beginning to make their way South to their wintering grounds. At the Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, we are studying the Wilson's Plover and Least Tern for our beach-nesting birds program.

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, and band them for our research. Once hatched, the Wilson's Plover chicks are able to fly within 30 to 35 days which are then 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 Dr. On Matagorda Peninsula, we unfortunately ended up with zero fledged chicks for the season. We found a total of 17 nests, of which only three ended up hatching. We observed a total of eight chicks and were able to band seven of them. All of those chicks ending up disappearing. Multiple factors could have been played a part, but we believe disturbance from vehicles and people were the main cause due to the fact that the chicks were gone after July 4th weekend.

At CRMF, we had a total of 10 fledged chicks. We ending up finding a total of six nests, of which only two hatched. Only one of the four hatched chicks made it to fledging. We then found five additional broods with each successfully fledged at least one chick. In total, we observed 12 chicks and we were able to band seven of them. At Matagorda, the Wilson's Plovers ended up with a total of 10 fledged chicks, five banded adults, and 16 banded chicks. No Least Tern chicks fledged.

At Sargent Beach, we split the island into two sections, Sargent East and Sargent West. We ended up with just two fledged Wilson's Plover chicks for the season. We found 17 nests, of which only two ended up hatching with one chick each. We found 8 additional broods with only one brood successfully fledging one chick. Total, we saw 14 chicks and we were able to band 13 of them.

For the Least Terns, we observed three chicks, but those unfortunately did not make it. All of the other nests failed due to disturbance. For the Wilson's Plover we ended up with a total of two fledged chicks, six banded adults, and 13 banded chicks.

In total, we had 12 fledged Wilson's Plover chicks for the entire season, and hope that next season will be better. While the birds weren't very successful this season, it is important that we gathered this data. The first step to conservation is knowing how a species is doing and what is affecting them.

If you would like to help support this project, all of the Wilson's Plover adults and chicks we banded this year are available for symbolic adoption through our online nature store at www.gcbo.org. On behalf of Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, thanks for reading.



IMG_7504: The last banded Wilson's Plover chick to successfully fly on Sargent Beach. Photo taken by Taylor Bennett at Sargent Beach, TX on July 30, 2021.