

Shorebirds Have Arrived in Texas for the Winter
Article by Taylor Bennett

As breeding season for Wilson's Plover and Least Tern ends, non-breeding season for shorebirds begins. Gulf Coast Bird Observatory is currently monitoring for non-breeding shorebirds along the Upper Texas Coast with target species being Piping Plover, Snowy Plover, Black Skimmer, Red Knot, and American Oystercatcher. These species are classified as threatened, endangered, or species of high concern due to habitat loss and disturbance. Non-breeding season runs from August to March each year. Assisting Coastal Biologist, Taylor Bennett, this season is GCBO's new intern, Marissa Zamora. Together they will both be monitoring Bryan Beach, Quintana Beach, Surfside Beach, Follet's Island, and Matagorda Beach this season.

A shorebird's wintering ground is just as important as it's breeding ground. Each season, these birds spend their winter here along the shores of the Texas Coast. Some stay the whole winter while others, such as the Red Knot, simply pass through. Here, they will spend most of their time feeding and resting in order to gain enough fuel and energy to make their journey back to their breeding ground in the Spring.

The purpose of monitoring these birds is to track their populations over time and to see how disturbances affects them. Each site has a certain number of 1 km transects depending on the size. Matagorda Beach is the longest with 36 km and also has two back beach areas with mud flat habitat, Three-mile Cut and Colorado River Mouth Flats. Bryan and Quintana Beach have a combined total of 6 km. Surfside and Follet's Island have a combined total of 20 km.

Within each transect we record the type of species, how many there are, what habitat they're in, what they are doing, and whether they are banded, flagged, or neither. Bands and flags are like bracelets that come in a variety of colors and are unique to each bird like a finger print. Some birds even have a U.S. Federal Government metal band with a number. With each banded bird, we record its location and take a picture of it.

With this information, we are able to send the data to their banders who can reveal more about this particular bird. For instance, we will be able to see where it came from, how old it is, and how far it traveled. This information is extremely important to help keep track of migrating patterns and ages of birds.

This past month, we observed a Piping Plover with a white flag and band combination and learned it was banded as an adult in 2012 in Canada. This is fairly uncommon because according to our records, most of the banded or flagged Piping Plover we see usually come from the Great Plains region which includes North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Colorado. Most of the banded birds, specifically the Piping Plover, have been observed multiple times over the years. This shows how important these particular sites are to these species.

We also keep track of the amount of disturbances within each transect. For each transect, we record number of vehicles, people, unleashed and leashed dogs, as well as balloons. These birds are highly disturbed by all of the above. That's why we ask people to share the beach and give

the birds their space. Also, to drive slowly and to keep dogs on their leash. On behalf of Gulf Coast Bird Observatory thanks for reading.