

Ruddy Turnstone  
by Taylor Bennett

This winter, Gulf Coast Bird Observatory is continuing to survey for non-breeding shorebirds along the Upper Texas Coast. I, Taylor Bennet, and GCBO's intern, Marissa Zamora, monitor Matagorda Beach, Bryan Beach, Quintana Beach, Surfside Beach, and Follet's Island from the beginning of August to the end of March. Our target species are Piping Plover, Snowy Plover, Red Knot, Black Skimmer, and American Oystercatcher. Along with these species, we often come across other bird species as well. One of them is a small shorebird called the Ruddy Turnstone.

The Ruddy Turnstone is a small multi-colored shorebird that belongs to the sandpiper family. They breed in the Arctic and spend their winters along coastlines of North America including the Upper Texas Coast. We often observe them at our sites during the non-breeding season. We mainly see them foraging in small groups along the shoreline with Sanderlings, especially in debris that washes up on the shore. They are named Ruddy Turnstones because of two things; their breeding plumage and the way they feed.

The term "ruddy" is a British euphemism for "bloody." As with most shorebirds, Ruddy Turnstone plumage changes during certain times of the year. During the non-breeding season, their plumage sports a calico-like pattern consisting of brown, black, and white. They have a gray head with black and brown markings along the face, a black breast band in the shape of a horse's collar, white bellies, and short bright orange legs. During the breeding season, however, the brown feathers of the males turn to a crimson or ruddy red. Their head also turns to a striking white with black markings along the face and neck and the breast band becomes thicker, nearly covering the entire breast.

The female's band is also thicker and they sport a little bit of red, leaving them a bit drabber than the male. We mainly observe this bird in their non-breeding plumage, but we sometimes see them in their transitioning phase and they are a beautiful sight to see. Their plumage also helps them blend in very well with debris.

The term "turnstone" comes from their feeding strategy. The Ruddy Turnstone has a short, black, upturned bill which helps it turn over stones, shell, debris, and anything it comes across to find prey. Besides turning stuff over, their bills are equipped to dig, probe, pry, jab, and tear apart prey as well.

During the winter, Ruddy Turnstones are considered to be opportunistic feeders, which means they can feed on pretty much everything. Their prey varies depending on time of year, location, and habitat. Like I mentioned before we mainly see them feeding in the debris that washes up along the shore. Their prey consists of invertebrates (insects), crustaceans (amphipods, crabs, etc.), mollusks (snails, clams, etc.), small fish, carrion (dead fish and mammals), and even human garbage.

Unlike our target species, Ruddy Turnstone are considered a species of least concern, but still protected via the Migratory Bird Act. When visiting the beach please remember to give birds

space, drive carefully, keep dogs on a leash, and keep the beaches clean by picking up trash. On behalf of Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, thanks for reading.

**IMG\_8619:** Two Ruddy Turnstones feeding amongst shells along Matagorda Peninsula at Matagorda Beach, TX. Photo taken by Taylor Bennett on October 8, 2021.