

2022 Beach nesting bird season has begun

Article by Taylor Bennett

The beach nesting bird season has officially begun along the upper Texas Coast, which means that shorebirds are starting to make their nests on the sands of our beaches. It also means that we at Gulf Coast Bird Observatory are once again monitoring for those nests as part of our ongoing research.

The target species we are focusing on are Wilson's Plover and Least Tern. 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 flat 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. When we band a bird, we place a lightweight band around their leg (just the right size, so it doesn't hurt) with a unique number and letter combination on it. Then we can keep track of who's who by reading the numbers off their bands, like T5 or VM. Each newly banded adult this year will also receive a geolocator which will help us track where they go during the winter. 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 Drive. The Wilson's Plovers mainly nest along the beach in front of the dunes and also in the debris. We observed our first Wilson's Plover nest of the season on April 13th, 2022. So far, we have located only two Wilson's Plover nests; one on Matagorda Peninsula and one for Three-mile Cut. The Matagorda Peninsula nest belongs to female T5 (or Tina) and her mate. She was banded in 2020. The Three-mile Cut nest belongs to male VM (or Van Morrison) and his mate. He was banded in 2019. We have yet to find a Wilson's Plover nest for CRMF. We haven't observed any nesting Least Terns yet.

Sargent Beach is divided into two sections, Sargent East and Sargent West. We have observed both Least Tern and Wilson's Plover in each section. For Sargent East, we located three Wilson's Plover nests. One of the three nests belongs to female Y5 (or YaYa) and her mate. She was banded last year. The Least Terns have just started to arrive and soon should have nests. We also managed to locate a hatching American Oystercatcher nest. For Sargent West, we located three Wilson's Plover nests. They all belong to unbanded pairs. We hope to band them next week. The Least Terns are also starting to pair up and nest there as well.

April through July 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!

WIPL nest: One of the three nests we located on the west side of Sargent Beach. Photo taken by Taylor Bennett on April 21, 2022.

