

Fourth of July Litter

By Celeste Silling

For those of us who do beach cleanups, no holiday elicits more anxiety than Independence Day.

Here on the Texas coast, thousands of people crowd onto beaches like Surfside Beach, Stewart Beach, and the Texas City Dike to enjoy a day of celebrating, feasting, fireworks, and fishing on July 4th. And while this is a wonderful tradition, it tends to leave behind a bit of a mess.

We often see a surge in the amount of trash on the beach after big holidays. People frequently head to the beach to celebrate, and leave much of their party supplies and trash behind. Every holiday has its trademark trash; Valentine's Day leaves balloons, Christmas leaves trees, and Halloween leaves candy wrappers.

Independence Day brings beer cans and bottles, broken tents, water toys, beach chairs, fireworks and sparklers, food containers, balloons, and much more. This holiday in particular seems to be notorious for creating litter. This could be for a few reasons:

Unlike Christmas and Thanksgiving, Independence Day is often celebrated outdoors, making for more litter outside. People also like to throw family barbecues or picnics, leading to more food waste like Styrofoam containers or glass bottles. Then there are the fireworks, which are almost always destined to create litter. After exploding, fireworks are hot, meaning that you have to leave them on the ground for a while to cool down. This makes them easy to forget. Additionally, even if you do pick up the bulk of your used firecracker, odds are that it has left some black powder or paper flakes flying through the air when it erupted.

For a holiday that's all about celebrating our country, Independence Day can be very damaging to American land. The trash that is left behind on our beaches is not only ugly, but it can also be dangerous. Items like glass shards and broken cans make the sand unsafe for barefooted beachgoers. And cigarettes, fireworks, and lighter fluid contaminate our waters.

Beach trash is detrimental to the natural world as well. Things like fishing line and balloon strings entangle birds like pelicans and willets. And items like balloons and plastic bags are often consumed by sea turtles and other wildlife. These huge surges in waste can be dangerous to both humans and animals, and they certainly aren't good for the country we're trying to celebrate!

We at Gulf coast Bird Observatory will be doing our part to keep our beaches clean by participating in a large trash pickup on July 5th. The cleanup, hosted by SPLASH (Stopping Plastics and Litter Along Shorelines) will be held at the Texas City Dike, which is a popular party spot and fishing hub. We expect to pick up a lot of fishing line, glass bottles, and Styrofoam. If you'd like to join us, sign up at www.splashtx.org.

If you aren't able to join a large cleanup, but still want to help, don't despair! You can do your part by taking your belongings with you when you leave the beach or park, pick up any trash you might have left behind, and even pick up any other litter in your vicinity. These quick pick ups only take a few minutes and can make a world of difference.

Independence day is a celebration of America, so let's do our best to take care of this country that we love! We need to take more pride in our land and treat it better this Fourth of July. Please throw away your trash responsibly and be sure not to litter on our Texas beaches!

Photo by Kristen Vale

Caption: San Luis Pass and other popular beaches see a huge increase in litter during holidays like the Fourth of July.