

Black-necked Stilt  
Article by Taylor Bennett

Beach-nesting bird season continues along the upper Texas Coast and Gulf Coast Bird Observatory is continuing to monitor birds on Matagorda Beach and Sargent Beach. We are focused on Wilson's Plovers and Least Terns which are protected by the Migratory Bird Act and are considered species of high concern due to habitat loss and disturbance. Most of the birds have finished nesting at this point but there are still chicks running around so please be cautious when visiting the beach and make sure to give them plenty of space. Along with the Wilson's Plover and Least Tern, we have observed other breeding shorebirds as well such as Black-necked Stilt.

Black-necked Stilts are large shorebirds typically found in wetland habitats. They are found in Texas year-round; however, we observe them more during the Spring and Summer when they are breeding. They are slightly smaller than American Avocet and belong to the same family. They have a slender black body, white belly, long black and white neck, small head with a short-pointed bill, and their stand out feature are their long, bright pink legs. The females and juveniles are more brown than black like the males. They mainly feed on insects like water beetles and crustaceans like crawfish. They can also feed on snails, small fish, and frogs.

Like Wilson's Plovers, during breeding season the Black-necked Stilts create territories and break off into pairs. They nest on the ground in open muddy areas near water or form vegetation islands above water using marsh grass. We have observed them nesting in the saltwort at Matagorda. The male and female take turns creating the nest using their belly and feet and lining it with plant material or whatever is nearby. Black-necked Stilts can lay 3 to 5 eggs, but 4 eggs seem to be the norm. The eggs are spotted and buffy brown to blend in with the habitat.

Both parents take turns incubating the nest and the chicks hatch within 25 days. Like plovers and terns, the chicks are precocial. This means that when they hatch, they are fully covered in down feathers, their eyes open, and they are able to leave the nest within a few hours after hatching. The parents lead them to nearby water where the chicks can feed themselves.

The chicks are mottled so they can blend in with their surroundings and have long legs like their parents, so they are able to wade in shallow water. Both parents keep watch and provide protection against predators and threats. If a threat is nearby, the parents will do an alarm call and a territorial display by flapping their wings. It takes 4-5 weeks for the chicks to be fully grown adults, so they are very vulnerable to threats and disturbances like dogs and humans before then.

Please remember to share the beach and give birds plenty of space especially if they have nests and chicks. On behalf of Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, thanks for reading.

**IMG\_1609:** Adult female Black-necked Stilt with chick observed feeding in mudflat at Three-mile Cut at Matagorda Beach, TX. Photo taken by Taylor Bennett.