

Beach Nesting Season Has Begun!  
by Taylor Bennett

Here at Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, a big part of what we do is monitoring and protecting birds. One research project we've been doing for a while now is the Beach Nesting Bird study in the Spring and Summer months. This year, we observed our first Wilson's Plover nest on April 17th.

The target species we are focusing on in this study 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. Last year, newly banded adults received geolocators and we are hoping they return to nest this season. 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 Plover mainly nest along the beach in front of the dunes, debris, or mudflats. So far, we have located three Wilson's Plover nests on Matagorda Beach: two along Matagorda Peninsula and one within Three-mile Cut.

For one of the nests on Matagorda Peninsula, we were able to band our first female of the season. She was given the band N8 "Natalie". The second nest belongs to female (T5 or Tina) and her mate. She was banded in 2020. The Three-mile Cut nest belonged to female (H7 or Hazel). She was banded last year and received a geocator. Unfortunately, her first nest got washed over by high tides. We have also observed Least Tern nesting along Matagorda Peninsula.

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. On Sargent East, we located two Wilson's Plover nests. One of the nests belongs to a female who we had banded years ago as a chick. We were able to recapture and she is now P8 "Padme". She was first banded in 2021 and according to our records she is our first chick to be recaptured and receive an adult band.

The other nest failed unfortunately due to a feral hog. We have also located a large nesting Least Tern colony near Cedar Lakes Pass. On Sargent West, we located two Wilson's Plover nests as well. One nest already failed due to a dog. The other nest belongs to an unbanded pair. The Least Terns are also starting to form colonies 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.

**Left Photo (WIPL chick) vs. Right Photo (WIPL P8):** Wilson's Plover female P8 "Padme". The first chick to return and receive an adult band. Left photo was taken in 2021 when she was a chick. Photo by Sarah Belles, July 16, 2021. The right photo shows her as an adult female with her new band. Photo by Taylor Snyder, on May 4, 2023.