

NestFest: A beach Cleanup for Nesting Sea Turtles and Shorebirds

By Celeste Silling

Texas beaches are important habitat for many animals, especially during nesting season. In the springtime, thousands of sea turtles and shorebirds arrive on our beaches to make their nests and lay their eggs. The sea turtles will return to the ocean, with their eggs hatching about two months later. The shorebirds will stay on the beach to incubate their eggs and take care of their chicks.

The ocean off the shores of Texas is home to 5 out of 7 sea turtle species in the world. Several of these species nest on Texas beaches, including Kemp's Ridley, Loggerhead, and Green Sea Turtles. From April through July, the most critically endangered sea turtle species in the world, the Kemp's Ridley, will come on shore to lay their eggs. Females will dig their egg chambers in the sand along our dune line, and lay their eggs there. Then, they will quickly return to the water, leaving the eggs behind. When it's time to hatch, the hatchlings will break free from their egg shells and crawl over the sand, into the ocean.

Texas beaches host many species of shorebirds year-round, and several of them lay their eggs here as well. This includes the Wilson's Plover, Snowy Plover, Least Tern, Black Skimmer, and Willet. These birds will generally lay their eggs right on the sand, usually in a gentle indentation called a scrape. Then they will incubate the eggs and raise the chicks, defending them from predators, human/car disturbance, overheating, over wash, and other threats.

One threat that affects both nesting sea turtles and shorebirds is trash. Texas beaches accumulate trash quickly, due to our own waste habits as well as trash washing up from other locations. This marine debris is an obstacle to nesting animals. It blocks usable habitat, and can entangle nesting mothers and their babies. Sea turtles in the ocean have been known to consume plastic, mistaking it for food, and shorebirds are commonly caught in fishing line and balloon strings. For both of these animals, trash is a formidable threat.

Fortunately, there is now a beach cleanup in Texas that focuses specifically on improving habitat for beach-nesting animals: NestFest! Nestfest is an event coming up on March 12th wherein volunteers will clean up twelve beaches across Bolivar, Galveston, and Follet's Island. The event is hosted by SPLASH, Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, Gulf Center for Sea Turtle Research, American Bird Conservancy, and the Galveston Bay Area Chapter - Texas Master Naturalists. The sea turtle experts and the shorebird researchers at these organizations have identified high-priority nesting habitat for the cleanups, ensuring that nesting bird and turtle mothers will have somewhere safe to place their eggs.

If you and your family or friends would like to spend the day on the beach, helping sea turtles and shorebirds, we encourage you to sign up! NestFest is currently looking for volunteers and you can sign up through www.splashtx.org or through the SPLASH Facebook page. We hope to see you out there!

Photo 1: Least Tern nesting on top of a plastic bag. By Mike Williams

Photo 2: NestFest flyer by Celeste Silling