

Storms, Beach-Nesting Birds, and You

By Lauren Ahlstrom

Hurricane season has begun in Texas. During the week of June 17, 2024, the outer bands of a tropical depression affected much of Brazoria and Matagorda county, leaving streets, yards, and reservation ponds flooded. And during this week, at the time of writing this article, Beryl is barreling towards us.

Humans aren't the only ones disrupted by heavy rain or flooding. Many wildlife species experience troublesome aftereffects of these storms as well, namely beach-nesting birds. Beach-nesting birds are a group of shorebird species that nest primarily on the ground and rely on camouflage to hide their nests and eggs.

Matagorda and Brazoria county have their own host of beach-nesting birds. Wilson's Plovers and Least Terns are some of the most prolific beach-nesting birds during this time of the year. Not only are these two bird populations declining, they have been displaced by the storm, too.

Wilson's Plovers and Least Terns at Sargent Beach were negatively impacted by the storm. Many of the dunes, which are used as nesting sites, have been over-washed. Nests that had previously been spotted by biologists, technicians, and interns with the Gulf Coast Bird Observatory are no longer there.

Additionally, prior to the storm, Wilson's Plover chicks were present at Sargent Beach. But after the storm, no chicks were there to be found. Some of these chicks were fledging, meaning that they made it to the point of flying. Other chicks were still quite young and may have been overtaken by the flooding.

It is an unfortunate part of nature that we face every nesting season. Storms happen, nests are destroyed, and chicks are gone. It is an unyielding cycle, but there are ways *you* can help to minimize further displacing the disturbed birds!

Beach-nesting birds tend to make their nests near or in the sand dunes, so avoiding these areas is a good rule of thumb. Make sure to keep your dogs and children away from the dunes. Not only can this disturb the birds, but there are snakes in the dunes that can cause harm. A good way to gauge if you are too close to a nesting area is to check and see if the birds have increased vocalization or are flying off their nests.

Least Terns live in colonies and will display mobbing behaviors when disturbances, like humans, are too close to their nesting sites. Adult Wilson's Plovers will try to get your attention by "peeping" at you to get your attention. They also engage in a "broken-wing" display where they lower themselves to the ground and flap their wings as if they are broken. All of this is to distract you from their nests or chicks.

Another way to minimize your effect on beach-nesting birds after a storm is to avoid posted nesting areas. Signs that tell you to share the beach should be heeded! Make sure to

keep your vehicles away from these areas as well, since engine noises can disrupt the birds nesting there.

Ultimately, many beach-nesting birds were affected by the storm, but there are ways we can help to minimize the impact! Stay aware of what is going on around you, keep back from the dunes, and enjoy the beach alongside the beach-nesting birds.

Photo by Mike Williams

Caption: Wilson's Plover chicks were among the birds affected by the recent flooding.