

NestFest, A Coastal Cleanup

By Celeste Silling

NestFest, one of my favorite volunteer events of the year, is coming up on March 11th! NestFest is a coastal cleanup that focuses on removing dangerous litter from important sea turtle and shorebird nesting habitat.

Sea turtles and birds are often entangled in trash when they come onto Texas beaches to nest. For this reason, fishing line is perhaps the most dangerous trash item to be found on our beaches. Sea turtles get the line tangles on their flippers, heads and all around their bodies when they're swimming or crawling up on the sand to nest. Birds get it wrapped around their feet, legs, wings, and beaks while they walk or swim. The tightening line can limit the mobility and hunting ability of these animals, and can often cut off circulation and cause death.

As well, many animals consume trash when they mistake it for food. I've personally witnessed a heron, pelican, and several other species of birds eat plastic, thinking that it's edible. Sea turtles are famously prone to this, as they mistake plastic bags and other trash for yummy jellyfish.

Texas beaches, which accumulate trash faster than those of any other Gulf state, are particularly perilous for wildlife in this regard. The beaches near Galveston Bay have trash washing up from all over the world. Most notably, we have trash washing down from the Galveston Bay watershed (which includes both Dallas and Houston, two enormous cities) as well as trash from the Gulf (which includes trash washing out from the nearby Mississippi River). With so much garbage washing up on our doorstep, citizens and wildlife have a big problem.

NestFest began in 2023, when five partners decided to team up to tackle this problem. SPLASh (Stopping Plastics and Litter Along Shorelines), the Gulf Center for Sea Turtle Research, Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, American Bird Conservancy, and the Galveston Texas Master Naturalists came together in hopes of bettering the beaches in preparation for Spring nesting season.

Researchers from ABC, GCBO, and GCSTR used their years of previous research to determine the highest priority beaches for conservation. Turtles and birds have historically nested in some places more than others. Based on this, we decided to cleanup twelve different beaches along the coasts of Bolivar, Galveston, and Follets Islands where the animals had historically nested most.

In 2023 and 2024, NestFest went swimmingly, and we had an absolutely amazing turnout of volunteers. In 2023, we were able to remove 2,358 lbs of trash from the coast, and in 2024 we removed 3,022. This year, we hope to get even more volunteers to come out and pick up trash with us.

If you are interested in learning more or signing up for NestFest, visit SPLAShtx.org and look for the NestFest page. The event is open to all ages and we will provide all of the cleanup supplies. It'll be a fun day on the beach, and you'll be helping the sea turtles and birds! What could be better?

Photo 1 Credit: Gulf Coast Bird Observatory

Caption 1: Use this QR code to learn more and sign up to volunteer

Photo 2 Credit: Alan Wilde

Credit 2: An American Oystercatcher entangled in fishing line