

Natural Heritage Resources Factsheet

Rare Beach Nesting Birds of Virginia



Least Terns, Common Terns, Black Skimmers, Piping Plovers, and Wilson's Plovers nest on the sun-soaked, windswept, sandy beaches found along the coast of the Mid-Atlantic States. In Virginia, beach nesting birds are known from beaches on the western shore of the Chesapeake Bay, as well as the barrier islands on the ocean side of the Eastern Shore.

Beach Habitat

These birds nest on sandy beaches generally in the area between the high tide water line and the fore-dune. They also frequently nest on open sandy areas known as blowouts or over wash fans of the beach and dune zone. These areas support little if any vegetation. The flat stretches are sandy and often strewn with pebbles, pieces of shell, and driftwood. Areas closer to the fore-dune may have some tufts of beach grasses.

Ecology of Beach-nesting Birds

Least Terns, Common Terns, Black Skimmers, and occasionally Wilson's Plovers nest in colonies which may range in size from a few to several hundred pairs. A colony will sometimes consist of several different species of colonial shorebirds. For example, Black Skimmers often nest in colonies of terns, plovers and gulls. Piping Plovers are solitary nesters, but they may locate their nests near a colony of terns. Researchers believe birds form colonies for two major reasons. One is "safety in numbers," the added protection from predators. Another reason is younger birds living in colonies seem to learn better foraging skills from older, more experienced birds.

The nesting period begins in late April and runs through late August. The nests of all these birds are little more than shallow depressions in the sand. Some species, such as the Common Tern, will line the nest with grass, shells and seaweed. Piping Plovers will camouflage the vicinity of their nest with bits of shell and driftwood. The eggs of all of these birds are off-white and marked with dark brown or black speckles making them very difficult to see against their sandy background.

Each of these bird species show varying degrees of site tenacity. Site tenacity refers to how often the birds return to the same site to nest year after year. Birds with strong site tenacity are more likely to return than those with weak site tenacity. Preference for a site is reinforced by the relative success that the bird experiences in rearing young at a given site. Flooding, predation or other disturbances during the nesting period will weaken site tenacity. A severe storm may flood the beach during the breeding season and destroy all of the nest sites. This often forces some birds to abandon the site and reneest elsewhere or give up rearing a brood in that season.

Piping Plovers show particularly strong site tenacity, which may contribute to their population decline as habitat is lost and human recreational activities intensify on more and more beach areas.



The Common and Least Tern and the Black Skimmer feed mostly on fish, but also eat crabs and insects. Piping Plovers feed on aquatic invertebrates, insects, marine worms and mollusks and are often seen foraging at the waters edge. Wilson's Plovers are especially fond of crabs.

These birds snatch their prey from near the surface of the water or off the beach. The Black Skimmer, as the name implies, uses its elongated lower bill to skim the surface of the water. It finds its prey by feel. When the Skimmer feels something touch its lower bill as it skims, it quickly snaps it up.

Several of these birds have interesting courtship and territorial displays. During their April courtship period, the male Least Tern will try to impress a female by bringing her a fish. Before giving her this gift, he is chased by other courting males. After the chase, he glides down to the female and feeds her the fish. The male Piping Plover flies in circles or figure-eights above his prospective mate. On the ground, he scrapes the sand, circles the female with his wings drooped, tail lowered and spread, whistles and stamps his feet. To protect her nest and young from unwanted visitors, the female Piping Plover performs a distraction display. She pretends to have a broken wing, hopping and taking short flights, and keeps just out of reach of the potential predator, who is lured away from the nest site.

Conservation

The best protection for beach-nesting birds is awareness, understanding, and self-restraint on the part of beach users. Many nesting areas have been posted with signs and should be avoided during the nesting period, which takes place from late April through August. Nests and eggs are so inconspicuous that they can go unnoticed until it is too late and the nests have been damaged. Dogs and other pets are best kept on leashes when near nesting areas. Children should be discouraged from collecting the eggs. In addition, natural predators such as foxes, skunks, raccoons, and gulls often prey on eggs and young birds. Although predation is a natural phenomenon which beach nesting birds have always had to contend with, predator populations may grow with increasing human activity on beaches. Beach users can help reduce such impacts by removing all food scraps and garbage from the beach.