



Protected Species - Colonial Waterbirds

Description and Status



“Colonial waterbird” refers to different bird species that share two traits: they gather in large groups/colonies during the nesting season and they feed almost exclusively from the water. Colonial waterbirds include herons, egrets, pelicans, terns, skimmers, etc. Several species of early successional nesters (those who nest on sand) are a growing concern as their numbers have dramatically declined. In North Carolina, the state lists the gull-billed tern as Threatened and the black skimmer, least tern and common tern as species of special concern.

Life History

Several colonial waterbird species including the black skimmer, least, common, and gull-billed terns require bare sand with little or no vegetation for nesting. They prefer barrier island beaches for nesting but will also use natural and manmade estuarine islands. Inlet areas contain some of the best nesting habitat along barrier islands. Adapted to the dynamic nature of barrier islands, these birds rely on storms to create their nesting habitat.

Colonial waterbird nests are generally a shallow scrape in the sand, shell, or gravel and are sometimes lined with bits of shell and vegetation. Some species will create mixed nesting colonies, joining especially with the more

aggressive defenders of the nests. Clutches vary from 1-7 eggs depending on the species and location.

The black skimmer, a distinctive waterbird, is the only American representative of the skimmer family. This species of colonial waterbird is largely crepuscular (active in the dawn and dusk) though it can also be active throughout the day and even nocturnal. Its use of touch to catch fish lets it be successful in low light or darkness.

Since colonial waterbirds are often concentrated in small areas, they are particularly vulnerable to elimination of large numbers at one time, whether by naturally occurring storm overwash or human disturbance.

Threats

Historically many of these birds’ populations were reduced due to excessive hunting for the millinery trade during the 19th century as well as egg collecting. Populations of colonial waterbirds again declined in 1970s, possibly due to pesticides.

Current threats include, but are not limited to:

- Pollution including toxins in the water
- Entanglement in marine debris
- Commercial and recreational fishing
- Predation including other birds, fox, raccoon, opossum, ghost crab, dogs, and cats
- Degradation and loss of habitat
- Commercial and recreational development
- Disease
- Collisions
- Human disturbance including vandalism and harassment
- Weather events
- Off-road vehicles and beach equipment
- Competition with other species, especially gulls

Colonial Waterbirds on the Cape Hatteras National Seashore

The Cape Hatteras National Seashore has nesting habitat for the black skimmer and the following terns: least, common and gull-billed. The colony on Ocracoke Island is often the largest in the state and, therefore, is highly important to the state’s population of colonial waterbirds.

Colonial waterbird nest numbers on the Seashore have fluctuated greatly in the last thirty years with the peak at 1,618 in 1983 and the fewest at 465 in 2000. Since 2000, the colonial waterbird nest numbers have been on a slow rise on the Seashore, though still well below the local average of the last thirty years.

In 2004, 964 colonial waterbird nests were counted on the Seashore. This total number of nests was comprised of 376 common tern, 342 black skimmer, 212 least tern, and 31 gull-billed tern nests. The black skimmer had the greatest rise with almost double the number of nests from 2001, the last year a count was made before 2004. The largest number of nests, 447, were found at the south end of Ocracoke Island.

In the winter, the black skimmer can occasionally be found in North Carolina. The three aforementioned tern species do not winter in this state.