



Coastal Bend Bays & Estuaries Program, Inc.

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Reminder to watch out for nesting birds

Imagine there's a 'do-not-disturb' sign on bird nesting islands.

From now until August, birds settle in on small islands throughout our bays to nest, incubate their eggs and raise up little birds.

They do so only when left alone by humans.

If birds are disturbed during this nesting time, they may fly the coop, leaving eggs or baby chicks vulnerable to predators and heat.

To ensure a healthy, productive nesting, the Coastal Bend Bays & Estuaries Program is reminding boaters, fishermen and kite surfers to steer clear of these islands.

David Newstead, one of our bird experts, spends much of his time monitoring the bird populations here in the Coastal Bend.

Those populations are indicators of healthy bay, and several species are showing declining numbers.

“If you just draw a line to the future projecting current trends, we'll be losing many of these birds,” Newstead said.

For those species especially, an undisturbed, successful nesting season is critical to increasing those numbers.

Landing a boat on these islands is obviously a disturbance. But wade fishing, kite surfing and kayaking too close can also cause birds to react.

Newstead said the nesting islands are already protected under state laws that require people to stay away from February through August. There's no set distance, but boaters are urged to watch for signs they're disrupting the birds. If your presence makes the bird start calling continuously or show other nervous behavior, you are too close. If they fly off their nests, you're too close.

Adult birds of different species react differently to disturbance. Typically, ground-nesting birds like terns and skimmers will aggressively defend their nests, by high-pitched vocalizations and swooping down on the disturbing party. Larger wading birds like spoonbills and herons typically vocalize upon leaving the nest and fly to another part of the island or away to another island. Plovers, such as killdeer, often fly away from the nest and then give a “broken wing display” pretending to be injured to distract the offending party from finding the vulnerable eggs or chicks. If you notice any of these behaviors from birds, you are disturbing the birds.

Disturbance can lead to the loss of an entire season's breeding effort for thousands of birds, and potentially the complete abandonment of the island by birds in several of the following years.

Fishing guide, Audubon warden and beach cleanup organizer Billy Sandifer encourages folks to avoid these nesting sites.

"I'm one of the guys who puts up signs around spoil islands warning boaters to stay clear during nesting season," he says in a recent article for Texas Saltwater Fishing Magazine. Sandifer goes on to tell fellow boaters declining statistics on bird islands. But he's clear there's space for birds and boaters.

"I got tickled recently to see a great blue heron nesting on top of a well hidden duck blind," he writes. "Living proof that there is room for us all IF we just use good sense."

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