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CBBEP is Discovering the Mysteries of the Black Skimmer



The Black skimmer has long been an iconic species along the shores of our beaches and bays, a sight to see sweeping across shallow waters, lower beak skimming just below the surface for a meal. They are striking, black and white plumage and bright orange and black beak, easy to pick out of a crowd. When they aren't skimming though, they are fighting the many pressures that colonial waterbirds face, habitat loss from coastal development, human disturbance, and predators, just to name a few. In fact, the Black skimmer population has been in sharp decline since the 1970's.

Among the most sensitive of all coastal-breeding bird species, skimmers nest on the ground close to the water's edge, and are susceptible to not only the usual threats, but to seasonal high tides and tidal overwash. A single storm or high tide at the wrong time can wipe out an entire colony of eggs and hatchlings. In some areas of the Texas coast this has resulted in multiple years of virtually no birds fledging from nesting sites - you can imagine what that does to a population.



Black skimmer and chick, Photo: Claudia Dorn



 **ConocoPhillips**

Though skimmers seem to always be around, it is suspected that outside of breeding season roughly half of the population probably leaves Texas. Very little is known about where they go and what other threats they may face, and with populations at less than half of what they were 40 years ago, it's a critical piece of the puzzle. That is why this past spring the CBBEP Coastal Bird Program joined forces with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Coastal Program to outfit 10 skimmers from our local population with satellite tracking devices.

It's a tricky dance to trap a Black skimmer and attach the tracking device. There are decoys, lots of walking, waiting, walking, walking slower, herding the skimmers from a distance one little bird step at a time towards a trap that catches them by the feet. Then delicate hands work quickly to retrieve the bird, take blood and feather samples, and carefully attach the tracking device with thin elastic. It fits around the bird's body much like a belt would sit on your waist, the transmitter is turned on, and the bird is released back to its flock.



Black skimmer with tracking device attached in Oso Bay, Nueces County.

The project seeks to understand the full life cycle and range of the skimmer, and identify areas of high usage and potential causes for mortality or low survival. "With these devices, we will finally gain valuable insight into how these birds are moving and using habitats," said David Newstead, CBBEP Coastal Bird Program Director. "This information is critical for pinpointing the causes of population decline and then deciding where future conservation efforts will be most effective."

The data has been steadily coming in and while some birds have migrated to areas we would have guessed, ranging across Texas and even out to the Chandeleur Island chain off Louisiana, some have left us scratching our heads. One bird (A20) was caught on South Padre Island in April, and is now in Nicaragua, having passed through Veracruz, Tabasco, Oaxaca, and Chiapas states in Mexico - crossing the Isthmus of Tehuantepec!



Flight path of Black skimmer (A20) from South Padre Island, TX to Nicaragua.

While this project is in the early stages, it is changing the way we think about these amazing birds and really driven home that there is so much more to learn! Stay tuned to our CBBEP and CBBEP Coastal Bird Program Facebook pages for updates.

Additional funding for this project was provided by ConocoPhillips. To learn more about the efforts of the CBBEP Coastal Bird Program visit <http://www.cbbep.org/coastal-waterbirds/>.

Photos: CBBEP File unless otherwise noted.

The Coastal Bend Bays & Estuaries Program is a non-profit organization dedicated to protecting and restoring bays and estuaries in the 12-county region of the Texas Coastal Bend. CBBEP is partially funded by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. For more information about the Coastal Bend Bays & Estuaries Program, contact Kathryn Tunnell at (361)336-0304 or ktunnell@cbbep.org.

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