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Rookery Island Clean Ups Remove 8,000 Pounds of Trash and Debris

by Kathryn Tunnell



Egrets and their young nesting in cactus on rookery island.

As the summer draws to an end and our local colonial nesting waterbirds fledge their last offspring, the work of Coastal Bend Bays & Estuaries Program's (CBBEP) Coastal Bird Program kicks into high gear. The fall and winter are packed with all things necessary to prepare rookery islands in the Coastal Bend for the next nesting season, including everything from installing nesting platforms and informational signage, to planting woody vegetation and exotic plant removal. One of the most important efforts, however, is the removal of harmful trash and debris.

CBBEP's Coastal Bird Program, in conjunction with US Fish & Wildlife Service, began hosting Rookery Island Clean Ups back in 2006 to engage volunteers from the public, as well as agencies and non-profits with a natural resource management to help clean the shorelines of these important waterbird rookeries. The effort has grown considerably, this year marking the 12th year of the Upper Laguna Madre Rookery Island Clean Up, the 3rd annual event for the Lower Laguna Madre Rookery Island Clean Up, as well as the beginning of a new partnership with Keep Aransas County Beautiful to expand the effort north into Aransas County.



Volunteers in Upper Laguna Madre removing debris.

Over 8,000 pounds of trash and debris were removed by volunteers from sensitive rookery island habitat at the three locations during this year's clean up! The Upper Laguna Madre effort removed over 1,000 pounds of bagged trash, as well as large debris items, and fallen and destroyed signage.



Lower Laguna Madre Clean Up crew.

The Lower Laguna Madre Clean Up targeted 18 spoil islands and one mile of the Arroyo Colorado shoreline. This effort removed 3,780 pounds of trash and debris, as well as 460 pieces of fishing tackle. "Colonial nesting waterbirds and their young face a host of challenges, but perhaps the most devastating are casualties that occur from discarded fishing lines and tackle due to entanglement," said Stephanie Bilodeau, Conservation Biologist with the Coastal Bird Program, "Thanks to the volunteers at this clean up, there are 460 pieces of fishing tackle that won't be harming wildlife on the nesting islands or Arroyo banks."



Little Bay volunteer with freshly planted prickly pear.

The new partnership with Keep Aransas County Beautiful targeted Little Bay in Rockport, who's islands were still suffering effects from Hurricane Harvey. Approximately 3,500 pounds of debris were removed by barge from just two nesting island, most of which were pieces of docks, piers, and stairs deposited by the storm surge. As a part of this effort the volunteers also installed a new nesting platform and established 160 square feet of prickly pear patches, which are used by wading birds for nesting.



Barge removing hurricane debris in Little Bay, Rockport, Texas.

This year's Rookery Island Clean Up partners included Aransas County Navigation District, Audubon Texas, City of Corpus Christi, Doc's Seafood and Steaks, Keep Aransas County Beautiful, Texas General Land Office - Oil Spill, Texas Parks & Wildlife - Coastal Fisheries, Texas Parks & Wildlife - Game Wardens, U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary, and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Southwest Region. "A large scale effort like this would not have been possible without these partnerships and volunteers," said David Newstead, Director of the Coastal Bird Program. "We are fortunate here in the Coastal Bend to have so many willing to dedicate their time to the protection of our colonial nesting waterbirds."

To learn more about the efforts of the Coastal Bird Program and the Coastal Bend Bays & Estuaries Program visit www.cbbep.org.

