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Nesting Season Going Well Despite Challenges!

By Kathryn Tunnell

Spring has sprung, and summer is here! Which means It is nesting season for coastal birds, and CBBEP's Coastal Bird Program is in the thick of it monitoring rookery islands and nesting areas from San Antonio Bay down through the Lower Laguna Madre. For the birds, nesting season is normally a tricky dance around the end of winter and seasonal high spring tides, but this year these little guys had to also deal with a record-breaking freeze and flooding rains. So how are they doing? We caught up with David Newstead, Director of CBBEP's Coastal Bird Program for an update!

The freeze came first, and it looks like the birds may have fared better than their finned friends. Certainly, we found a few carcasses of birds that probably succumbed to the extreme cold as many of these species are not physiologically adapted to deal with that, but it is hard to say how much direct mortality there was, and there certainly was not massive kills like we saw with fish.

The freeze did not seem to drastically reduce the bird's main food source. Nearly all the nesting birds we deal with are fish-eating birds, and based on our observations, we are seeing the baitfish concentrations return – this is a great thing! Many of the baitfish species the birds feed on would have been in the gulf or otherwise in deeper water during the freeze, and some even spawn offshore, so they may have been able to escape the cold water, so it is possible the birds may even be benefitting from fewer large predatory fish consuming their prey.

Great blue heron on nest with chicks on Tern Island in the Upper Laguna Madre.

For the herons, egrets, and others that nest in trees and shrubs, the die back of mangroves in the Coastal Bend did not seem to faze the birds. They were happy utilizing dead mangroves for nesting and by mid-May many of the early nesters had already fledged chicks and were working on another round. Once the dead mangroves begin to decay, they may be of less use to the birds in coming years.

Then came the tropical rains and high tides. Most of the ground-nesting terns and skimmers in the Upper Laguna Madre were out of luck early in the season as the islands they nest on are low-lying and were affected by the flooding rains from the tropical system, and then overtopped by high tides. This did set them back timewise, but the nesting season is long enough that they may still have had time after the high tides to set up and lay some eggs, only time will tell.

Probably the most exciting news though, is that our recently restored Nueces Rookery Islands are doing excellent! These 5 islands were designed to be resilient, and that they are. This is the first full nesting season since the islands were completed, and they are loaded with nesting birds. One of the islands that was designed specifically for ground nesters is supporting 300 nesting pairs of Black skimmers among others, which is amazing!

Nueces Bay Rookery Island with hundreds of pairs of nesting Black skimmers.

The bottom line… nesting season seems to be going well but we are just now getting to the part where we will get a better sense of whether nesting will be productive (fledging young). Bird populations are inherently resilient to events like the freeze or tropical weather, IF they are given the chance to recover. That means reducing or eliminating the things people do that can turn a potentially boon year for them into a nesting failure - especially disturbance. If things continue to bode well for the birds this year (fingers crossed for no early hurricanes), they may even have a bumper crop of production that can help them sustain through years when conditions are less favorable – so when you are out enjoying our bays and estuaries be sure to Fish, Swim, and Play from 50 Yards Away!

CBBEP COASTAL BIRD PROGRAM

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