

Nature Notes

...from Sharon

Black Skimmer (*Rynchops niger*)

Black Skimmers are in the same family as gulls and terns. Their common name comes from their “skimming” the surface of the water with their bill as they forage. The lower half of the bill is longer than the upper, allowing it to cut through the water and dip down to grab prey encountered near the surface. Flying low with open bill and dipping the lower mandible into the water, upon sensing a fish or shrimp, the bird snaps its upper bill shut, seizing its prey. The prey is then turned and swallowed headfirst or carried crosswise in the bill to the nest. The types of fish caught seem to depend on the region and local availability; however, the fish are usually 6-8 inches or less. These are highly nocturnal birds with the bulk of their feeding activities and chick provisioning taking place from dusk to dawn, although occasionally they may be seen foraging in the day.



The Black Skimmer can get up to about 19 inches in length and have a wing span of nearly 50 inches. The Black Skimmer is the only bird species in the United States that has a larger lower mandible than upper mandible. Breeding colonies can be found along Florida’s Gulf and Atlantic coasts.

Adult plumage is black above and white below. This striking combination, along with the brightly colored bill, makes it easy to spot the birds as they hunt over the water or rest on the beach with other seabirds and shorebirds. The breeding adult has a black cap that extends down the nape, black upperparts and white



under parts. The bill is bright orange tipped in black. The legs and feet are red. The non-breeding adult is similar to the breeding adult but has white at the base of its head, making a white ring around its neck. Females are smaller than males and have a smaller bill. The juveniles have a duller, shorter bill, brown-mottled upperparts, and yellow legs. Skimmers' eyes have narrow vertical pupils (highly unusual in birds) helping reduce the glare from water and sand.

Black Skimmers are monogamous and nest near least, royal, and sandwich tern colonies in the open sand on beaches, sandbars, and dredge material islands. Due to habitat loss some Black Skimmers have been known to nest on gravel roofs! Black Skimmers rely on camouflage or group mobbing to protect their nests. Their nests are very vulnerable to human disturbance and predation by animals such as raccoons or laughing gulls. During nest building, mates take turns scraping, using exaggerated sand-kicking posture with alternate foot strokes throwing sand backwards. Birds rotate in the scrape to create a saucer-shaped depression—similar to resting scrapes they use throughout the year. It only takes a few minutes to create the depression; however, the process of courting may involve several scrapes and nest showing behavior, requiring 7-10 days between onset of nest “building” and laying eggs. No material is added to the nest. Eggs are mainly ovate to elongated, white, buff, or blue-green in color and blotched with brown, making them perfectly camouflaged on the sand. A typical clutch is 3-4 eggs and incubation takes 21 to 23 days. Hatching and feeding the chicks are carried out by both parents. The parents regurgitate fish and crustaceans on the ground near the chicks. Since chicks begin life with mandibles of the same length, they are able to retrieve this food. By the time they fledge at four weeks, the lower mandible is nearly a centimeter longer than the upper mandible. Most Black Skimmers withdraw from the northern part of their breeding range to winter in Central America.

Black Skimmers are listed as a Species of Special Concern in Florida. Please help protect these special birds and discourage people from walking or running through Black Skimmers resting on our beach.