



This juvenile Reddish Egret is a rare visitor from the south

Brunswick Wildlife Birding Oak Island's West End

For resident and vacationing birders alike, Oak Island offers a number of good sites for finding and photographing birds. Ocean, dune, estuarine, salt marsh, and maritime forest habitats host a wide variety of birds...a mix of species that slowly but continually changes as seasons change.

For me, the west end is fast becoming one of my favorite birding locations for the fall migration and winter. It is a wonderful place to find waterbirds and shorebirds all year; however, from late August through the winter, rarities may be present.

As you drive west near the end of Beach Road, veer right on Kings Lynn Drive and drive to the parking area at the end. This site affords birders easy access to Lockwoods Folly inlet and estuary. Watch the mud flats between the parking area and inlet and those across the tidal creek on an incoming tide for the best the west end has to offer.

Tidal creeks and salt marshes give up their usual variety of waders, rails, and seaside sparrows. Occasionally, a Wood Stork may be sighted during late summer and early fall. Look for shorebirds on the estuary's mud flats, especially for Piping Plovers during migration and winter. Also, Savannah Sparrows overwinter in the dune grass, including the rare Ipswich subspecies.

Eight species of terns may be seen at the west end during fall migration: Royal, Sandwich, Common, Least, Gull-billed, Caspian, Forster's, and Black. The first five species breed on Lower Cape Fear area beaches and spoil islands.

The Caspian is our largest tern and it moves through the area in good numbers during fall migration. A few Caspian and Royal Terns plus overwintering Forster's Terns are the species you will likely see during winter.

Reddish Egrets are considered rare in North Carolina. Approximately a dozen have been reported up and down the North Carolina coast this year including this juvenile photographed on the west end.

Before 1900, they were almost eliminated from the United States by plume hunters; however, their population has somewhat recovered to nearly 2,000 breeding pairs.

Many wading birds wander extensively before reaching their breeding age. They generally return to their natal colonies to breed, especially males. Reddish Egrets, inhabitants of coastal lagoons in Gulf Coast states, disperse from their natal area in late spring or summer traveling far to the north.

Reddish Egrets use a disturb-and-chase foraging method, finding and chasing schools of small fish across mudflats. They perform a wild dance that combines running, jumping, flying, and wing flicking. Often they run forward with wings extended, stop, and bring both wings overhead to form a shadow that seems to attract fish. You have to see it to believe it!

The Great Black-backed Gull, the world's largest gull, is common in the northeastern United States and breeds along the coast from Cape Hatteras north to Labrador and around the Great Lakes.

They are extending their breeding range southward and may soon nest in our area. They generally winter throughout their breeding grounds and as far south as northern Florida and are fairly common at the west end.

In North America, Great Black-backed Gulls were nearly wiped out by feather hunters and egg collectors before the early 1900's; however, given protection and plentiful human-generated food their numbers have been restored and now exceed previous highs and they are still increasing.

The Lesser Black-backed Gull is a species that breeds in Europe and Iceland and ranges to Africa. It was once considered very rare to the Atlantic Coast and Great Lakes but is now a regular visitor during non-breeding season.

It is remarkably smaller than the Great Black-backed and has dark charcoal-gray upperparts instead of black. Though highly outnumbered by Great Black-backed and Herring Gulls on Oak Island, they may be easily identified by their yellow legs.

In closing, my thanks to the DOT for building a wonderful bridge for me to get to the west end via Midway road. When complete, it will shorten my trip from Leland by at least fifteen minutes. Hot dog I reckon!

John Ennis



The standing tern in back is a Caspian Tern with its smaller Royal Tern cousin in front



Lesser Black-backed Gulls may be recognized by their yellow legs



A family of Caspian Terns