



Brunswick Wildlife Black Skimmers

The Black Skimmer is one of our most recognizable waterbirds. It would be difficult to mistake its “bark” vocalization, orange bill adapted to catch small fish in shallow water, and unique feeding method. Watching it fish is big time fun! Its maneuverability and ability to avoid plowing into a sand bar are incredible!

A skimmer’s lower bill (mandible) is longer than its upper bill (maxilla). When feeding, a skimmer flies over the water with its bill open and its lower bill slicing the surface as shown in the photo. The width of its bill is narrow and knife-like, enabling it to cut through water with ease. When the lower bill touches a fish, the upper bill quickly snaps down to nab it. Their highly tactile bill allows skimmers to forage in low light or at night.

Both photographs above were taken at the Mason Inlet Waterbird Management Area on the north end of Wrightsville Beach, which is probably the best place to see skimmers nesting in our area. The sanctuary was created with the relocation of the inlet and, in 2003, New Hanover County contracted with Audubon for habitat management, leading to increasing nesting successes for Black Skimmers.

One photo shows a juvenile begging for a meal...its parents have flown in with a delivery like “meals-on-wings”. On a recent hike, I counted five juveniles in the flock of adults.

Resting skimmers will lay with their heads flat and with their chins and bills resting on the sand. Generally, a juvenile’s first response when alerted to danger by adults is to lay flat because the juvenile’s plumage offers great camouflage, especially when flattened against sand and broken shells.

Skimmers are very social, colonial birds. They nest in sub-colonies of a larger colony and are found in large flocks after breeding season. Successful colonies generally use the same nest site year after year; however, failed colonies generally relocate.

Skimmers make scrape nests, which are just shallow depressions, by kicking sand and throwing it backwards. Both male and female participate in nest building and also in

incubation. Eggs are incubated constantly and are uncovered only momentarily during nest changes or if the birds are disturbed. Skimmers protect their nests from drifting sand, retrieve displaced eggs, and uncover buried eggs, all necessary behaviors for birds nesting in sometimes harsh conditions.

Black Skimmers may be found in the Lower Cape Fear region all year; however, the small number we see in winter are likely those that breed north of us and not permanent residents. Our breeding skimmers probably overwinter further south and along the Gulf of Mexico

Mason Inlet has become a successful nesting colony for skimmers. The number of live chicks hatched grew from two in 2002 to forty-one during 2005. Their status currently ranges from “endangered” in New Jersey to “threatened” in New York to “species of special concern” in North Carolina and Florida. As with many waterbirds, loss of breeding habitat is the main cause for population declines.

Most colonies nest on sandy beaches, islands, and shell bars; however, they increasingly use “spoil” islands that are byproducts of dredging. Skimmers prefer open, sandy substrate with a small amount of plant cover for nesting. Creation of spoil islands is our way of giving back habitat that has been lost but only if the amount of vegetation is managed.

Skimmers nest near colonies of terns such as Common Terns. They benefit from the extra protection provided by the aggressive terns. At Mason Inlet, the tern neighbors are a large colony of Least Terns, a colony also benefiting from creation of the sanctuary and their numbers have increased from zero nests in 2002 to 614 nests in 2005.

It is not that skimmers are shy and docile...they are also ferocious! They will fly out to buzz those coming too near a juvenile...both parents and a host of other adults.

John Ennis

