

A Closer Look at our Bird Friends

As a new column, that I hope will become a regular feature, it seemed that sharing some in depth information on one of our favorite species would enhance both our knowledge and appreciation of one of our bird friends. I chose the Black Skimmer because it is the "mascot", so to speak, of SEVAS and also a really cool bird! My hope is that someone else might want to write about a favorite bird each month. If not, too bad, I get to choose!!

The Black Skimmer

There is hardly anything more graceful in the bird kingdom than a flock of Black Skimmers furrowing the shallow waters off shore in search of small fish. With their reddish and black bills, bold black and white bodies, and long wings they make a beautiful picture. Their bills are distinctively adapted for fishing. The large lower mandible plows through the water until it feels a fish then the smaller upper mandible snaps shut and "voila", dinner is served. Flocks in flight can often be seen turning in unison like synchronized swimmers as they fish the waters together.

Black Skimmers are members of the gulls and terns family (Laridae). They can sometimes be seen in flocks, resting on sandbars or beaches, often with their necks outstretched and heads flat on the sand. A pose, by the way, that they also use to "play dead" or to protect their young from predators. During a recent birding trip at a stop on the way to Merritt Island there was a big flock resting on the parking lot with some gulls. A great photo op!

They are social birds that nest in colonies mostly along the coast. They nest on the ground on an open sandy beach by making a shallow scrape in the sand and can produce 4-5 eggs. The parents mate for life and share brooding responsibilities. They feed the young, by regurgitation, a diet that consists of mostly small fish or crustaceans living in the shallow waters. Interestingly, the young have the same length upper and lower mandibles, increasing their ability to pick up fallen food on the ground. (Imagine trying to pick up a morsel of regurgitated fish if your lower beak is bigger than the top part!) The beak size changes at about 4 weeks when the baby birds fledge and they fish on their own.

Skimmers are very sensitive to anything that disturbs their nesting habits such as high water from storms, ATV and vehicular traffic on beaches, predators such as Laughing Gulls, dogs, raccoons, and beach side development. All of these can create nest abandonment and/or chick mortality. So, climate change and human activities account for much of the decline in their population. Hopefully, the next time you see one of these beautiful birds you will remember how special they are and that we can all do something to protect them.