

# COLONIAL WATERBIRDS

NORTH CAROLINA WILDLIFE RESOURCES COMMISSION

*fact sheet, 2005*



**C**olonial waterbirds are just that—birds that nest in colonies or groups. Nesting colonies may consist of only a few pairs to a few thousand pairs of birds. Twenty-five species of colonial waterbirds nest in North Carolina, many of which you may have seen in our coastal towns and on our barrier beaches such as pelicans, egrets, herons, terns, skimmers and gulls.

Colonial waterbirds use a wide variety of nesting habitats ranging from barrier island beaches and estuarine islands to maritime forests and swamps. Each species is adapted to a particular nesting “substrate” and plant community. Terns and skimmers generally nest on bare sand and shell with little or no vegetation. Other birds, such as pelicans, prefer to nest in grasses or low shrubs while wading birds, like egrets and herons, most often nest in shrubs or trees. Our beaches and estuaries also provide important roosting and foraging habitat for migrating and wintering colonial waterbirds.

## SURVEYS AND RESEARCH

Biologists with the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission conduct coast-wide colonial waterbird surveys every two to three years. This work has provided valuable information on the location, species composition and size of nesting colonies, as well as population trends. Data have shown that populations of some species of colonial nesters are declining. Beach nesters—such as common terns, gull-billed terns and black skimmers—have shown the most significant declines. Coastal development, increased nesting disturbances by humans and increased nest predation all contribute to these declines.

In response to these declines, Commission biologists have conducted several research projects to investigate causes of these declines. Recently, Commission biologists have examined reproductive success on the barrier island



beaches and used video surveillance to identify causes of nest failures. The Commission also pursues techniques to increase reproductive success, such as using decoys and recorded calls to attract birds to suitable nesting habitat on dredged material islands.

Royal terns nest within inches of one another on the bare sands of mostly uninhabited islands.



## HABITAT PROTECTION

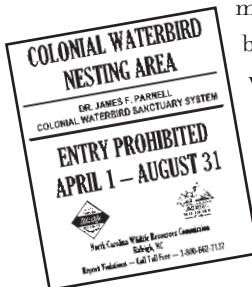
Humans and their pets easily disturb nesting waterbirds. Flushing the adults from their nests, especially during cool spring or hot summer weather, may put excessive stress on the eggs or nestlings. In addition, nests and chicks of many waterbirds are extremely well camouflaged. People can easily step on them, and dogs often trample nests and break eggs or crush chicks.

In an attempt to protect colonial waterbird nesting habitats from human disturbance, the Commission prohibits entry on 21 state-owned islands every year. These areas are closed to the general public from April 1 to August 31 to protect the nesting colonies during the breeding season. Signs are maintained year-round to notify fishermen, outdoor enthusiasts and other users of the protected nesting areas.

As the human population increases along our barrier beaches, colonial waterbird nesting sites are vanishing at an alarming rate. Many marshes and nesting islands are being converted to housing developments and private getaways. In an attempt to combat the decline of nesting areas, the Commission works closely with the United States Army Corps of Engineers to create nesting habitat for colonial nesting waterbirds using dredged material.

Based upon Commission recommendations, the dredged material is used to stabilize existing islands and create new islands that can be used as alternative nesting sites for colonial waterbirds. Dredged material islands are becoming extremely important as habitat on barrier island beaches is lost to development. These islands provide isolated areas relatively free of human disturbance and predators. Commission biologists survey these islands every year for nesting use and success.

Biologists hope that with the joint efforts of the Commission, other conservation organizations and concerned citizens, colonial waterbird nesting habitat will continue to be protected and waterbird nesting success will increase enough to sustain the waterbird population in North Carolina for future generations.



A Wildlife Commission biologist and volunteers prepare to survey nesting birds.



White ibis adults and chicks.

### COLONIAL NESTING WATERBIRDS IN NORTH CAROLINA

Anhinga  
Double-crested cormorant  
Brown pelican  
Great blue heron  
Great egret

Snowy egret  
Little blue heron  
Tricolored heron  
Cattle egret  
Green heron

Black-crowned night heron  
Yellow-crowned night heron  
White ibis  
Glossy ibis  
Laughing gull

Herring gull  
Great black-backed gull  
Gull-billed tern  
Caspian tern  
Royal tern

Sandwich tern  
Common tern  
Forster's tern  
Least tern  
Black skimmer

### HOW YOU CAN HELP

1. Do not enter posted nesting areas from April 1 through August 31.
2. Keep dogs on a leash when on the beach.
3. Do not leave any trash on the beach. Discarded garbage attracts predators to nesting areas. Fishing line that is left on the beach entangles and kills birds.
4. Educate yourself and others on waterbird biology, identification and the importance of protecting habitat.
5. Volunteer with wildlife management agencies to help conduct annual waterbird surveys.
6. Join a conservation organization to stay informed about current population trends and conservation efforts.
7. Donate to the N.C. Nongame and Endangered Wildlife Fund.

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