

CHANGES IN THE SEASON IS FOR THE (SHORE) BIRDS

Have you noticed? There is a change in the way the morning and afternoon light hits Marco Island and in the way the air feels lighter on your skin. It must be fall in southwest Florida. To many, it means time for the first “snow birds” to arrive with the Island roads, restaurants and shops getting pleasantly busier. For regular beach goers and birders, the change means time for a different type of “snow bird” to arrive on the beach – seeing the end of the spring and summer shorebird nesting species changing to the fall migration and wintering shorebird species arrival to the beautiful Marco Island beach.

Changing Sands

This past nesting season for shorebirds, specifically the Wilson Plover (*Charadrius wilsonia*), Least Terns (*Sternula antillarum*) and Black Skimmers (*Rynchops niger*), on Marco Island in the Big Marco Pass federal Critical Wildlife Area (CWA), otherwise known locally as Sand Dollar Island, was hugely successful. Successful nesting equated to approximately 800 adult Black Skimmers, 225 Least Terns and a dozen Wilson Plovers nesting producing high numbers of chicks, even though the entire “island” changed dramatically due to currents, tides and storms. This nesting success makes Marco Island Big Marco Pass CWA the largest nesting site in the State of Florida for Black Skimmers and the second largest for Least Terns.

Sand Dollar Island, the dynamic spit of sand attached to Marco Island since the late 1990’s, has threatened to breach for many years during the stormy summer months. Especially with seasonal higher than average tides, the Gulf of Mexico has rolled over the thinnest part of the “island”, only to rebuild and stay intact after a few tidal cycles. This past July, Sand Dollar Island finally did breach in two, but not at what looked to be the most vulnerable point. Instead it breached approximately a third of the length of the “island” from the most northern tip – almost at the historical point for the opening of Big Marco Pass. In the past two and half months, the breach has widened and deepened creating a “new” island to the north of Sand Dollar Island and a natural pass wide enough for boat traffic to pass through to the Gulf of Mexico. The depth and width of the pass look to be somewhat permanent for near future.

Shorebird Steward Success

This year was the second year for the Collier County Shorebird Steward Program coordinated by the Collier Shorebird Alliance. Shorebird Stewards are trained volunteers who spend a few hours on the beach each weekend during the shorebird nesting season, April through mid-August. Their role is to minimize nest disturbance by educating beach goers about the beach-nesting shorebirds and the posted areas for nesting, doing simple repairs to the postings of the nesting areas and collecting data for Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC). In Collier County, Collier Audubon, City of Marco Island and FWC have coordinated a successful program with 12-15 trained volunteers, or stewards, on the beach regularly each weekend from April through mid-August to share knowledge on the nesting shorebirds, their characteristics, habitat and natural history, and provide opportunities for beach goers to see the shorebird chicks up close with birding scopes. This past season, 3,300 Marco Island beachgoers were contacted with the information from the Shorebird Stewards. Birding and beaching go hand-in-hand in our beautiful natural environment of Sand Dollar Island. Research has shown ecotourism is on the rise and very valuable for Florida’s economy. The Stewards stats show beachgoers from around the world visited Marco Island, thrilled to view and share the beach with the threatened bird species and their chicks. Shorebird Stewards are

committed to educating beachgoers about Big Marco Pass CWA ensuring its status as one of the largest colonies of nesting Black Skimmers and Least Terns in the state of Florida.

Changes for Fall Migration and Wintering Shorebirds

Now that nesting is over and chicks have fledged, the fall brings about migrating species, such as the Ringed-billed and Herring Gulls, Caspian, Royal, Sandwich and Forster's Terns, Piping Plover, Semipalmated Plover, Whimbrel, Ruddy Turnstone, Marbled Godwit, Dunlin, Red Knot, Dowitchers, and more. They stop over and feed and rest on their way to South America or winter over. Beach goers can also see White Ibis, Snowy Egrets, Brown Pelicans, Reddish Egrets, Osprey and even a Peregrine Falcon. Big Marco Pass is habitat for over sixty species of sea, shore and water birds. What is truly unique and amazing to the Marco Island beach goer is how many species one can see in a walk and how close one can get without disturbing them. For a developed, urban Island with an extensive recreational beach, Sand Dollar Island is really a natural paradise in Marco Island's own backyard. Some species will winter, like many "snow birds". So, how we as a community welcome the "snow birds" from the northern states, let's do the same for the migrating and wintering shorebirds on the beach. Do not chase or disturb a flock of birds - they are just resting and conserving energy for their global journeys.

What You Can Do to Help

- Respect posted and closed beach areas and please keep your distance.
- Leave your pet at home – dogs or pets are not allowed on the Marco Island beaches.
- Keep it clean - Litter is not only unsightly but attracts shorebird predators such as fire ants, raccoons and crows.
- Volunteer as a Shorebird Steward – contact Nancy Richie at 239-389-5003 or nrichie@cityofmarcoisland.com.
- Be a part of the expanding knowledge of shorebirds – report your observations to shorebird@myfwc.com. (Please note in the email the date, time, specific as possible location, species or best description, and describe any leg band colors or combinations of bands.)
- Report dogs on the beach or vandalism to the posted area to the Collier County Sheriff non-emergency number **239-252-9300**. Be specific with your information, even take a photo. The information will be relayed to the FWC Law Enforcement.

For more information on shorebirds or to volunteer as a Shorebird Steward, visit the websites: www.flshorebirdalliance.org or www.collieraudubon.org. And get out there and enjoy the beautiful Marco Island beach!

- - Nancy J. Richie, 10/11/11