Bird Stewards Make the Difference

September has left the building and the last lingering baby birds are fledging from Florida’s islands and beaches. In this at-a-glance report, we are recognizing the hard work of Florida’s dedicated resource managers, Bird Stewards, and Colony Watchers, and celebrating the end of a successful 2013 nesting season.

Although not without its own challenges, the 2013 season did not have the brutal finality of 2012’s Tropical Storm Debby, which squashed breeding success statewide.

Read on for regional accounts of successes, challenges and the dedicated people who made all the difference for coastal birds this year.

Panhandle Birds Eke Out Success, Face Tremendous Coyote Predation

This season, Audubon took increased responsibility for managing and stewarding beach-nesting birds at 19 sites throughout the Panhandle, in partnership with the Florida Park Service, Tyndall and Eglin Air Force bases, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Apalachicola National Estuarine Research Reserve, The Nature Conservancy, and more. The volunteer response from folks eager to help protect these birds and their babies was both overwhelming and humbling.

Santa Rosa Island in Pensacola won the award for most nontraditional nesting sites this season! Audubon stewards chaperoned the Least Tern and Black Skimmer colony that set up shop—and successfully fledged dozens of chicks—in the parking lot of the Margaritaville Beach Hotel, Landshark Landing.

Kudos to the bird-friendly proprietors and patrons of these establishments who supported temporary posted areas that protected the birds, even though they reduced the number of parking spaces available. The students of Pensacola Beach Elementary, FWC biologists, Audubon staff, neighbors and volunteers posted a Least Tern colony on the school’s grounds and playing field, and FWC and Audubon worked to post the impromptu Least Tern and skimmer colony that settled on the perilous road shoulder of the Navarre Causeway.

In the Central Panhandle, volunteers joined the devoted staff of the Florida Park Service and Audubon to steward colonies in a traditional fashion, as well through new outreach opportunities—on the bus ferrying visitors between parking and the beach at St. Andrews State Park, painting skimmer decoys at Panama City’s Earth Day celebration, and engaging boaters at launches.

While nesting success was better this season without the catastrophic effects of Tropical Storm Debby, impacts from coyotes were devastating in much of the Panhandle, with nesting pairs often losing multiple clutches to these wily non-native predators.

The birds worked for every chick they managed to fledge, and so did the region’s dedicated resource managers and volunteers. Thanks for the inspiring effort this season!
At-a-Glance:
Florida’s Coastal Nesting Season 2013

West-Central Florida Wading Bird Nesting Strong with Colony Watch

The wading bird nesting season began amidst a prolonged drought, with wetlands across the region low and evaporating. With the warm winter, early nesters (Great Blue Herons, Brown Pelicans, Wood Storks, and Roseate Spoonbills) started even earlier, but a sharp cold spell in March delayed nesting of the second wave of tree-nesting colonial waterbirds (herons, egrets, ibis), which nested later than usual.

On the 29 islands Audubon posts, patrols, and surveys—from northern Pinellas to northern Charlotte counties as well as the additional 46 where we partner with land managers—staff and volunteers counted 53,500 nesting pairs of colonial waterbirds in the region. Productivity for the tree-nesting wading birds was good this year as these birds were not greatly impacted by any tropical storms, but the ground-nesting birds suffered from losses related to the Tropical Storm Andrea’s storm surge in June.

Colony Watch volunteers in the region generously adopted 13 nesting waterbird colonies in their neighborhoods, becoming expert observers, monitors, and advocates for their special site sites, while working closely with Audubon staff. Progress included posting the prolific Wood Stork colony islands in Lake Somerset through an agreement with the City of Lakeland, strongly supported by Colony Watch volunteers Lillian Blessing, Mike and Colleen Fearney, Reinier Munguia, and Harold Moulder, and the Sagebrush Colony in north Tampa, an effort led by Pat Lewis and Cheryl Merz.

And for the 20th year in row, Audubon worked with Tampa Bay Watch to coordinate the Tampa Bay Fall Fishing Line Cleanup with Tampa Bay Watch, where 50 boat captains and their crews removed dangerous, bird-life threatening line from nesting and foraging island habitats in Tampa Bay; the Sarasota Bay Watch effort, enlisting 15 boat captains and crew, completed its fifth Fishing Line Cleanup for that special bay.

Congratulations to Tampa Audubon, Manatee Audubon and St. Petersburg Audubon for their leadership in addressing fishing line entanglement issues at the Sunshine Skyway Bridge Pier, helping to develop a stewardship and outreach program to reduce bird injuries from fishing gear.

Suncoast Volunteers See Results

Three Rooker Bar, a part of Anclote Key Preserve State Park, hosted the area’s largest Least Tern colony in recent memory this summer – and fledged 100 chicks despite a washout as Tropical Storm Andrea passed by on the Gulf Coast. John Hood, Clearwater Audubon President, purchased a boat out of pocket this year and with help from two other boat captains, ferried 27 volunteers to the island, 3-4 per day, for six-hour bird steward shifts on 25 weekends and holidays watching over thousands of Royal, Sandwich, Caspian, and Least Terns, Laughing Gulls, American Reddish Egret by Jim Gray.

Oystercatchers, plovers and other shorebirds.

Sarasota County bird steward coordinator Ruth Ellen Piepert reported unusually good nesting success at Lido Beach – 3 Snowy Plover chicks fledged – and at Longboat Key where a post-Tropical Storm Andrea Black Skimmer colony fledged 40 young birds.

St. Petersburg Audubon’s shorebird steward coordinator Saskia Janes, reported 1,672 volunteer hours invested in protected nesting birds at Fort Desoto County Park and the Black Skimmer colony at Indian Shores. Volunteers engaged...
At-a-Glance: Florida’s Coastal Nesting Season 2013

in education about beach-dependent birds with 2,173 people during the season at the two beaches. On Indian Shores, there were 227 Black Skimmer nests resulting in 100 fledged chicks! Bird Stewards experimented with the temporary addition of silt fencing around the colony on the evening of July 4th which prevented the chicks from scattering with each fireworks explosion.

The central Pinellas County rooftop that formerly saw 200-300 Least Tern chicks fall off each year has been outfitted with roof-perimeter fencing for a second year with great success. Only eight young birds were found off the roof and these were old enough to fly over the fencing but not quite strong enough to return to the roof on their own.

Despite Unusual Causes of Disturbance, Stewards Protect Southwest Florida’s Super-Sized Colonies

This season in Lee County, Little Estero Island Critical Wildlife Area and the adjacent private beach at Carlos Pointe supported about 150 Least Tern pairs, 12 Snowy Plover nests, several Wilson’s Plovers, and one pair of American Oystercatchers, which hatched the first oystercatcher chick in many years in this area. Around 60 Black Skimmers courted but made no nests, which also would have been a local first in years.

Lee County also had a notable colony of about 35 Least Tern nests on top of the Harborside Convention Center in downtown Ft. Myers, which fledged chicks. It was monitored by a dedicated volunteer who observed from the top deck vantage point of the adjacent parking garage.

In Collier County, Big Marco Pass Critical Wildlife Area, especially Sand Dollar Spit at Tigertail Beach, supported 150–200 Least Tern nests, several Wilson’s Plover nests, and a whopping 900 Black Skimmer nests. While Tropical Storm Andrea destroyed about half of the nests in early June, re-nesting occurred and continued late into July for terns and late September for hundreds of skimmer fledglings.

Challenges at these and other area sites were diverse—frequent visits by a “pirate ship” firing cannons caused terns to abandon one site; repeated low flying aircraft flushing colonies, encroaching wildlife photographers and marauding dogs delivered to island sites by unwitting boaters also caused losses. We applaud Lee and Collier’s stewards and partners not only for their dedication to stewarding, but for their fast thinking and quick engagement to resolve these dangerous disturbances when they encountered them.

Thanks to several stewards with cameras who shared wonderful reports regularly — Jean Hall, Julie Ausbon, Christine Cook, and Meg Rousher—and our gratitude to the 25 active Lee Stewards and 22 Collier Stewards, their Site Coordinators (Roxy Barber and Julie Drevenkar), Ft. Myers Beach biologist Keith Laakkonen, Marco Island biologist Nancy Richie, and FWC bio-techs Penny Jarrett and Kristina Shope.

Northeast Florida Celebrates Successful Breeding and Ft. Matanzas Management Plan Passage

Years of engagement in management of Northeast Florida’s public lands and the heroic efforts of volunteer stewards are paying off. In St. Johns County, Least Terns settled at four beach sites and one rooftop. Thanks to new Bird Steward Coordinator Sue Killeen, our returning Bird Steward families, new volunteers, and dedicated bird surveyors, three of the beach sites and the rooftop under renovation produced chicks. Park staff, FWC staff, and Audubon volunteers (including stewarding grandchildren and high school students) helped to implement management measures and kept a close eye on this thriving colony.
At-a-Glance: Florida’s Coastal Nesting Season 2013

The Summerhaven colony produced some chicks but was impacted by a substantial disturbance: dog walkers. American Oystercatchers pairs along the Tolomato River renested and successfully produced 10 fledglings, despite all sites overwashing at least once.

More good news for Least Terns: Flagler Audubon Society volunteers report that the one known remaining rooftop nesting site in their county was reroofed during the winter, with gravel, allowing the terns to return to nest.

In Nassau and Duval counties, Fort Clinch State Park had a productive year for Wilson’s Plovers and the Least Terns returned to nest on Amelia Island Plantation beach. Most of the nests at Little Talbot Island State Park suffered from heavy predation this year, including a marauding coyote. Pre-posting at the north end of Huguenot Memorial Park resulted in the first American Oystercatcher chick fledged there since 2006. Vegetation control doubled the available nesting habitat in the dunes, new shade structures kept chicks cool, and volunteer stewards, interns, and Park staff helped keep the thousand Royal, Sandwich Terns and Laughing Gulls chicks safe.

Perhaps the region’s biggest victory this year was the approved Final Management Plan for Fort Matanzas National Monument. Congrats to the many volunteer stewards and caring community members who testified at contentious meetings and won strong bird protection measures in this critical coastal area. With the elimination of beach driving, Fort Matanzas had a banner year for Wilson’s Plovers and harbored a late-season Least Tern colony.

Although these successes are encouraging, we still have ambitions for the region. Black Skimmers and Gull-billed Terns need support to nest successfully in the region. A glimmer of hope: Although all 23 nests failed, skimmers attempted to nest on the north end of Huguenot this year.

Volunteers Support Surprise Nesting in Southeast Florida and on Keys Rooftops

Sadly, beach-nesting in lower Southeast Florida and the Keys is less common than elsewhere in the state, for lack of remaining, undisturbed habitat; most recent seabird activity in the region had occurred on gravel rooftops. So imagine the surprise and excitement of South Florida Audubon this summer when news arrived that Least Terns were once again nesting on Fort Lauderdale Beach!

President Doug Young and Conservation Chair Grant Campbell had attended the inaugural meeting of the Florida Shorebird Alliance’s Southeast Shorebird Partnership in May and had volunteered to monitor a handful of historical Least Tern rooftop colonies sites. Instead, the birds returned to the beach for the first time since 1987! Doug took on the role of volunteer coordinator working alongside member Stanley Pannaman. Audubon Florida provided our Bird Stewarding Manual, and Saskia Janes (Shorebird Coordinator for St. Petersburg Audubon) joined the volunteers via conference call to share training tips and South Florida’s first beach nesting bird stewards went to work.

Stewards tended the site during busy weekends and the critically important 4th of July holiday, when fireworks can cause frightened birds to abandon their nesting efforts. Facing predation challenges, the colony fledged 7 chicks but we’re hoping they’ll be back next season—South Florida’s new bird steward program will be ready.

Further to the South, Audubon Florida Everglades Research Manager Pete Frezza became a volunteer for the brand new Florida Keys Partnership, agreeing to monitor five rooftop colonies. Rooftop monitoring comes with the additional challenge of working with the building property owners where messy bird droppings and falling chicks can create a nuisance. Two of the colonies were inactive, but counts at two others revealed dozens of feathered chicks at each.

Coordinating with building owners, Pete worked to ensure fallen chicks were returned to rooftops and to install barriers to reduce the number of fallen chicks.

Interested in helping or becoming a Bird Steward? Send an email to ficonservation@audubon.org or visit: http://bit.ly/HelpCoastalBirds

Page 4

October 2013