

# Sea Science

A Series by SCDNR Marine Resources Division

## Seabirds & Shorebirds

### Shorebirds

Shorebirds are commonly found along the shorelines of oceans, lakes, ponds and rivers. They are small birds that migrate long distances. Some travel from as far as the southern tip of South America to the Arctic and back in a single year! Shorebirds fuel these long flights by feeding on invertebrates including horseshoe crab eggs, coquina clams and other small crustaceans.

South Carolina hosts over 20 species of shorebirds that are a wide variety of shapes, sizes and colors. The South Carolina coast provides important migration stopover areas for shorebirds to feed and rest. Birds like the red knot and the whimbrel can spend weeks building muscle and fat reserves on our shores before continuing their northward migration to breed and raise young in the Arctic.

In the spring and summer, shorebirds such as Wilson's plover, willet and American oystercatcher nest on beaches in South Carolina. As solitary nesters, shorebirds lay eggs that are well-camouflaged in their environment. Speckled eggs are laid in a small nest scrape on top of the sand above the high tide line, and incubated by adults for a month. Shorebird chicks are mobile merely hours after they hatch but rely on their parents for protection until they are about 25 days old when they can fly on their own, or "fledge".

### Seabirds

Seabirds are adapted to life in the marine environment, living on or near the ocean, sometimes only coming to land to reproduce. They feed primarily on fish, making them piscivores. Most seabirds, such as terns and pelicans, plunge dive into schools of fish to feed, while black skimmers carve their bill along the water's surface to catch fish.

In South Carolina, seabirds such as the brown pelican, black skimmer, royal tern and least tern gather in large numbers to nest together in colonies during the breeding season, which can extend from March through October. Just like shorebirds, seabirds make their nest directly on the ground, usually in a shallow scrape on the sand, or in the case of the brown pelican, a nest made of twigs and wrack. Colonies can consist of tens to thousands of birds and are usually found on isolated offshore islands or on wide open beaches near an inlet.

## Protect Coastal Birds in SC

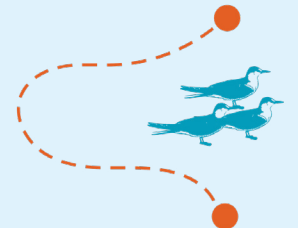
Keep dogs at home or on a leash



Don't feed wildlife



Go around flocks



Stay out of closed areas



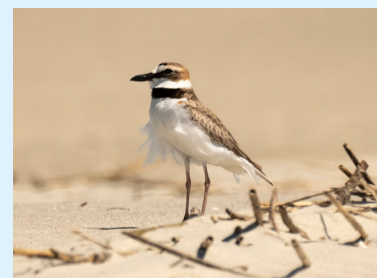
Find the full Sea Science Series by SCDNR at [bit.ly/seasciences](http://bit.ly/seasciences)

## Declining Populations

Shorebird and seabird species are declining worldwide due to a range of threats including climate change, sea level rise, loss of food resources, coastal development, oil spills and human disturbance. Shorebirds that stop on our shores during migration are particularly vulnerable. They must efficiently feed and rest to survive their long journeys. When disturbed by people or dogs while at the beach, their chance of survival drops as they spend valuable energy escaping the perceived threat. Nesting birds also face obstacles when rearing chicks. Storms and exceptionally high tides, which are increasing in frequency with climate change, wash away eggs and chicks. Predators, such as crows, laughing gulls, coyotes, racoons and even owls, eat eggs and small chicks, at times causing the failure of entire colonies. Dogs entering nesting colonies can also cause the same catastrophic results.

SCDNR biologists protect areas where birds rest, nest and feed. To protect beach nesting birds, SCDNR Seabird Sanctuaries are closed to visitors during critical months when birds are nesting. Signs and symbolic fencing are used to identify and protect other important habitats along the coast. Biologists monitor nesting sites and count nesting seabirds using aerial photography and on the ground observations. Additionally, staff participate in tagging and banding of coastal birds to learn more about migration patterns and population trends of these declining species.

South Carolina is important for the survival of many coastal bird species. You can help conservation efforts by familiarizing yourself with local regulations before heading to the beach and by avoiding nesting and feeding birds.



## Identify SC's Coastal Birds



### Shorebirds



### Seabirds