



Common Name: BLACK SKIMMER

Scientific Name: *Rynchops niger* Linnaeus

Other Commonly Used Names: American skimmer, cut-water, knifebill, scissorbill, sea dog, storm gull, shearwater

Previously Used Names: None

Family: Laridae

Rarity Ranks: G5/S1

State Legal Status: Rare

Federal Legal Status: Not listed

Federal Wetland Status: N/A

Description: The adult black skimmer is 45-46 cm (18 in) in length with a wingspan of about 112 cm (44 in). It has black upperparts and white underparts. The outer portions of the upper surface of its tail are white as are portions of the trailing edges of its upper wings. This bird's orange-and-black bill has a compressed lower mandible that extends well beyond the upper mandible and is used to skim small fish and other food from the surface of the water. Feet and legs are orange to reddish-orange. Juveniles have mottled gray and white upperparts instead of black. Their bills are a much duller orange-gray in color and their feet and legs are pinkish.

Immature birds are similar to adults, but have grayish upper surfaces on their wings and often some gray color on the shoulders and nape.

Similar Species: Adult royal terns (*Thalasseus maximus*) and caspian terns (*Hydroprogne caspia*) are the most similar species to adult skimmers; however, they both have light gray backs, black legs, and much shorter bills with mandibles that are about the same length. Their bills are bright orange (royal tern) to red or red-orange (caspian tern). The juvenile caspian tern can look similar to the juvenile black skimmer, but its back is lighter in color, its cap tends to be darker gray-black than the skimmer's, its bill is a lighter orange or yellowish orange color, and it has black legs.

Habitat: Black Skimmers form breeding colonies on beaches, sandbars, dredge spoil islands, and marsh islands. They prefer sparsely vegetated, sandy substrates and often nest in close association with gulls and terns. In areas where such habitat is lacking, they may nest on the wrack line in saltmarsh. Foraging habitat includes bays, estuaries, tidal creeks and rivers, saltmarsh pools, and other shallow coastal waters, usually within 5 km (3 mi) of the nesting site.

Diet: Small fish, particularly killifish (*Fundulus spp.*), herrings, and pipefish, and small crustaceans.

Life History: Mated pairs usually arrive at colonies in Georgia in late April or May and begin constructing shallow, unlined nest scrapes in the sand. Normally, a clutch of 1-5 eggs is laid by mid-June. Eggs are incubated for 21–25 days before hatching. Both adults brood the young for the first week after hatching and guard them in the nest for two additional weeks. Chicks are semiprecocial, leaving the nest within 1-5 days. They begin to fly after about 5 weeks but remain dependent on their parents for food for at least a few more weeks.

Survey Recommendations: Helicopter, boat, or pedestrian surveys of beaches, sand spits, and other habitats likely to support this species. Skimmers often nest in colonies with other ground nesting waterbird species, so any surveys for these other species can detect skimmer nesting. Surveys should be conducted from a safe distance to prevent stress or colony abandonment. Documenting the number of nests and location of nesting colonies should be the highest priority. High-resolution digital photographs may be very useful in determining the number of nests as well as the nesting stage of individual nests. Additional information that would be useful would be the average number of young produced per nest and survivorship to fledging or independence.

Range: In North America the Black Skimmer breeds locally along the Atlantic Coast from Massachusetts to Florida and along the Gulf Coast from Florida to the Yucatán Peninsula. Small numbers breed at a handful of sites along the Pacific Coast from southern California south to Nayarit, Mexico. The majority of the North American population winters along the Atlantic coast of southern Florida, the Gulf Coast, and southward along both coasts of Mexico and Central America. A few birds winter as far north as the Carolinas. Nesting was first documented in Georgia on Sea Island in 1903 and skimmers were found nesting on Oysterbed Island at the mouth of the Savannah River in the 1920s with the nesting population at this site reaching 800–1,000 pairs in 1927. During the Breeding Bird Atlas (1994-2001) this species nested on Little Egg Island Bar and on the north end of Wassaw Island. More recently, black skimmers have nested or attempted to nest at Tybee, Little Tybee, and Little St. Simons islands; Little Egg

Island Bar; Pelican Spit; St. Catherines Island Bar; a sandbar in the Ogeechee River near Ossabaw Island; and at a new dredge spoil site near the mouth of the Brunswick River in Glynn County.

Threats: Black skimmer populations declined during the late 1800s as a result of market hunting and egg collecting. They rebounded following protection under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (1918), but by the 1970s numbers began declining again due to development of coastal habitats. Populations have apparently stabilized in most locations. Coastal development still poses a significant direct and indirect threat to this species. Beach armoring could result in changes to the natural deposition of sand and reduce areas of beach nesting habitat. Hydrologic changes resulting from new causeways, docks, and other structures could also affect natural beach building processes and could impact water flow regimes resulting in loss of foraging sites. Vehicles, people, and pets can crush eggs and young birds and dogs may chase and kill young and occasionally adult birds. Significant disturbance at nest sites may lead to abandonment of the colony and the subsequent loss of young. Numerous other human-mitigated factors have the potential to affect black skimmers negatively, including exposure to contaminants, hunting in the neotropics, and loss of nesting habitat because of global sea level rise.

Georgia Conservation Status: Wassaw, Tybee, Little Tybee, and Little St. Simons Islands; Little Egg Island Bar; Pelican Spit; St. Catherines Island Bar; a sandbar in the Ogeechee River near Ossabaw Island; and at a new dredge spoil site near the mouth of the Brunswick River in Glynn County.

Conservation and Management Recommendations: In 1976 there were an estimated 380 pairs of skimmers nesting at three sites on the Georgia Coast. During the Breeding Bird Atlas project (1994-2001) about 200–300 pairs nested each year at Little Egg Island Bar and in 2005 nearly 700 pairs nested at this site. Although small colonies have been documented elsewhere along our coast, Little Egg Island Bar remains the state's most important breeding site. Reducing human disturbance at breeding colonies is a primary conservation goal throughout much of the black skimmer's range. This species is generally intolerant of humans, and females may abandon frequently disturbed colonies before laying their eggs. Restrictions on beach vehicle traffic and fencing around colonies have helped to increase reproductive success in some locations. Management for black skimmers in Georgia focuses on maintaining low levels of recreational disturbance and controlling emergent vegetation at colony sites.

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C. George, 2010: Breeding Bird Atlas species account

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