

BLACK SKIMMER

Rynchops niger

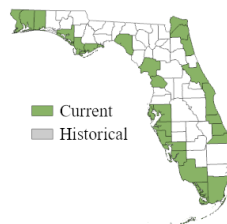
Order: Charadriiformes

Family: Laridae

FNAI Ranks: G5/S3

U.S. Status: none

FL Status: Threatened



Description: A coastal waterbird with a red, black-tipped bill and red legs. Bill's lower mandible is much longer than upper, and whole bill is laterally compressed, like a knife. Top of head, back, and most of upper sides of wings are black in adults and mottled dingy brown in juveniles. White trailing edge to wings; white outer tail feathers. The forehead, cheeks, and underparts are white, contrasting sharply with black above. Nonbreeding adults sport a white collar. Skims food (mostly small fishes) from surface of water while flying with lower mandible in water.

Similar Species: Unlikely to be confused with other waterbirds or shorebirds. Lower mandible longer than upper is diagnostic.

Habitat: Coastal waters, including beaches, bays, estuaries, sandbars, tidal creeks (foraging), and also inland waters of large lakes, phosphate pits, and flooded agricultural fields. Nests primarily on sandy beaches, small coastal islands, and dredge spoil islands, but also on gravel rooftops. Inland nesting record along a road in an agricultural area.

Seasonal Occurrence: Resident along most of coast, but retreats somewhat in south Florida to breed farther north. Fewer present in panhandle and more abundant in southernmost Florida and the Keys in winter.

Florida Distribution: Breeds along Gulf coast from Escambia County south to Collier County and on Atlantic coast from Nassau County to Broward County. More prevalent in southernmost Florida and the Keys in winter. Also frequents large inland lakes and phosphate pits.

Range-wide Distribution: Breeds locally from Massachusetts south to Florida on the Atlantic coast and along the Gulf coast west through Texas and south to the Yucatan peninsula. On the Pacific coast, from southern California to Ecuador; also from

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Columbia to northern Argentina, including larger rivers. Winters from southern U.S. to southern South America.

Conservation Status: Data gathered in the early 1990s suggest an estimate of 1,500 - 2,000 breeding pairs, somewhat lower than a previous estimate of about 2,250 pairs during 1976 - 1978. Several known breeding sites occur within public and private conservation lands, and some are designated as Critical Wildlife Areas. Like other coast dwellers, black skimmers are vulnerable to human disturbance, which may reduce breeding success; also affected by flooding during high tides and by predators, including raccoons (*Procyon lotor*) and laughing gulls (*Larus atricilla*).

Protection and Management: Increased management needed for people and pets (e.g., posting and law enforcement) at some colony sites and probably at many loafing and foraging sites. Keep dredge spoil islands and causeway rights-of-way free of thick vegetation to extend use of these sites by terns and skimmers. Predator control may also be necessary in some situations.

References: Poole and Gill (eds.) 1994, Robertson and Woolfenden 1992, Rodgers et al. (eds.) 1996, Stevenson and Anderson 1994.



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