

NOTES

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WINTERING LOCATIONS OF BLACK SKIMMERS BREEDING IN THE FLORIDA PANHANDLE

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During the summers of 1996 to 1998, Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission (FGFWFC) personnel banded 207 Black Skimmer (*Rynchops niger*) chicks in four roof and six ground colonies situated from Franklin County to Escambia County in the Florida Panhandle (Bolte and Cobb 1998). In 1996, 46 chicks were banded with aluminum U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) bands and from one to three color bands, and 4 chicks with only USFWS bands. In 1997, 79 chicks were banded with USFWS bands and three color bands, and 23 with only USFWS bands. In 1998, 34 chicks were banded with USFWS bands and three color bands, and 21 with only USFWS bands.

By mid-September of each year, all skimmers had left their breeding colonies. In the winters (December through mid-February) of 1997-98 and 1998-99 we looked for banded skimmers in Taylor and Levy counties, and in 1998-99 in Pinellas County. Surveys of roosting flocks resulted in observing 14 skimmers for which the original colony location could be determined (Table 1). Distances between the breeding colony and winter location ranged from 69 to 468 km.

We observed that winter skimmer populations were composed of individuals from more than one breeding colony. In the winter of 1997-98 on Cedar Key, we detected five banded skimmers, but we could not read all the color bands because some bands were lost or the view was obscured by the flock or muddy feet. We saw enough colors, however, to determine that they were different than individuals whose bands could be seen well (Table 1).

We also observed skimmers with USFWS bands only. On 2 February 1998, we found a banded skimmer at Keaton Beach, Taylor County (29°49', 83°35'), which is 95 km from the closest colony in which birds were banded; in the winter of 1998-99, we detected at least two skimmers at Cedar Key, one on Dunedin Causeway, and seven at Fort Desoto with USFWS bands only.

Based on Christmas Bird Counts (CBCs) from 1962-72, highest concentrations of wintering skimmers occur in East Florida around Daytona Beach and inland in the Everglades (Root 1988). Our summary of CBC data from 1980-89 indicated that the highest densities of skimmers in Florida were at Jacksonville, Cocoa, and Coot Bay (in the Everglades). Along the Gulf coast from 1980-89, St. Petersburg CBCs averaged >250 skimmers, North Pinellas CBCs >370 skimmers, and Cedar Key, farther north on the Gulf, averaged >300 skimmers.

Black (1981) speculated that the source of individuals in winter skimmer populations at Cedar Key must be from states other than New York, New Jersey, Virginia, or the Carolinas, because she detected no skimmers that were banded in these locations. Despite winter use of Cedar Key by skimmers since at least 1920 (Howell 1932), the historic banding record (birds banded 1925-1991) of 445 Florida skimmer recoveries had only one winter recovery in Levy County, a bird banded in South Carolina during the breeding season. The only recoveries of banded skimmers in Pinellas County before this study were from birds banded during summer in New Jersey, South Carolina, Louisiana, and the Florida Panhandle.

Table 1. Winter sightings of Black Skimmers banded in the Florida panhandle as chicks from 1996-1998.

Breeding Colony Location	Latitude	Longitude	Date	Band Date	Distance
Port of Pensacola roof	30°24'	87°12'			
Cedar Key, Back Bayou	29°8'	83°2'	30 Jan 1999 ^a	25 Jul 1996	424 km
Cedar Key, Gulf sand spit	29°9'	83°3'	13 Feb 1999	3 Jul 1996	425 km
Navarre Causeway	30°23'	86°52'			
Orange beach, Alabama	30°17'	87°28'	3 Dec 1996	5 Sep 1996	69 km
Cedar Key, Gulf sand spit	29°9'	83°3'	13 Feb 1999	2 Jul 1996	393 km
Dunedin Causeway	28°3'	82°47'	7 Jan 1999	28 Aug 1996	468 km
Dunedin Causeway	28°3'	82°47'	19 Jan 1999	9 Sep 1998	468 km
Sears roof, Panama City	30°11'	85°39'			
Fort Desoto Park, beach	27°38'	82°44'	30 Jan 1999	9 Sep 1997	397 km
Tyndall Air Force Base, sand spit	30°4'	85°37'			
Dunedin Causeway	28°3'	82°47'	13 Jan 1999 ^b	26 Aug 1996	350 km
St. George Island Causeway	29°42'	84°53'			
Cedar Key, Back Bayou ^c	29°8'	83°2'	12 Dec 1997	15 Jul 1997	188 km
Dunedin Causeway ^d	28°3'	82°47'	7 Jan 1999	15 Jul 1997	271 km
Dunedin Causeway	28°3'	82°47'	7 Jan 1999	15 Jul 1997	271 km

^aAlso observed 13 Feb 1999 at Cedar Key, Gulf sand spit.

^bAlso observed 26 Jan 1999, 28 Jan 1999, and 1 Feb 1999 at the same location.

^cThis represents 3 individual birds banded at the same colony and sighted together.

^dThis represents 2 individual birds banded at the same colony and sighted together.

Our banding observations indicate that some skimmers that breed in the region between Pensacola and the St. George Island Causeway winter in Levy and Pinellas counties.

We observed skimmers roosting on bars and mud flats at Cedar Key, which are rarely disturbed by boaters; and, Black (1981) urged conservation of winter feeding areas in shallow water between oyster bars or mudflats. We recommend that sandbars and mudflats for roosting and shallow water for foraging be protected for wintering populations of the Black Skimmer, a Species of Special Concern (Wood 1997) in Florida.

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