

## Black Skimmers

By Celeste Silling

One of my favorite birds here on the Texas coast is the Black Skimmer (*Rynchops niger*). These charismatic birds live on the beach and can often be seen skimming along the surface of the water, a behavior that is pretty unique in the bird world. The skimmers will open their bill and let their lower beak drop into the water a few inches. Then they fly along, keeping parallel to the water, waiting until they feel a fish or crustacean touch their beak. When they do feel one, they snap their bill closed, catching it!

Because they can find fish by touch, and not by sight like most birds, Black Skimmers are able to feed in low light and even at night. However, this might also lead them to snap up things that aren't entirely edible, like trash floating in the ocean.

Because their lower bill, or mandible, is made for skimming, the Black Skimmers have a pretty noticeable underbite. Most birds have a relatively balanced upper and lower mandible, or a slightly smaller lower one. But the skimmer has a very pronounced lower bill, giving it a distinctively "skimmer" appearance. This makes them relatively easy to identify in the wild, especially if they're skimming.

Black Skimmers have a long body and short orange legs. The upper half of their body is black and the underparts are white. Their bill is orange with a black tip and is quite large compared to their body size. They can often be seen roosting with gulls or terns, or in large colonies of skimmers. One of their favorite ways to spend the days is "loafing," in which they stretch out their body and lay down on the sand, resting their heavy bill on the ground. It can't be easy carrying that big beak around all day!

Black Skimmers nest in large colonies in open sandy areas or shell bars with sparse vegetation. They make their nests directly in the sand or shell. They do this by kicking sand away from a small area, then nestling down and rotating to make an indentation in the substrate. This shallow bowl in the sand is called a "scrape." Then they lay their eggs directly in the scrape and incubate them, keeping the eggs protected and at the correct temperature.

One of the dangers that skimmers and other beach-nesting birds face is disturbance. They're easily disturbed by humans, dogs, vehicles, boats or other unexpected guests entering their area or even coming near it. If disturbed, skimmers birds will fly up, panicking and calling. This leaves the eggs and chicks unprotected from predators and the elements. With our distressingly hot Texas summers, this often causes the chicks to overheat and die and the eggs to overheat and stop developing.

I love a fried egg, but not if it belongs to a skimmer! These birds are in steep decline, having lost about 87% of their population since 1966. Much of this decline is due to habitat loss as the coast is developed. With so few left, it's important that we protect the remaining Black Skimmers we have in Texas. This summer, remember to steer clear of bay islands with nesting birds on them and keep your dogs on leash and away from the dunes. And if you want to learn more about these birds, feel free to skim our website [www.GCBO.org](http://www.GCBO.org).

Photo by Jackie Hicks

Caption: A Black Skimmer family: one parent with a chick under its wing and the other bringing food for the baby.