

Black Skimmer, *Rynchops niger*

Status:

State: Endangered

Federal: Not listed

Identification

Watching the strikingly-colored black skimmer forage for food--flying low horizontally while its highly sensitive lower jaw sluices through the water--is one of the natural world's more remarkable sights. This rather unique skill is made possible by its long, laterally compressed bill, which has a lower mandible, or jaw, that extends beyond the upper mandible. Gull-like, with narrow, tapered wings, the black skimmer is graceful and buoyant in flight. Its call, meanwhile, is a distinct, repeated barking.



© Clay Meyers

The breeding adult black skimmer has brown-black upperparts, contrasting with a white forehead and underparts. The upperwing shows a white trailing edge from the secondaries to the inner primaries. The tail is white, with dark central feathers. The bill is black with a reddish-orange base. The legs and feet are also reddish-orange. Male black skimmers are slightly larger than females. Nonbreeding adult plumage is similar, but duller, to that of breeding adults. In winter, the bill and upperparts are somewhat paler. In addition, white feathers on the nape form a light collar around the neck.

Juvenile skimmers appear similar to adults, but have duller brown upperparts with light feather edges and streaked crowns. The legs, feet, and base of the bill are dusky-red. Juveniles acquire adult-like plumage the following summer.

Habitat

The black skimmer nests on open sandy beaches, inlets, sandbars, offshore islands, and dredge disposal islands that are sparsely vegetated and contain shell fragments. The growth of dense vegetation may cause colony relocation. Skimmers also frequently nest on wrack mats (deposits of dead sea grasses and other vegetation) on marsh islands in the back bays; however, these colonies are typically much smaller than the beach colonies. Black skimmers forage in shallow-water tidal creeks, inlets, and ponds. Similar coastal and estuarine habitats are used throughout the year.

Status and Conservation

In the early 1800s, the black skimmer was a common breeder along the New Jersey coast. Egg collecting and hunting decimated skimmer populations in the state by

the early 1900s. Protection afforded by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 enabled skimmer numbers to rebound.

By the late 1970s, the black skimmer had declined and concern arose over its status in the state. Consequently, the black skimmer was listed as an endangered species in New Jersey in 1979. The majority of the state's population remains in two to three large colonies that are threatened by habitat loss or human activity. The New Jersey Natural Heritage Program considers the black skimmer to be "demonstrably secure globally," yet "imperiled in New Jersey because of rarity" (Office of Natural Lands Management 1992).

Each year, the New Jersey Endangered and Nongame Species Program (ENSP) monitors the state's black skimmer population. Nesting colonies are enclosed and patrolled by personnel. Counts of adults and young are conducted to monitor population size and productivity. Despite annual fluctuations, the state's breeding population has remained relatively stable since the time of its original listing, although the number of active colonies has declined significantly. Human disturbance, beach raking, tidal flooding, and predation continue to threaten nesting skimmers and their habitat.