

**Fort Matanzas National Monument  
Monthly Resource Management Update  
December 30, 2011**

Black Skimmers

Visitors to the ocean inlet at Fort Matanzas, or even folks driving over the bridge, may have seen a “black cloud” in recent days, rising up from the beach and moving in graceful patterns, dividing and conjoining again, until coming to rest back upon the sand. A genie perhaps, or an aerobatic dust devil? Not likely. The “cloud” is actually hundreds of black skimmers, a species of bird native to Florida.

Park staff and members of the local Audubon chapter counted at least 325 skimmers during a winter shorebird survey this month (as opposed to two last month). What is to account for this drastic increase? Although the black skimmer (*Rynchops niger*) is a permanent resident of the state, the local population is significantly augmented in late fall and winter by members of the same species migrating south from northern states. Being a socially gregarious species, black skimmers live up to the old adage that “birds of a feather flock together”, sometimes in impressive numbers.

But whether skimmers are seen in huge flocks or as solitary shorebirds, they are a physically distinctive bird. This is due to their striking color pattern and bill shape: Their upper body has black feathers, while their lower body and forehead are white, creating quite a contrast. Their bill is bright red-orange except for a black tip. Also, the lower part of the bill, or mandible, is longer than the upper mandible by two to three centimeters, an evolutionary adaptation that allows them to skim the surface of the water and capture prey (mostly fish up to twelve centimeters in length). Unlike many of the shorebirds spotted along the beach, black skimmers are usually easy to identify!

Responding to the 2010 Gulf Oil Spill at Gulf Islands National Seashore

Even at an hour like five o’ clock in morning the smell of tar is strong and lingering, never mind when it’s two in the afternoon in the middle of July. It’s a haunting smell you can’t forget or mistake for anything else but crude oil. On the beach, what appears to be a blanket of sargassum left by the high tide is instead a putrid, thick layer of oil.

BP oil crews that have been working through the night are still sifting, raking and scooping. Tractors, ATVs, tents and groups of workers have taken over what used to be a placid beach. Looking for turtle tracks from the night before is almost impossible with all the tire marks and footprints left behind. If a turtle did nest the previous night, it’s highly doubtful any trace of its activity is left. The nests that were found and marked have a rough road ahead of them. Some get washed over by oil during high tide, while others are constantly in the path of tractors and other vehicles driving all over the beach. The turtles won’t even get to hatch naturally.

In order to try to save the turtles, the eggs are dug up just before they are due to hatch. The eggs, carefully cushioned in coolers, are trucked to Canaveral National Seashore on the east coast of Florida so that the hatchlings can get a better start in the less-tainted Atlantic Ocean.

What complicates this procedure is that the eggs are in a critical stage when they are scheduled to be dug up. They are near the “pipping” stage. This means the hatchlings are beginning to break through the leathery shell, and if they are removed from the nest cavity and transported across the state in that condition, their fate is up in the air, so to speak. It is hoped that the hatchlings will have imprinted on the beach in which the eggs were laid and incubated, so that eventually they will return to the Gulf coast to lay their own eggs. It is evident, though, that the entire Gulf of Mexico environment and surrounding ecosystems will have to struggle with the consequences of the Deepwater Horizon incident for decades to come.