

Bolivar Birds Beach Outreach

houstonaudubon.org/conservation/beach-nesting-birds.html

What are “Bolivar Birds?”

Every spring and summer, beach-nesting birds return to the Bolivar Peninsula to raise their chicks directly on the sand. Unlike birds that nest in trees or marshes, species like the Wilson's Plover, Snowy Plover, and Least Tern rely entirely on the open beach (and on camouflage!) for survival.

Houston Audubon, in partnership with American Bird Conservancy, monitors these nesting populations, places symbolic fencing around key nesting areas, and coordinates outreach to help beachgoers understand how to share the shore. That outreach is where you come in.

YOUR ROLE IN ONE SENTENCE

You're going onto the beach or into the community to have friendly conversations with beachgoers to help them understand why the birds are there, what threats they face, and a few simple things anyone can do to help.

The Birds You're Protecting

Houston Audubon's beach-nesting bird monitoring focuses on three species whose cryptic, ground-level nesting makes them especially vulnerable to accidental disturbance:

- **Wilson's Plover:** A stocky shorebird with a single thick breast band. Nests in shallow scrapes in the dry sand.
- **Snowy Plover:** Smaller and paler than the Wilson's, with a partial breast band. Extremely well-camouflaged on sandy beaches.
- **Least Tern:** The smallest North American tern! Quick and vocal. Nests in loose colonies on open sand above the tide line.

Their eggs and chicks blend almost perfectly with the sand, making them nearly invisible to beachgoers. That's what makes human presence so dangerous: the nests aren't being maliciously disturbed, they're being accidentally stepped on, driven over, or abandoned when adults are repeatedly flushed.

What Puts Them at Risk

- **Foot traffic in dry sand:** Eggs and chicks are nearly invisible. A casual stroll above the tide line can be deadly during nesting season (March–August).
- **Off-leash dogs:** Shorebirds flush from a much greater distance when dogs are present, keeping parents away from eggs longer. Dogs can also kill chicks before a person even realizes there was a nest nearby.
- **Vehicles on the beach:** Tire tracks through nesting areas are one of the leading causes of nest failure.
- **Repeated flushing:** Every time an adult is scared off the nest, the eggs or chicks are exposed to predators and the harsh coastal sun. Repeated disruptions can cause a bird to abandon the nest entirely.
- **Fishing line:** Shorebirds can walk into discarded monofilament, becoming entangled around legs, wings, or necks. Standard fishing line takes about 600 years to decompose.
- **Trash:** Food scraps attract predators. Small plastic pieces are mistaken for food and can cause starvation or internal injuries. Some birds even use trash as nesting material, leaving chicks vulnerable to entanglement.

How to Share the Shore: What to Tell Beachgoers

You don't need to lecture. Most people genuinely want to do the right thing, they just don't know the nests are there! A friendly, conversational approach works best. Here are the key messages:

- **Walk in the wet sand (March–August):** Baby birds and eggs blend perfectly with dry sand. Staying near the surf keeps beachgoers on the safe side of the tide line.
- **Stay 50 yards from fenced nesting areas:** When people or pets get too close, the parent birds flush. That's 50 yards, or roughly 15 beach towels laid end to end. If a bird looks agitated, you're too close.
- **Keep dogs on a leash:** Year-round. A leashed dog is manageable. An off-leash dog in nesting habitat can cause serious harm before anyone realizes what happened.
- **Leave found chicks alone:** A chick standing alone isn't lost; its parent is watching from a distance, waiting for you to move on. Well-meaning intervention almost always does more harm than good.
- **Pick up trash and properly discard fishing line:** Gear waste and food scraps are ongoing hazards for shorebirds. Many beaches have monofilament recycling tubes; point people toward them.

HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT

This is one of the best conversation-starters you have. The eggs look exactly like sand and pebbles — so perfectly camouflaged that even trained biologists have to watch where they step. That's nature's protection. The problem is that nature didn't account for hundreds of people walking the same stretch of beach every day!

The Symbolic Fencing

From March through August, Houston Audubon places low symbolic fencing around the most active nesting areas on the Bolivar Peninsula. The fencing does not block beach access, but provides a visual cue to give nesting birds extra space. Volunteers and staff check these areas regularly and adjust the fencing as nesting activity shifts over the season.

If beachgoers ask about the fencing, explain that it marks areas where birds are actively nesting and ask them to stay outside of it. The fencing is symbolic, so it doesn't physically stop anyone, and that's why the outreach conversations matter!

Materials & Resources

- **Stickers and outreach materials:** Houston Audubon will provide these for your shifts. Use them to reward curiosity and give people something to take home.
- **Downloadable flyers (4 versions):** Great to reference or share! Available at: houstonaudubon.org/conservation/beach-nesting-birds.html
- **Social media graphics:** Canva templates are available if you want to post about your volunteer experience and tag Houston Audubon.
- **Contact for questions:** Casey Smith kcsmith@houstonaudubon.org (Bolivar Birds)
Wyatt Egelhoff wegelhoff@houstonaudubon.org (Bolivar Flats Sanctuary Manager)
Caroline Evans cevens@houstonaudubon.org (Volunteer Coordinator)

FAQ What if someone is upset that I'm asking them to move away from the birds?

Stay calm and lead with curiosity, not enforcement. Try: "We've got a few nests hidden in the dry sand over there, the chicks look just like pebbles so they're really hard to spot. We're trying to give the parents a bit of space." You're not a wildlife officer; you're a friendly person with some cool information. If someone is genuinely confrontational, disengage graciously.

FAQ What if someone asks about a bird that appears sick or injured?

Direct them to houstonaudubon.org/ways-to-help/injured-birds.html or Galveston Animal Services Unit (409-765-3702), which handles local injured wildlife calls. Houston Audubon's team focuses on nest monitoring and outreach rather than direct wildlife rescue. For chicks that appear alone on the sand, the message is almost always: leave them be. Their parent is watching.

FAQ Is there a bird I should know especially well for this outreach?

The Least Tern is your most vocal ally! Adults will often dive-bomb perceived threats near the nest, which is a dramatic and memorable behavior that you can use to explain what disturbance looks like in real time. Wilson's Plovers are the most common nesters in the fenced areas.

FAQ Can I participate if I don't know much about birds?

Yes! No birding experience is required. You just need a genuine love for the beach and coastal wildlife. The talking points in this handout are everything you need for most conversations. When in doubt, "I'm not totally sure, but let me find out" is always a great answer.

SIGN UP & LEARN MORE

Bolivar Birds Outreach runs Fridays & Saturdays through Labor Day, 10 AM – 2 PM at Bolivar Flats Shorebird Sanctuary, Rettilon Rd.

Sign up at: signup.com/go/OkMcfWG

More info: houstonaudubon.org/conservation/beach-nesting-birds.html