

BLACK SKIMMER TRENDS

■ TODD POVER

The Black Skimmer was listed as an endangered species in New Jersey in 1979, and statewide surveys of the breeding population have been conducted since 1976. During that period the population (based on the sum of peak counts from each site) has fluctuated widely, from a low of 1,542 individual birds in 1991 to a peak of 2,998 birds in 2005. The population has dropped since the peak in 2005, but has generally been higher over the past fifteen years (1993 to the present) compared to the previous years going back to 1976.

On the other hand, the number of Black Skimmer breeding sites has significantly declined since 1976, down to just six known colonies in each of the past two years. In a related trend, the population has been concentrated into just two or three large colonies in recent years, where it had previously been distributed over multiple colonies of varying sizes. In 2007, three-quarters (seventy-five percent) of the statewide population (2,165 individual birds) was in one colony located on Champagne Island at Hereford Inlet, and most of the remaining birds (nineteen percent) nested at Mordecai Island in Barnegat Bay, directly behind Beach Haven.

Large skimmer colonies are not atypical in the state, but the fact that almost the entire population is now concentrated in just a few colonies raises concerns about its overall vulnerability. The Champagne Island skimmer colony was highly productive in 2007, fledg-

ing approximately 700 young from just over 700 pairs. However, the Mordecai colony almost completely failed due to flooding, and in other recent years the large colony in Hereford Inlet (either Stone Harbor Point or Champagne Island) has been far less productive than this year because of predators and flooding. As the saying goes, "Don't put all your eggs in one basket" – in effect, that is the current scenario with the Black Skimmer population in New Jersey.

Since surveys began in 1976, Black Skimmers nesting on barrier islands in New Jersey have almost exclusively selected

habitat directly adjacent to inlets, greatly limiting the potential availability of nesting sites. However, unlike other beach-nesting birds such as Piping Plovers and Least Terns, which depend almost entirely on Atlantic coast beaches for nesting, skimmers also nest on back bay marsh islands in New Jersey. This gives them an alternative to barrier island beach sites, where human disturbance and predator activity is generally high. However, the increased popularity of boating and jet ski usage raises concerns that the back bay nesting sites may no longer provide as great a refuge from disturbance.

Aside from the large colony at Mordecai Island, the Barnegat Bay portion of the skimmer population has been low in recent years. Some other back bay regions (for example, the area between Absecon and Brigantine Inlets and in the vicinity of Townsend's Inlet)



Black Skimmer
PHOTO BY HERB HOUGHTON

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*Outdoor Recreation Alliance Study, 2006.
www.outdoorrecreationalliance.org



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have also been known to harbor a few small skimmer colonies. These sites are not included on the annual survey, so their current status is unknown, but it is unlikely they would compensate for any significant loss in population from other regions. ■

