

# Birds of the Gulf

The Gulf of Mexico, the ninth largest body of water in the world, provides year-round homes for millions of birds, from enormous Brown Pelicans to delicate Snowy Plovers. Magnificent Frigatebirds snatch food from its surface; Northern Gannets plunge into its depths. Most of the Common Loons that breed in the Upper Great Lakes in Michigan and Wisconsin migrate to the Gulf and eastern Florida.

The Gulf's location in the very heart of the Americas puts it at the very heart of bird migration, where it provides critical resting places and food resources for birds making their way between North America and the tropics. As we move into migration season, estimates of the amount of oil spilled so far are as high as 142 million gallons—more than 12 times the size of the *Exxon Valdez* disaster.

The Cornell Lab of Ornithology is working to understand the long-term effects of this disaster on birds and marine mammals, and offering ways for people to report sightings and learn about the birds at risk (see p. 2).

We also receive inquiries from people across the country who want to know how they can help. It's difficult to find direct ways to help: skimming oil, cleaning beaches, and rescuing oiled birds require special equipment and training. But concerned individuals can report sightings to eBird, monitor nests for NestWatch, or support conservation by purchasing federal Duck Stamps or donating to organizations helping birds in the Gulf, including the Cornell Lab of Ornithology.

Learn more at [www.birds.cornell.edu/helpbirds](http://www.birds.cornell.edu/helpbirds).

## Beach Nesters

Least Terns are just one of many beach-nesting shorebirds put at risk by oil. Others include Sandwich, Royal, and Caspian terns, Wilson's Plover, American Oystercatcher, and Black Skimmer. These birds place their nests just feet away from the Gulf's waters and mere inches above them. In normal years they are vulnerable to flooding by high tides and storm surges; this year their risk being exposed to oil as well.



## Wintering Waterbirds

Red-breasted Mergansers are among millions of waterbirds that spend winters along the Gulf Coast. Others include scaup, teal, Redheads, and Canvasbacks. Most of the Common Loon population breeding in Minnesota and Wisconsin winter in the Gulf; immatures remain there for 1-3 years.



## Saltmarsh Residents

Marsh birds are hard to see in the vast, low expanses of the Gulf Coast. Seaside Sparrows are habitat specialists, depending on salt and brackish marshes. They spend non-feeding time in marsh grasses. They find most of their food in shallow pools and on the muddy ground. Clapper Rails, Least Bitterns, Common Yellowthroats, and Boat-tailed Grackles are also common species in this habitat.



## Migrant Shorebirds

Red Knots are one example of the many shorebirds that pass through the Gulf Coast during migration and in winter—others include Piping Plovers, Marbled Godwits, Western, Semipalmated, and Least sandpipers, dowitchers, yellowlegs, avocets, and stilts. Clusters of Red Knots, a species that is sharply declining and proposed for listing under the Endangered Species Act, have been reported to eBird in Pensacola, Florida, since oil reached the beaches there.



## Pelagic Seabirds

Pelagic, or open-ocean, birds such as the Northern Gannet are perhaps most at risk from the vast amount of oil offshore. Other species at risk include storm-petrels, shearwaters, boobies, and Black terns. A oiled Northern Gannet was among the very first birds to wash ashore after the disaster.

