



Tom Grey

**Black-necked Stilt** • L 14” • Uncommon • Slender shorebird with long reddish-pink legs, black upperparts, white underparts, and long, thin, black bill • Nests on vegetation clumps in shallow water, often in impoundments • Stands or wades slowly through

shallow water to catch prey

**Willet** • L 15” • Priority conservation species in SC • Large, drab, gray-brown shorebird with long bill and legs – in flight shows distinctive black and white wing stripe • Solitary ground nester amid marsh or beach grasses • Forages on beaches and tidal flats



Greg Lavaty



Greg Lavaty

**Laughing Gull** • L 16” • Abundant, increasing • Breeding adult has black hood, reddish-black bill, and dark gray back with white underparts – juveniles are varying shades of brown • Colonially nests in grasses surrounding other species’ colonies • Opportunistic feeder; will take eggs and young of other birds

**Common Tern** • L 12” • Uncommon nesting in SC, declining • Blood red bill with black tip, black cap • Nests on sandy or shelly ground with other terns or Black Skimmers • Aggressively defends nest



Felicia Sanders



Greg Lavaty

**Gull-billed Tern** • L 14” • Priority conservation species in SC • Mid-sized tern – breeding adults have black cap, short, sturdy, black bill, pale gray upperparts • Nests in small colonies or often with Black Skimmers on bare to sparsely vegetated ground • Forages over the marsh eating insects and fiddler crabs

**Royal Tern** • L 20” • Priority conservation species in SC • Large tern with orange bill and a black cap, non-breeders partial cap • Nests in colonies usually with Sandwich Terns on bare to sparsely vegetated ground • Plunge-dives to catch fish, also eats crabs and shrimp



Gary Smyle



Chuck Tague

**Sandwich Tern** • L 15” • Priority conservation species in SC • Mid-sized tern with shaggy black cap, slender, black bill with yellow tip • Nests in groups, usually with Royal Terns, on sandy or shelly ground with little vegetation • Dives to catch fish near water’s surface – also eats

crustaceans

**Forster’s Tern** • L 13” • Uncommon nesting in SC, priority conservation species • Mid-sized tern with black cap, orange bill with black tip, and orange legs • Nests on the ground in smaller colonies amid marsh and grasses • Plunge-dives to capture prey



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**Least Tern** • L 9” • Threatened in SC, declining • Smallest tern with yellow bill and legs, white forehead and black cap • Nests in colonies on sandy shelly ground and on flat pebble-covered roofs • Hovers and plunge-dives to catch small fish and shrimp



Chuck Tague



Greg Lavaty



American Oystercatchers: Chuck Tague



**Fun Waterbird Facts**

- Waterbirds take a wide variety of prey, including fish, crustaceans, snails, shellfish, worms, amphibians, reptiles, and insects. **Roseate Spoonbills** are pink because the crustaceans they eat contain pink pigmentation.
- The **Wilson’s Plover**, like many plovers, will feign a wing injury if you get too close to its nest. This behavior is called a broken-wing display, and is used to lure predators away from the nest.
- Like owls, many fish-eating birds, such as terns and **Black Skimmers**, regurgitate “pellets” – non-digestible parts of their prey such as bones or scales.
- The **American Oystercatcher** has a laterally compressed bill that allows it to easily pry open shellfish to reach its soft-bodied prey inside.
- **Terns** and **Black Skimmers** display a behavior called “mobbing”, flying up as a group to dive-bomb people, dogs, or predators that approach their nesting colonies. Agitated birds will peck at and defecate on intruders, so steer clear of nesting colonies!
- **Black Skimmers** rest in a strange position – they lay flat on the ground with their heads stretched out in front of them. “Rest assured” they aren’t dead!



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Coastal Birds Project  
220 Santee Gun Club Road  
McClellanville, SC 29458  
[www.dnr.sc.gov/wildlife/species/coastalbirds/index.html](http://www.dnr.sc.gov/wildlife/species/coastalbirds/index.html)



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540.253-5780 • [www.abcbirds.org](http://www.abcbirds.org)

This guide was designed by the American Bird Conservancy. SCDNR thanks this conservation partner for permission to use this guide and adapt it for SC.

Sources: Sibley Field Guide to Birds (2003), Birds of North America Online (Cornell Lab of Ornithology, 2011)  
2015 SC State Wildlife Action Plan <http://www.dnr.sc.gov/swap/index.html>

COVER PHOTO: Black Skimmer, Brown Pelican and young: Felicia Sanders  
Fisherman and Boat Clipart: [www.clipartpanda.com](http://www.clipartpanda.com)

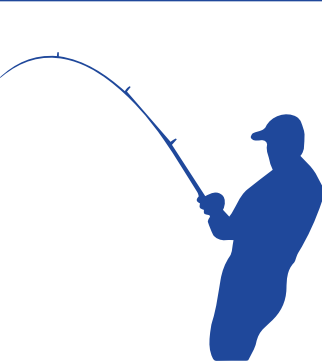


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# Breeding Birds of the *South Carolina Coast*

**An Angler’s and Boater’s Bird Guide**  
April - September



***Fish, Swim, and Play  
From 50 Yards Away!***



## Why Birds are Important

- Bird abundance is an important indicator of the health of coastal ecosystems
- Revenue generated by hunting, photography, and birdwatching helps support the coastal economy in South Carolina

## Threats to Island-Nesting Bay Birds

- Habitat loss from erosion and wetland degradation
- Predators such as raccoons, mink, feral hogs, and laughing gulls that eat eggs and young
- **Disturbance from people and their pets**
- Entanglement in discarded or lost fishing tackle and other debris



Felicia Sanders  
Brown Pelican Nestlings



Felicia Sanders  
Nesting Royal Terns

## How to Avoid Disturbing Birds

*"Fish, Swim, and Play From 50 Yards Away!"*

— Gary P Nunn, the Music Ambassador of Texas

- Obey posted areas where groups of birds are nesting on islands
- Anchor your vessel at least 50 yards away from nesting islands and beaches
- **Keep children and pets away from closed nesting areas**
- Move away from nesting birds if they increase vocalization, fly off their nests, or otherwise move away from you
- Do not leave discarded fishing tackle behind — dispose of it properly on the mainland
- If you see someone destroying nests or disturbing a nesting colony of birds, please contact:  
**South Carolina Department of Natural Resources at 1-800-922-5431**



# Breeding Birds of the South Carolina Coast

### American White Pelican • L 62" •

Common • Large, white bird with black flight feathers and bright yellow bill and pouch • Does not nest in SC, but visits year-round • Preys on small fish in groups



Chuck Tague



Chuck Tague

**Brown Pelican** • L 51" • Common, stable • Large gray-brown bird with distinctive bill and pouch—breeding adults have yellow head with dark brown neck • Colonial nesters on islands with grassy dunes and low shrubs • Plunge-dives to feed on fish

**Great Blue Heron** • L 46" • Common, moderate conservation concern • Largest heron — overall gray-blue with yellowish bill — will extend and coil long neck • Nests colonially in mature pine trees on hammock islands or over brackish/freshwater • Wades to feed on a wide variety of prey



Chuck Tague



Chuck Tague

capture fish or other prey

**Great Egret** • L 39" • Common, high priority conservation species • Large, white wading bird with long, orange-yellow bill and black legs; during breeding season has long plumes on back and lime-green skin around eyes • Nests in groups among other species in trees or shrubs in brackish or freshwater ponds • Wades or waits motionlessly to

**Snowy Egret** • L 24" • Common, species of conservation concern • Small, white egret with long black bill; yellow feet contrast with dark legs; yellow skin around eye • Nests in mixed-species colonies among shrubs in brackish or freshwater ponds • Slowly wades through water with neck extended in search of prey



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**Tricolored Heron** • L 26" • Common, priority conservation species • Mid-sized heron; slate gray back and dark breast with contrasting white belly • Nests in mixed-species colonies on islands in dense vegetation or in shrubs in brackish or freshwater ponds • Chases fish through water, crouching low and quickly stabbing bill to catch prey



Greg Lavaty

stir up prey

**Reddish Egret** • L 30" • Priority conservation species in SC • Dark morph has slate gray body with reddish breast, neck, and head; white morph completely white — both have pink bill with black tip; shaggy looking plumage • Rarely nests in SC • Uses quick, erratic movements to

**Little Blue Heron** • L 24" • Uncommon, SC priority conservation species • Smaller wader; entirely blue-gray with long, greenish legs and bluish bill — immature birds are white with or without blue mottling • Nests in mixed-species colonies on islands in low shrubs •

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Slowly wades through water with a stiff, extended neck in search of prey



Robert Stalnaker



Chuck Tague

areas inland; feeds on insects

**Cattle Egret** • L 20" • Common, stable • Smallest white egret, with stocky body, short legs, rusty-buff plumes on back, chest, and head, and reddish-orange bill • Nests in mixed-species groups on vegetated coastal islands or in low trees/shrubs over water • Usually seen foraging in agricultural

**Black-crowned Night-Heron** • L 25" • Common, SC priority conservation species • Mid-sized, nocturnal heron with short legs and neck — black cap and back, gray wings and tail, and red eyes. Juveniles are brown with white streaking • Nests in groups on islands in shrubs • Crouches at water's edge waiting to strike and capture fish and other prey



Chuck Tague



Chuck Tague

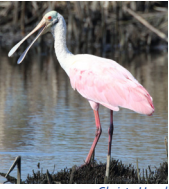


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search of food

**White Ibis** • L 25" • Common, SC high priority conservation species • White, mid-sized wader with long, downward-curving, red orange bill and legs. Juveniles mottled brown • Colonially nests in small trees and shrubs over freshwater • Uses touch-sensitive bill to probe shallow water and soft mud in

**Roseate Spoonbill** • L 32" • Uncommon SC conservation species • Unmistakable pale pink wading bird with a long bill ending in flat "spoon" • Does not nest in SC, but visits in summer and fall • Wades slowly through water, sweeping touch sensitive bill side to side in search of prey



Christy Hand



Christy Hand

**Wood Stork** • L 40" • Federally threatened species and SC endangered • Bald head, large with black trailing edge of wings • Nests with other wood storks high in trees over water • Feeds by feeling for prey with its bill in the water

**Anhinga** • L 35" • Priority conservation species in South Carolina • Black diving bird with a long straight bill and snakelike neck • Nests in mixed species groups in trees and shrubs in brackish or freshwater areas • Spears fish with its bill



Christy Hand



Christy Hand

**Green Heron** • L 18" • Priority conservation species in South Carolina • Greenish black cap, dark grayish back and wings, reddish neck and grey underparts • Solitary nesting on tree limbs over water • Sometimes uses "bait" to attract fish which it catches with its bill

**Clapper Rail** • L 14.5" • Locally common, trend unknown • Thin, chicken-like bird, grayish to rusty brown with long, orange bill • Nests in clumped grasses or low in forks of woody vegetation • Secretive, forages along marsh edges



Greg Lavaty



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**Wilson's Plover** • L 8" • Threatened in SC, decreasing • Mid-size plover with single neck band, thick black bill, and white forehead • Solitary ground nester near beach dunes or on flat open areas • Eats mostly crustaceans, including crabs, crayfish, and shrimp

**American Oystercatcher** • L 17" • SC high priority conservation species • Black and brown with white underside; large, laterally flattened, reddish-orange bill and red eye ring • Solitary nester on slightly vegetated sandy berms and shell rakes • Forages on tidal flats for oysters and other shellfish



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