



Public Statement on Nesting Island Disturbance

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Contact David Newstead at (361) 885-6203 or dnewstead@cbbep.org

The future of colonial waterbird conservation is in all our hands

By David Newstead, Coastal Bend Bays & Estuaries Program, and Iliana Peña, Audubon Texas

Like many coastal residents, Coastal Bend Bays & Estuaries Program and Audubon Texas are troubled by the recent loss of a rare white morph Great Blue Heron and other waterbirds in Mesquite Bay. We are also heartened to see that the loss has galvanized the community's interest in colonial waterbird conservation. But before we get to that, let us provide a brief history for context.

The incident occurred on one of the islands in the Second Chain of Islands complex in Mesquite Bay. These islands are rare treasures in and of themselves, being some of the few natural islands remaining on the Texas coast that support nesting colonial waterbirds. Second Chain – like most of the nesting islands along the Texas coast – are owned by the Texas General Land Office, and are leased to Audubon Texas. Audubon has been leasing these islands for over 90 years, literally “paying rent” for the birds. The intention of the leases was originally to allow Audubon wardens to patrol the islands and keep would-be vandals, egg thieves, or plume/market hunters from destroying what was left of waterbird populations in the early 1900s. Better times were ahead and some species began to rebound through the first half of the 20th century before beginning a second decline beginning in the 1970s. In more recent years, Coastal Bend Bays & Estuaries Program has partnered with Audubon to actively manage the islands in the Coastal Bend, including Second Chain. Over the years we have managed predators, improved vegetation, developed plans to protect islands from erosion and posted signage to discourage human disturbance. Last year we posted additional signage after encountering several boats far too close to the islands and noting lower than expected nesting activity on some parts of the islands.

After the reported loss this year, nesting bird numbers were indeed lower than in previous years, and the lack of birds on some parts of the island are consistent with human intrusion. We have received report that several people have been seen this spring walking ON the island with cameras, and that there had been repeated occurrences of people pulling boats all the way up to this and other islands in the area for photography, resulting in birds leaving nests. When birds leave their nests, the eggs are immediately vulnerable to grackles, which rapidly peck a hole in the egg for a small drink of its contents thus destroying the egg. Gulls are also quick to seize upon this opportunity and may take eggs and small chicks. Further, the heat stress on eggs and chicks while they are not being shaded by an adult can quickly kill the birds.

While there is good reason to be concerned about the sudden loss of the white morph Great Blue Heron and her chicks, of greater conservation concern is the loss/absence of the many Tricolored Herons, Snowy Egrets, and Reddish

Egrets that until this year have nested on the part of the island where people appear to be entering. There has been concern voiced about the loss of a generation of the birds of this island. That may be true for some of the birds – their opportunity to nest successfully this year may have already passed.

Whether or not a human actually entered the island and intentionally destroyed or “stole” birds is still under investigation by TPWD law enforcement, however, it is clear that intense human visitation has already impacted the birds this nesting season. If the persistent human intrusions and approaches to the islands continue, the long-term outlook for the nesting birds there is grim. Many of these species are experiencing declines statewide and beyond, and it is clear that human activity is often exacerbating that decline. Suitable habitat for nesting colonial waterbirds is limited so your support in working to save this site is imperative.

While we don't know if the photographers that were seen on the island may have also been culprits in the direct take of the white Great Blue Heron, it is near certain that photographers' presence on the island would have resulted in nesting failure for at least some birds and each time these impacts would mount. These islands are under lease between the months of February and August, which means that anybody present on the island is committing a criminal trespass violation in addition to potential violations of the federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act and statutes of Texas Wildlife Code. Beyond that, we hope that nature photographers, guides, fishermen, kite surfers, or anybody else near a waterbird rookery enjoy the scene from at least 50 yards away.

Since we manage nearly 150 small islands throughout a five county area, we cannot be simultaneously present to witness and address each and every disturbance event. You can help with the conservation of these magnificent birds by being respectful of their need for space during the nesting season and doing your part to keep your **Eyes on the Islands** and report any violations. If you see anyone on or too close to an active rookery island between February and August, please contact Texas Parks & Wildlife Department through their Operation Game Thief Hotline – (800) 792-4263. You should also contact Coastal Bend Bays & Estuaries Program's waterbird biologists at (361) 885-6202.

Thanks again for your support and interest in these amazing birds and to find out any additional information about this or other coastal bird conservation please visit the following websites.

Coastal Bend Bays & Estuaries Program - <http://cbbep.org/programscoastalwbirds.html>

Audubon TX Coastal Stewardship Program - <http://tx.audubon.org/coastal-stewardship-program>

The North American Nature Photography Association has endorsed Principles of Ethical Field Practices (<http://www.nanpa.org/docs/NANPA-Ethical-Practices.pdf>). The guidance they suggest should be interpreted even more conservatively when applied to something as fragile as a colonial waterbird rookery.

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