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Colonial-Nesting Waterbirds: A Glorious and Gregarious Group

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

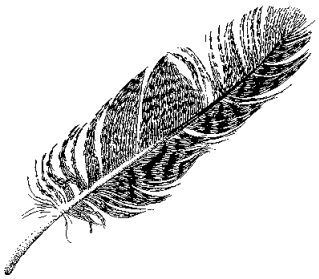
Colonial-Nesting Waterbirds

A Glorious and Gregarious Group

Migratory Bird Management

Mission

To conserve migratory bird populations and their habitats for future generations, through careful monitoring and effective management.



What Is a Colonial-Nesting Waterbird?

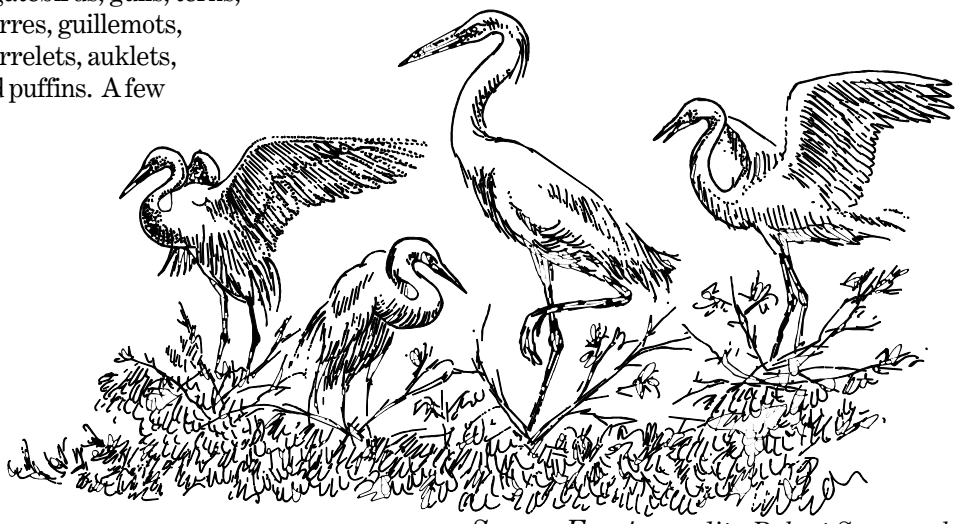
"Colonial-nesting waterbird" is a tongue-twister of a collective term used by bird biologists to refer to a large variety of different species that share two common characteristics: (1) they tend to gather in large assemblages, called colonies, during the nesting season, and (2) they obtain all or most of their food (fish and aquatic invertebrates) from the water. Colonial-nesting waterbirds can be further divided into two major groups depending on where they feed.

Seabirds (also called marine birds, oceanic birds, or pelagic birds) feed primarily in saltwater. Some seabirds are so marvelously adapted to marine environments that they spend virtually their entire lives at sea, returning to land only to nest; others (especially the gulls and terns) are confined to the narrow coastal interface between land and sea, feeding during the day and loafing and roosting on land. Included among the seabirds are such groups as the albatrosses, shearwaters, storm-petrels, tropicbirds, boobies, pelicans, cormorants, frigatebirds, gulls, terns, murres, guillemots, murrelets, auklets, and puffins. A few species of cormorants, gulls, and terns also occupy freshwater habitats.

Wading Birds seek their prey in fresh or brackish waters. As the name implies, these birds feed principally by wading or standing still in the water, patiently waiting for fish or other prey to swim within striking distance. The wading birds include the bitterns, herons, egrets, night-herons, ibises, spoonbills, and storks.

Should We Be Concerned About the Conservation Status of Colonial-Nesting Waterbirds?

Yes. While many species of seabirds appear to have incredibly large populations, they nevertheless face a steady barrage of threats, such as oil pollution associated with increased tanker traffic and spills, direct mortality from entanglement and drowning in commercial fishing gear, depletion of forage fishes due to overexploitation by commercial fisheries, and predation at colonies by introduced predators. Moreover, populations of many species, especially wading birds, are greatly depresssed



Snowy Egrets credit: Robert Savannah

compared to 100 years ago, a direct result of a 50 percent loss of freshwater wetlands.

Eight species of colonial-nesting waterbirds are already listed as Endangered or Threatened in the United States: Short-tailed Albatross, Dark-rumped Petrel, Townsend's Shearwater, Brown Pelican, Wood Stork, Roseate Tern, Least Tern, Marbled Murrelet. We must remain vigilant to ensure that others do not decline to the point that they need to be listed.

What Are We Doing To Manage Colonial-Nesting Waterbirds?

The Migratory Bird Management Program of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is engaged in numerous activities to ensure that colonial-nesting waterbird populations remain healthy. Notable examples include:

We monitor nesting colonies to track trends in breeding populations. These efforts have been most intensive on the Pacific Coast, but surveys have also been undertaken in recent years on the Atlantic Coast and the U.S. Great Lakes in cooperation with State wildlife agencies.

We conduct or fund research activities to investigate relationships between colonial-nesting waterbirds and various environmental and human factors.

We employ methods to *restore quality nesting habitats*, such as removing introduced predators from seabird nesting islands, manipulating vegetative structure and water levels to favor waterbirds, and minimizing human disturbance at colonies.

In cooperation with Federal, State, and other partners, we are working to *develop the North American Waterbird Conservation Plan*. This plan, which is slated for completion in 2002, will provide a detailed outline of the types of actions that need to be completed over the next 15-20 years to ensure healthy populations of colonial-nesting waterbirds. We have *hired a Waterbird Coordinator* to help implement the Plan.

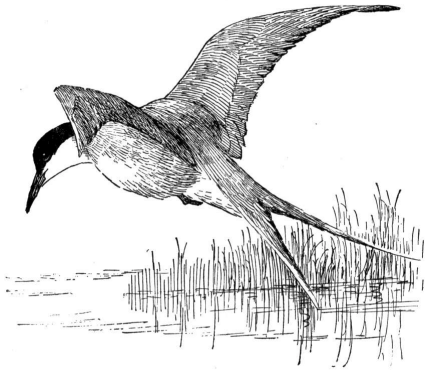
We periodically *prepare status assessments* of species for which there is some evidence of conservation concern, the Black Tern being a recent example.
In a few rare but well-publicized instances we have implemented measures to *control "overabundant" populations* that threaten agricultural or economic interests, or human health and safety. One recent example is the environmental impact statement and national management plan now being developed for the Double-crested Cormorant, which has caused substantial economic impacts on the commercial catfish industry and is suspected of decreasing the abundance of local sportfish populations in some instances.

As part of a United Nations-sponsored effort, and in cooperation with the National Marine Fisheries Service, we are *implementing a national plan of action* to reduce seabird mortality caused by unintentional entanglement in domestic longline fisheries gear, with a special focus on North Pacific albatrosses.

Glossy Ibis
credit: Alan Brooks

What Else Is Needed for Colonial-Nesting Waterbirds?

A number of important actions are needed to further conservation of colonial-nesting waterbirds. Baseline inventories of nesting colonies (where, when, what species, and how many) must be conducted across the continent. Standardized monitoring techniques must be developed, and a Web-based monitoring database implemented to allow investigators to exchange information on trends in populations, breeding success, contaminant levels, and other parameters of interest. Conflicts between "overabundant" colonial waterbirds (e.g., cormorants, gulls) and humans must be resolved or minimized. Applied research must be conducted to better understand relationships between colonial waterbirds and various components of their environment, including humans, with an emphasis on identifying appropriate management and conservation strategies for maintaining healthy populations. Habitat enhancement, modification, and restoration techniques must continue to be developed, improved, and undertaken. Finally, public awareness of colonial waterbirds should be heightened and opportunities for educational and recreational involvement increased.



Forsters Tern
credit: Alan Brooks

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Colonial-nesting waterbirds and other migratory birds are some of nature's most magnificent resources. Their conservation is a critical and challenging endeavor for the Migratory Bird Management Program and all who value nature.

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