

Colony Birds

A few questions for world-class Ornithologist Jack Hailman about JIC Bird Species Populations (Professor Emeritus of Zoology, University of Wisconsin, and Research Associate, Archbold Biological Station, Venus, Florida)

How can JIC residents support a vibrant bird population?

Plant more natives and fewer horticultural species that require poisons to protect them from insects. More native plants mean more native insects, better cover for birds, better roosting places, better nest sites, and because they need less water, lower water bills!

What about herbicides and pesticides? Despite the “green” labeling, do they still harm the bird population?

Yes, definitely. We cancelled our "pest control" contract years ago despite the company's prediction of dire consequences. There's never been a problem. We poison only chinch bugs, and will be as long as small grandchildren play on our lawn.

There's no such thing as a truly species-specific herbicide or pesticide; they all kill things other than what the company tells you. Killing our native insects deprives insectivorous birds of their food. Likewise, killing native plants both eliminates their insects and deprives herbivorous birds of their food. The average amount of poison used per square yard in suburbia greatly exceeds that of agricultural fields.

After a feral cat's body was found recently, a bobcat was trapped. Do bobcats threaten birds?

Bobcats typically take mammalian prey (rabbits, squirrels, opossums, raccoons). Birds are pretty small prey for a bobcat.

Are feral cats a threat?

Yes. But feral cats aren't the only predators. House cats are too. It's difficult to persuade cat owners to keep their pet cats in at night when they hunt. We have always had cats. And they were allowed to come and go. After Stanley Temple of the University of Wisconsin published his landmark study based on radio tracking of his own cat at night, we re-thought our habits and kept our cats in the house. They didn't like it at first, but cats are smart and they lived to a good old age.

Does feeding birds help or hurt bird populations?

It's more or less neutral. We have exotic House Sparrows at our feeder that only a few years back were absolutely unknown in the Colony. They chase our female Painted Buntings off the feeders. European Starlings, also once unknown here, now congregate in flocks that seem to grow larger each year.

How is our pelican population?

Last winter was a banner year with a very high proportion of young birds, reflecting an unusually successful 2010 breeding season. Mortality is higher in immature birds so there should be fewer pelicans this year than last, but the population seems about normal.

But pelicans are a species to watch. The oil disaster in the Gulf will take years to manifest itself. The oil has settled on the bottom, where it will smother benthic organisms. This die-off will work its way up the food chain, eventually causing declines in fish populations, and only then will fish-eating birds such as Brown Pelicans and Ospreys show the effects. The two uncertainties are how long this will take and how large the effects will be. It's not a pretty prospect.

You and Liz do a species count in JIC every year. How are our counts holding up?

Our birds have decreased markedly. See the chart for our annual species tallies for JIC:

Year & Number of Species

2000 111

2001 96

2002 98

2003 98

2004 107

2005 99
2006 96
2007 87
2008 74
2009 76
2010 79
2011 75

We were recording roughly 100 species per year through 2006, but that dropped to 87 in 2007, and it is been in the 70's ever since. We have lost a quarter of our species. No cheers about that.

Why the decline?

Over the last couple of decades empty lots in JIC are now built upon, eliminating remnants of native vegetation and diminishing the food supplies, roosting sites, and nest sites. Global warming may mean some of our wintering birds no longer come this far south. We have a substantial feral cat population. There is not yet any documentation of a general decline of birds in South Florida, but if there is such a decrease, then peripheral habitats like suburban areas would be expected to show it before more natural habitats do.

Any new birds in JIC??

We’ve had consistently White-winged Doves this winter. White-wings stay pretty much in citrus groves. Why they've been common in the Colony this winter, I don't know. We have also had a White-throated Sparrow, which arrived in late November and stayed the winter. We suspect he'll soon migrate north.

Will the removal of utility wires have any impact on our birds’ behavior?

The birds should do just fine, but no wires will put a kink in the bird-watching! Birds will just have to perch in trees and on houses. They might sing that song: got along without you before I met you, gonna get along without you now.

Northern Gannet (adult and two juveniles)
Oct-May
Usually well offshore
Commonly occurs in small groups



Bonaparte's Gull (winter plumage)
Oct-May
Principally the river
A small, lithe gull that floats high in the water



Double-crested Cormorant
Year around, commoner Oct-May
Principally the river
One of many avian species with a resident population in Florida augmented by wintering individuals from the north



Our summer terns nests on roofs in shopping centers



Northern Gannet (juvenile)
Oct-May, juveniles commoner in fall
Usually well offshore
Gannets dive vertically from great height.



Northern Gannet (adult)
Oct-May
Usually well offshore
Injured birds occasionally found



Seagulls are not really seabirds,
rather they stay close to the coast



Laughing Gull (winter plumage)

Year around, rare in summer when at nesting colonies
River and ocean
Our commonest gull



Laughing Gull (breeding plumage)

Year around, rare in summer when at nesting colonies
River and ocean
Named for its laughing-like call





Forster's Tern (winter plumage)
Oct-May
Mainly river, occasionally ocean
Similar to Sandwich Tern but less common and has reddish legs



Red-breasted Merganser (female)
Oct-May
Ocean, occasionally river, rare on shore
Males are never seen here, must overwinter elsewhere



Mottled Duck (female left, male right)
Spring-Summer (all year elsewhere in Florida)
A pair nests in our dune line each year
Mottled Ducks apparently pair for life

Waterway, river, and ocean; nests way over
Our only fishing bird that captures prey with
its feet (talons) rather than its bill



Brown Pelican (adult left, juvenile right)
Year around, rare in summer when at colonies
Ocean and river, less commonly on waterway
Gulf oil disaster could put it back on endangered list



Royal Tern (winter plumage)
Oct-May
River and ocean
Our largest and commonest tern





Willet (winter plumage)
Oct-May (a few nest elsewhere in Florida)
Ocean beach or river shore
A loner and our largest sandpiper



Ring-billed Gull (breeding plumage)
Oct-May (this plumage only in May)
River and ocean
A medium sized gull

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