

Waterbird Team Reports 2024

by Dave Youker

In 2024, the CVWO Waterbird Team once again focused on documenting the volume and diversity of bird species frequenting Craney Island Dredged Materials Management Area (CIDMMA) located in Portsmouth, Virginia. Breeding activity was centered on three species: Black-necked Stilts, American Oystercatcher and Least Terns.

Overall 2024 Results

The final survey of 2024, completed on December 19 was the 44th for the year. Weeks missed were attributable to either holidays (3) or weather (5). This culminated in the 17th year of documented surveys dating back to 2008. Survey data have been entered into the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology's eBird database, and breeding data have been shared with the Norfolk District Office of the United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE).

For 2024, a total of 212,349 birds comprising 211 species were documented during 300 observation hours over 44 weeks between January 4 and December 19. The average number of species per survey was 81, and the average number of birds was 4,826. The single-day high count for the total number of birds was 9,312 on August 22 (99 species); the lowest single-day total was 1,318 on June 20 (75 species). Waterbird species included three rail species, three grebe species, two loon species, Double-crested Cormorant, two pelican species, 34 shorebird species, nine gull species, eight tern species, Black Skimmer, 10 heron-egret-ibis species, two bittern species, and Roseate Spoonbill.

CIDMMA had Virginia's highest 2024 totals for nine waterbird species: 3,560 Northern Shovelers on October 17; 1,485 Green-winged Teal on November 14; 235 Black-necked Stilts on August 1; 1,244 American Avocets on September 5; 3 Buff-breasted Sandpipers on August 29; 781 Lesser Yellowlegs on August 1; 12 Wilson's Phalaropes on August 1; 14 Red-necked Phalaropes on August 22; and 5,100 Semipalmated Sandpipers on August 22.

Breeding Activity of Selected Species

Black-necked Stilt

The first Black-necked Stilts (three total) were observed on April 25. Breeding evidence was noted on May 16, with eight birds sitting on nests. Three downy young were observed on June 13. The highest number of nests located was 17 and the largest number of young seen at one time was 27.

American Oystercatcher

This was the fifth year an American Oystercatcher attempted to breed on the southernmost Elizabeth River expansion dike. A bird was first observed incubating on May 2, then observed again on May 23 and May 30. The nest was subsequently abandoned. A second bird was observed incubating in the middle of a Least Tern colony on June 20, and on June 27, a nest exchange was observed. However, this nest was also ultimately abandoned. Again, the presence of Fish Crows and other area predators may have had a detrimental effect on these breeding attempts.

The same color-banded oystercatcher seen in previous years was again observed on April 25. The red band with white alpha-numeric lettering indicated the band had been placed on the bird in Georgia.

Least Tern

On April 25, the Team observed the season's first Least Terns (5). Once again, significant construction activity kept the terns moving around the facility. As they settled down into restricted-access areas, the USACE staff took over monitoring the breeding activity. Five colonies were identified, consisting of 148 adults with 46 incubating birds. Productivity was again low, probably due to a combination of mammalian predation, high-volume vehicular traffic and periods of excessive heat and dryness. The facility continued to be used as a staging area, with a high count of 362 birds observed on May 23.



Least Tern and chick taken at Craney Island from June 26, 2024. Photo by Bill Williams.

New Species for CIDMMA

There were four species observed during 2024 that had not been previously identified during the 17 years of documented surveys. These additions bring the Team's cumulative species total to 281 (283 if the probable escapees Black Swan and Mandarin Duck are included).

Black-headed Gull

A single bird was recorded on August 15. This species had not previously ever been recorded at the CIDMMA facility.

Black-legged Kittiwake

A single bird was recorded on November 14. This species had not previously ever been recorded on the CIDMMA facility.

Swainson's Hawk

A single bird was recorded on October 17. This species had not previously ever been recorded on the CIDMMA facility.

Gray-cheeked Thrush

A single bird was recorded on May 16. This species had been recorded only once previously in December of 1994.

Motus Wildlife Tracking System Activity

The Motus wildlife tracking system has been installed on CIDMMA Spillway 6 at the northwest corner of the facility since November 2018. At the start of the year, the system displayed an error code and data were not being recorded. After troubleshooting, it was determined to be a faulty cable between the DC Voltage Convertor and the Raspberry Pi. The cable was replaced on 14 March. There were no detections in 2024.

Additional CIDMMA Fauna

The Team keeps anecdotal records of non-avian species detected during surveys.
Those recorded for 2024 were as follows:

Mammals | Coyote, White-tailed Deer, Atlantic Bottlenose Dolphin, Mink, Muskrat, Opossum, River Otter, Eastern Cottontail Rabbit, Eastern Gray Squirrel, Nutria, Raccoon, Gray Fox

Reptiles | Yellow-bellied Slider, Diamond-backed Terrapin, Eastern Mud Turtle, Snapping Turtle, Painted Turtle, Box Turtle

Amphibians | Leopard Frog, Green Tree Frog, Squirrel Tree Frog, Green Frog, Bull Frog

Butterflies | Red Admiral, Summer Azure, Common Buckeye, Pearl Crescent, Hackberry Emperor, Monarch, Sleepy Orange, Clouded Skipper, Fiery Skipper, Least Skipper, Ocola Skipper, Silver-spotted Skipper, Clouded Sulphur, Cloudless Sulphur, Orange Sulphur, Black Swallowtail, Eastern Tiger Swallowtail, Eastern Tailed-blue, Cabbage White, American Lady, American Snout, Variegated Fritillary, Question Mark, Tawny Emperor, Horace's Duskywing, Juvenal's Duskywing, Little Glassywing, Checkered Skipper, Broad-Winged Skipper, Zabulon Skipper

Dragonflies | Blue Corporal, Eastern Amberwing, Familiar Bluet, Common Green Darner, Swamp Darner, Rambur's Forktail, Atlantic Bluet, Blue Dasher, Wandering Glider, Four-spotted Pennant, Halloween Pennant, Banded Pennant, Eastern Pondhawk, Black Saddlebags, Carolina Saddlebags, Bar-winged Skimmer, Needham's Skimmer, Slaty Skimmer, Great Blue Skimmer, Widow Skimmer, Common Whitetail, Common Baskettail

Snakes | Black Racer

Acknowledgement

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