

## Give the birds a beach

Dr Neil Lamb, President, Bay County Audubon Society

The shore-nesting birds have been driven off Panama City Beach by human activity and development. Now the last natural refuge for these birds on Shell Island is threatened by the insistence of a few people with dogs. Sharing beaches with dogs is a fine idea, but that beach should be in the middle of Panama City Beach where the birds have already been dislocated, and where citizen beach-goers can help enforce rules of behavior and sanitation. If Bay County is to create a dog beach, do it in a public park far away from critical wildlife habitat. At Fort DeSoto Park (a Pinellas County Park) this works great. About 500 yards of beach is open for dogs off leash. They can run, swim, and socialize. No more excuses to have dogs in other areas.

Least terns, gull-billed terns, and black skimmers have been dislocated from most of our beaches. In an attempt to survive, they are forced to use flat, gravel-coated rooftops. Perhaps you have seen some of these birds atop the Panama City Mall or other buildings around town. Now new technology for roofs is changing and removing this gravel, so the only remaining choice for the birds are the Shell Island beaches.

Sharing a beach with birds and allowing them the space and natural resources to survive should not be too difficult. Perhaps the discussion should be to designate the beaches where dogs **and people** are restricted. Least terns, gull-billed terns, snowy plovers, Wilson's plovers, semipalmated plovers, and black skimmers are the species and populations that require our consideration and dedicated assistance for them to survive and reproduce. The area of Shell Island (now a peninsula, again) called Land's End, where the old East Pass existed is a key shorebird nesting, loafing, and foraging spot for many of these birds. This is also the prime bird watching spot of the entire Bay County Gulf coast. Instead of dogs and coolers of beer, beach goers to this area should be taking binoculars and cameras to enjoy and appreciate the wonderful diversity of birds that make Bay County so special.

Tyndall Air Force Base Natural Resources officials do a fine job of managing the beach and dune areas through dedicated sea oats restoration, posting of critical wildlife habitats, predator control, and monitoring of wildlife populations. Unfortunately, like the Florida Park Service and the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, the base Natural Resources office is under-funded and under-staffed to provide adequate enforcement to protect the abundant wildlife of the area. The recent enforcement of rules on all of Shell Island is not about harassment of boaters with their dogs. People need to understand that this is about the protection of bird species that are so vulnerable to thoughtless human activity. The citizens and public officials need to stand behind the Florida Park Service and applaud the efforts to protect these sensitive species from careless disturbance. When parent birds are flushed from their nests by dogs and people, the chicks and eggs are exposed to predators and the summer sun that can destroy an entire colony with a single disturbance. Professor Beth Forsy and her students at Eckerd College have been studying and recording nesting bird response to dogs on a beach. People think that only dogs chasing the birds will disturb them, but nesting birds perceive dogs as predators and will fly up, even at the sight of a dog on a leash walking away from them.

Outside the breeding season, Bay County's beaches and bays are critical stopovers for shorebirds and waterbirds who must feed and rest before their long-distance flights to wintering or breeding grounds. Without enough stored energy, birds often perish before reaching their destinations. Our beaches are crucial to the survival of the shorebirds of an entire flyway, not just Florida's shorebirds. Protecting these birds for the enjoyment of future generations of humans to enjoy is a heavy responsibility, but it is our responsibility. It is critical that the Florida Park Service and all natural resource managers continue to enforce existing rules that protect our wildlife from disturbance.