

Hurricane a Boon to Nesting Terns

Our concern for nesting Least Terns was an important consideration in pursuing the arduous cleanup of asphalt from Gulf Islands National Seashore following Hurricane Opal (previous story). In addition to tearing up and redepositing the asphalt from park roads, the powerful hurricane transformed a 4-mile stretch of Santa Rosa Island from a dune field into a flat sand expanse with little or no vegetation. The storm surge spread old road bed material (gravel) and sand from the dunes over the northern half of the island creating, ironically, ideal nesting areas for these and other bird species. In the 1½ years since the hurricane, the Least Tern, Snowy Plover (*Charadrius alexandrinus*), Wilson's Plover (*Charadrius wilsonia*), and Black Skimmer (*Rynchops niger*) have all nested successfully and fledged young in the areas disturbed by the storm.

The park was not able to monitor the birds closely due to personnel shortages. However, staff made frequent observations of the birds from the road. While some areas were too far away to confirm the presence of a nest, at least 60 tern nests were observed in four separate colonies. At least four pair of Snowy Plovers nested near the tern colonies. Approximately 40 skimmers began nesting behavior in one colony, with all but one pair abandoning the area. At another area, Least Terns, Snowy Plovers, and Wilson's Plovers all nested successfully.

To protect the nesting birds, the park posted area closure signs near the colonies, which worked well to minimize disturbances. The U.S. Navy at Pensacola Naval Air Station agreed to divert most helicopter flights away from the birds,

and by the end of June 1996, the terns were well on their way to having a successful nesting summer. The terns are nesting again this summer in greater numbers than last year.