

# Historical Records Pertaining to Least Tern and Black Skimmer nesting on the Sanibel Causeway Islands

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## 1963 USFWS Annual Report

Of concern was the high mortality rate among nestling and adult least terns which utilized the fill and shoulders of the new Sanibel causeway as a nesting area. Many hundreds of these and other shorebirds were destroyed by traffic during the nesting season of 1963. The local Audubon Society has joined ranks with similar groups on the mainland and a united committee of conservationists are soon to meet with the Lee County Board of Commissioners, causeway administrators, to determine what action may be taken to reduce fatality among the shorebird population during the approaching nesting season.

## 1964 USFWS Annual Report

### 3. Shorebirds

The mortality among the nesting least terns on the Sanibel causeway continued and heavy losses resulted. Signs erected by Lee County Audubon groups informing drivers of the bird use proved of little worth and hundreds of adults were killed by traffic. At the height of the nesting season the Sanibel Captiva Audubon Society in its conservation program banded approximately 400 immature least terns.

July 2, 1964— News Press

## Least Terns Continue to Be Hit By Cars on Island Causeway

The number of bird fatalities among the least terns, birds now nesting on the Sanibel Causeway, continues to be a problem, Charles Le Buff of the Sanibel - Captiva Audubon Society reported yesterday.

It's hard to tell at this stage, Le Buff said, whether the two bird-crossing signs, recently erected by the Sanibel - Captiva group, the Caloosa Bird Club and the Southwest Florida Audubon Society with the cooperation of the County Commission, have helped to reduce the number of fatalities. Great numbers, he said, are still being killed by motorists on the causeway. Approximately 500 were killed last year during the height of the nesting season, Le Buff said.

Approximately 4,000 terns started nesting here last year just prior to the opening of the causeway. The open expanses of beaches on the causeway made it a natural spot for nesting, he said. The Audubon Society has banded some 300, Le Buff said.

The terns, which look something like a small sea gull, arrived on the causeway in mid-April and will remain there until early in August when they scatter.

If the terns continue to nest on the causeway, something more will have to be tried to protect both the young and adult terns, Le Buff pointed out.

Le Buff said that the society plans to go to the County Commission to suggest that the beaches be closed to cars during May, June and July, the height of the nesting season. Many nests and eggs have been destroyed and many young terns killed by persons driving their cars on the beaches.

He said the society also planned to suggest that the causeway be dedicated as a county refuge.

Snow fences to keep the terns from running across the highway, a series of signs to further alert motorists that terns and black skimmers are nesting on the causeway beaches have also been suggested, Le Buff said.

Le Buff said that approximately 120 black skimmers arrived to

nest the latter part of May. "Right now we don't know if they'll pose the same problem as the terns. The skimmers, distinguishable by their long bill and gracefulness of flight, will be here until early September," he said.

Le Buff noted that this is the first time to his knowledge that skimmers have ever nested in the area. The closest other nesting area, Le Buff said, is the south Tampa Bay area.

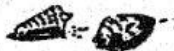
April 15, 1965 – Sanibel Captiva Islander

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## AN ALERT TO CITIZENS & MERCHANTS

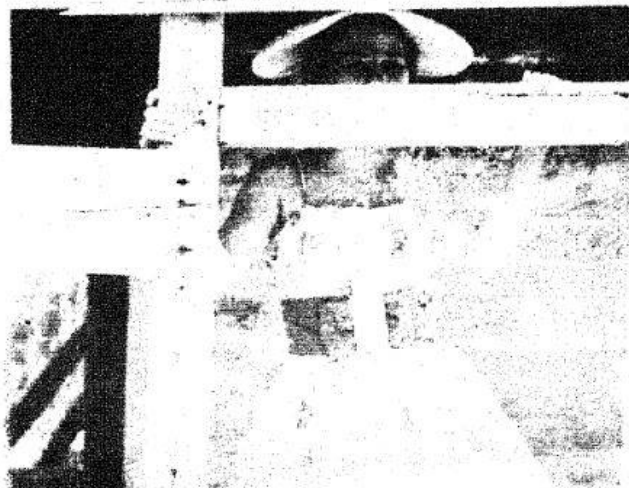
Ruth M. Betts, Secretary of the Better Business Division of the Lee County Chamber of Commerce sent the following announcement:

An advertising solicitation is being conducted in the Lee County area, under the name of LEE COUNTY CRIPPLED CHILDREN'S BUREAU...THERE IS NO ORGANIZATION BY THIS NAME HERE. Such solicitation has not been issued a permit of any type, nor applied to the Sanction Bureau.

## THE PLIGHT OF THE LEAST TERN

According to the best estimates of the wildlife officers, 6,000 least terns lost their lives on the Sanibel causeway last year. The casualties were due to loss of eggs caused by automobiles driving over the nests, hitting the young birds on the roadway, and by the pilfering of eggs from the nests.

This area is scheduled to be a public park but until some safe measures are taken to prevent both birds and children from running into the road, the public should be extremely careful to drive slowly and to stay away from the nests during the breeding season.



## 1965 USFWS Annual Report

### 3. Shorebirds

Nesting use by least terns and black skimmers occurred again on the Sanibel causeway as it has since the pumping in of the fill material. Mortality or destruction of eggs was greatly eliminated by the erection of small signs (50) at 15 foot intervals along the road shoulders at the points of most intensive nesting. These signs were positioned facing the highway and the copy of these contained the following message: Nesting Least Terns, Do not Drive or Park in this Area. Cost of these signs was defrayed by the Sanibel-Captiva Audubon Society in that organizations attempt to reduce nest site and hatchling destruction. Some fatality occurred as adults were struck by passing vehicles or young wandering terns paraded on the pavement. The nesting of these birds again stirred intensive public interest with people often parking on the road shoulders and herding the flightless young out of the paths of approaching automobiles.

## 1967 USFWS Annual Report

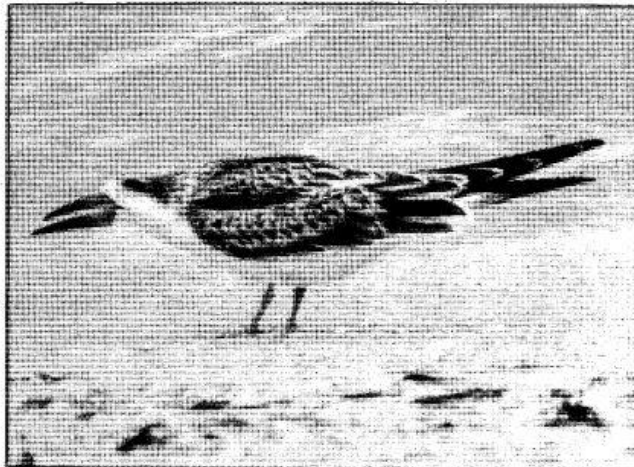
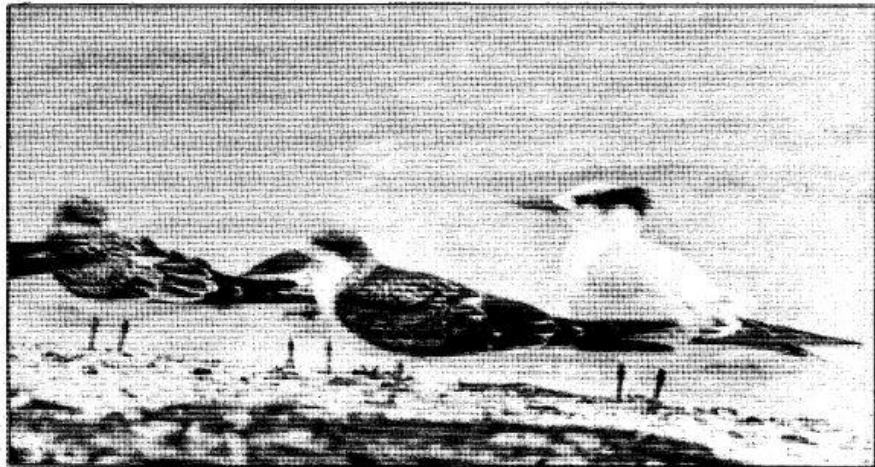
### 3. Shorebirds

The continued decline of usage of the fill areas of the Sanibel Causeway by nesting least terns and black skimmers has resulted in complete abandonment of the once active site by these birds. Nesting colonies have since been created adjacent to LaCosta Island to the north of

1980's Black Skimmers on the causeway by volunteer Al Miliken



## Skimmers grow up, refuge proposes protection



By Carol Kranichfeld

Black skimmers have delighted Sanibel Causeway travelers with their antics since they began nesting on a small patch of sand near the bridge in early July.

Because the skimmer colony has given thousands of passersby the chance to stop and watch, photograph and film the unfolding story as a new generation of skimmers was given life, it seems fitting that gratified observers complete the circle and return the gift.

Under the guidance of the J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge management, a written suggestion has been made to Lee County that eternal protection be granted for future Causeway nesters. The proposal is awaiting final approval.

Although transfer of Causeway nesting site jurisdiction has yet to be completed, everything points toward approval

from the Lee County Commission.

As outlined in the refuge's correspondence, the plan is designed to grant refuge management authority over the Causeway site beginning April 1 of each year, when least terns typically arrive to breed.

Commission approval of the jurisdiction transfer will permit refuge personnel to scrape a section of Causeway land free of vegetation to encourage least tern colonization. Black skimmers are expected to succeed the terns later in the summer.

Refuge management would also be allowed to construct a barrier, along the lines of a wooden snow fence, to discourage terns and skimmers from flying low into nearby Causeway lanes and oncoming traffic. The protective barrier should minimize bird kills, which have been seen this summer.

Although efforts were made to attract least terns and skimmers to other more protected parts of the Island, such as the Bailey Tract, the black skimmers chose to nest alongside the Causeway this year.

"The disked soil in the Bailey Tract must have been too dark to provide good camouflage for their eggs," refuge Assistant Manager Larry Narcisse surmised earlier this summer. He explained that the birds usually prefer white sandy flats to disguise the three to four eggs laid in each clutch.

The young skimmers, which hatched in late August, are adolescents now. Skimmers do not generally colonize the same area each year, but commission approval of the refuge's request may ensure the unique opportunity to see this year's adolescents and the offspring that are sure to follow next year.

Photographs by David Meardon



Least tern, above, and egg, bottom.

## Black skimmers, least terns choose sandy spots for nesting

It's nesting time for this group of black skimmers, which have chosen the east side of the Causeway's first island, and least terns, which have staked out an area just south of Turner Beach.

All last count some 20 pair of skimmers had laid eggs in the sand in clutches of up to four eggs. The tern rookery, with several nests already, is expected to grow and has already accepted the company of an unexpected visitor.

It seems a female loggerhead who came ashore in search of a place to lay her eggs also dropped a clutch at the tern site.

Of the several varieties of terns that inhabit the area - black, common, common, forster's, least,

royal and sandwich - only the least tern nests on Sumbel and Captiva. Endangered on the Pacific Coast, the least tern's beach nesting habitat is also under stress here by the encroachment of beachgoers.

J. N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge Assistant Manager Larry Narcisse has led off both the tern and skimmer nesting areas with ribbons and signs warning curious onlookers to keep their distance.

searing and possibly lethal sun.

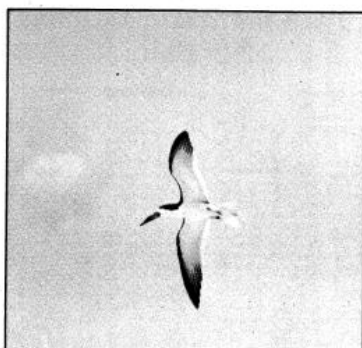
Like the least tern, skimmers also choose sandy beach habitats for nesting.

"The storm (last month that flooded sections of the Causeway Islands) opened up a good sandy area for nesting," Narcisse said. Both the male and female incubate the clutches, taking turns sitting atop the buff white colored eggs with dark splotches and calling off intruders with agile flight patterns and "barking" noises.

"This isn't being a busy time of year, we hope the birds will make it," said Narcisse, who cautioned birdwatchers to keep a low profile near the nesting sites because disturbances can cause the birds to leave the nest, exposing their eggs to the



Black skimmers



Black skimmers, top and above, and their eggs, below.



Black skimmers

Photography by David Meardon



# Causeway living threatens his life . . .

## *New home sought for nesting birds*

By ROSLYN AVERILL  
News-Press Environmental Writer

**SANIBEL** — The black skimmer, a bird whose numbers are dwindling locally, has been nesting for years alongside the busy causeway leading to this barrier island.

But only 17 young skimmers have survived this fall, and some environmentalists want to establish a new nesting site farther away from traffic and humans.

"The causeway is not the proper place for the birds to nest because of its public use," said Ron Hight, manager of J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge on Sanibel.

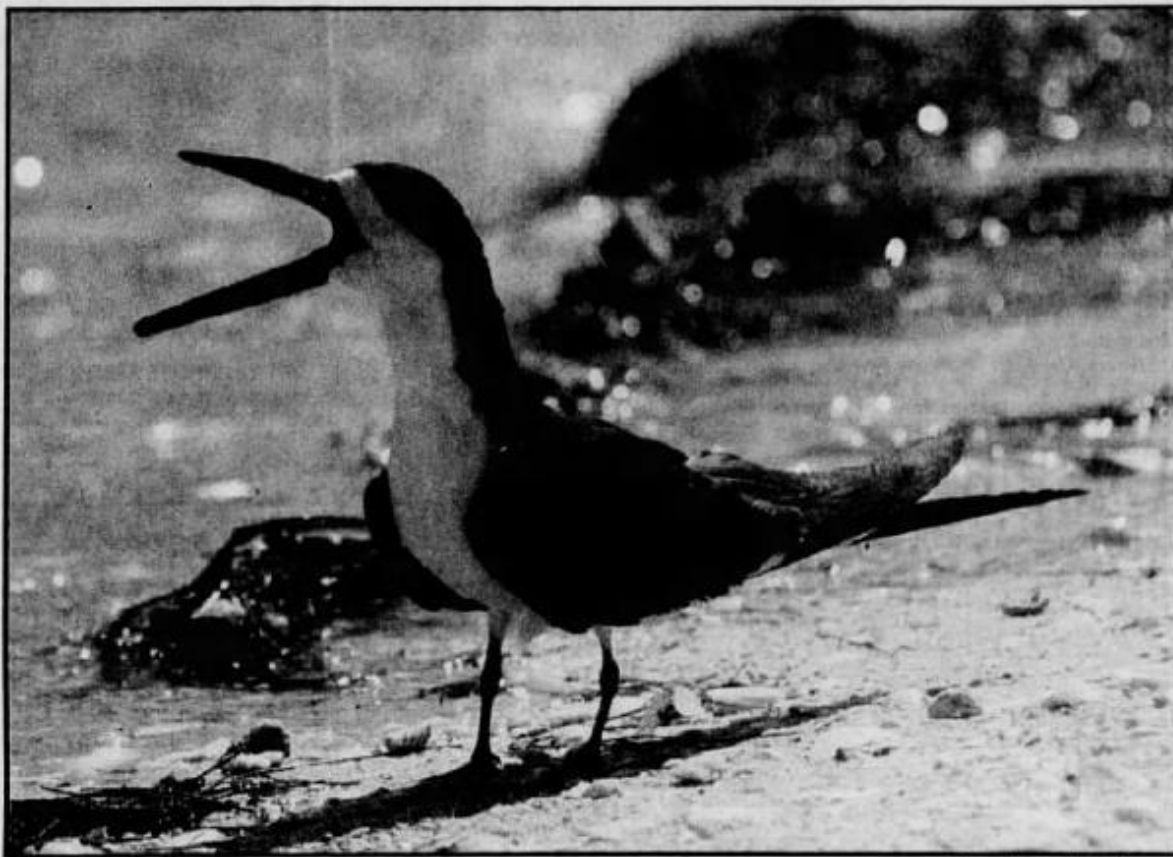
"The skimmers have used the causeway on and off since it was built in the early 1960s," Hight said, noting that about 50 young skimmers usually survive locally each year. "We have a pretty well-established colony."

Hight said at least 22 skimmers hatched about three weeks ago alongside the causeway, but only 17 remain. Four newly hatched birds were flattened by cars when a 9-year-old boy disrupted their nest and the birds ran toward the roadway, Hight said. A fifth fledgling was killed by a dog, he said.

"If people get too near, the birds will take off," Hight said. In early July, workers at the wildlife refuge roped off a 35-yard stretch alongside the causeway for the nesting birds and posted signs to keep people away.

"The best way to view the birds would be from your car parked near the signs," Hight said. "The birds feel less threatened by a car than by a person on foot."

The daredevil antics of the sleek black-and-white skimmers are fun to watch. "They fish with their scissor-



News-Press/Marc Beaudin

**A BLACK SKIMMER OPENS ITS BEAK WIDE AS IT STANDS ALONGSIDE THE SANIBEL CAUSEWAY LAST WEEK . . . the birds' nesting grounds on the causeway are threatened by intruding humans**

bills open," Hight said. "They skim along the water, with the lower part of the scissors in the water, to catch minnows."

Skimmers usually live and nest along the 3-mile-long causeway from May to mid-November, according to Hight. The birds, which live between South America and North Carolina, are considered a species of special concern but are not threatened by immediate extinction.

In an effort to protect the local skimmer population, Hight has

spearheaded a drive for state permission to convert a spoil island into a nesting site. A three-acre, unnamed island two miles north of the Sanibel Causeway in San Carlos Bay would be a perfect nesting ground for the birds, Hight said, because it receives the same sea breeze as the causeway.

"We would like to clear the island of its woody vegetation so there would be a sandy beach for the birds," he said. "I feel the birds will find the island and use it," and decoys of skimmers could

See BIRDS, page 2B

## 1988 USFWS Annual Report

In 1986, we entered into an agreement with the Florida Department of Natural Resources which gave us management authority on a small spoil island in the southern extremity of Matlacha Pass. As part of a legal settlement a mainland development company cleared the 3.5 acre island of Australian pine and other non-native plant species. This activity was aimed at our longtime goal of providing alternative suitable nesting habitat for black skimmers and least terns. It was our hopes this developed nesting habitat would entice both species to vacate the nearby Sanibel Causeway where traffic and other human-related pressures were negatively impacting those birds which have attempted to nest there since the Causeway was constructed in 1962 - 63.

## 1992 USFWS Annual Report

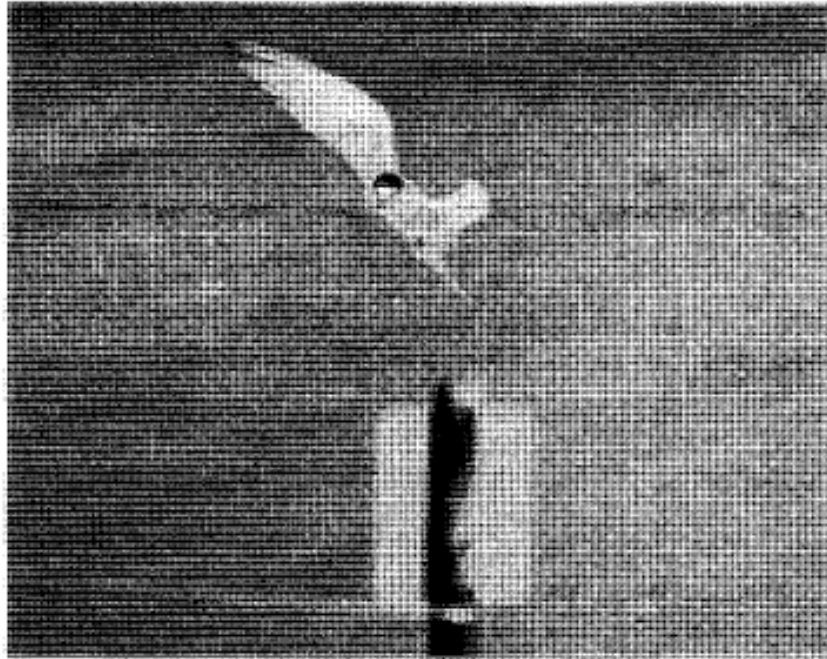
### 5. Shorebirds, Gulls, Terns and Allied Species

Of shorebird-like species only the killdeer and black-necked stilts are known to nest on the Refuge. However, the Refuge provides habitat for sizeable populations of plovers, sandpipers, and others such as the yellowlegs.

Black skimmers and least terns attempted to nest at construction sites along the causeway. Due to heavy rains, high winds and disturbance from people, no young were successfully produced.

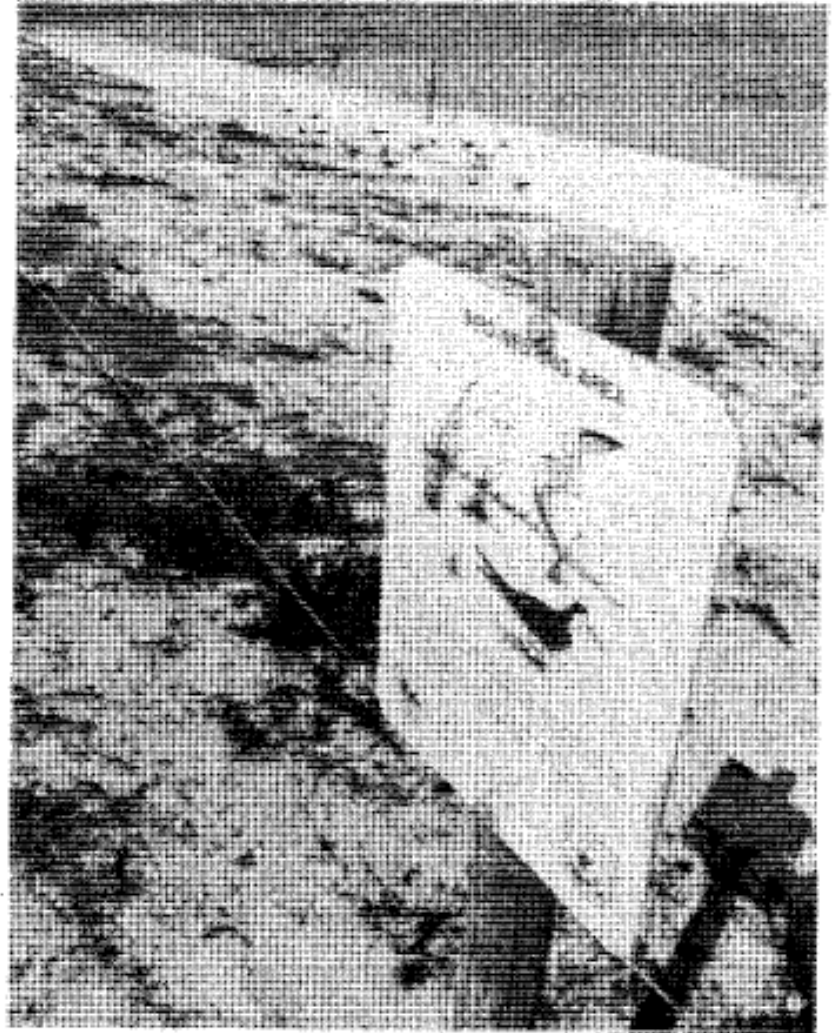
A black skimmer colony was found on Silver Key on the west end of Sanibel. The colony had approximately 40 nests, but as well as we could tell no young were produced.

July 9, 1992 Sanibel Captiva Islander



Black skimmers have taken up residence in the nesting area on the Sanibel Causeway which the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service had set aside for least terns. That's a least tern pictured above, hovering, hummingbird-like, over its nest. The wildlife service had hoped the skimmers would use Skimmer Island, which it prepares especially for them each year. Lee County has agreed to not do scheduled causeway improvement work in the nesting area until after all baby birds of whatever species have fledged. Pictured at right is the sign, warning people to steer clear of the sight.

## Sharing a nesting spot



Photos by PAUL COTE

Conservation Council reports:

# Mosquito spraying, nesting washouts, four-wheel drives and fishing licenses

By Steve Ruediger  
Islander staff writer

A wide variety of items were discussed Thursday, July 16, at the monthly meeting of the Conservation Council, an advisory group to the J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge.

**Mosquito spraying** -- An agreement has been reached between the refuge and the Lee County Mosquito Control District that there will be less mosquito-control helicopter flights in and out of refuge impoundment areas. In exchange, the refuge will be keeping the water in those areas higher so that fish will eat more mosquito larvae, refuge manager Lou Hinds reported.

He also said mosquito control had agreed to spray adulticides only by helicopter in The Sanctuary

development. The refuge allows larvaecide to be sprayed over the refuge. However, chemicals designed to kill adult mosquitoes are banned over federal lands.

Hinds said that if The Sanctuary were sprayed using the DC3s that mosquito control uses, some of the chemicals might drift into the refuge. Helicopters are more precise regarding the area to be sprayed. Therefore, using helicopters to spray in The Sanctuary will protect the refuge from that spray.

**Birds washed out** -- The least tern colony that was attempting to nest on the Sanibel Causeway was washed out by the heavy rains several weeks ago, Hinds reported. No babies were produced.

Assistant Refuge Manager Ralph Lloyd reported

Please see CONSERVATION, page 4C

## 1993 USFWS Annual Report

### 5. Shorebirds, Gulls, Terns and Allied Species

Of shorebird-like species only the killdeer and black-necked stilts are known to nest on the Refuge. However, the Refuge provides habitat for sizeable populations of plovers, sandpipers, and others such as the yellowlegs. Black-necked stilts nested at the Bailey Tract and at The Three Islands area on the Refuge. There were at least 8 nests that we knew about and most were successful.

Black skimmers attempted to nest on the causeway this year. They never actually laid any eggs but were present and did make several scrapes as if attempting to nest. The area was checked daily to see if any eggs were laid and if they would have the area would have been posted. The causeway is not a suitable nesting area for skimmers or terns. The area has heavy traffic and high public use. Any young that might have been produced most likely would have been run over or trampled upon.

## 1994 USFWS Annual Report

### 5. Shorebirds, Gulls, Terns, and Allied Species

Skimmer Island (Matlacha Pass NWR) was prescribe-burned this spring for the 1994 nesting season to provide nesting habitat for black skimmers and least terns. On March 30, the Refuge dozer was ferried by barge to the island. Approximately two-thirds of the southern end of Skimmer Island was root-raked.

Even though Skimmer Island appeared to be in its best shape in several years, no skimmers or terns nested there. Other than the attempted nesting on the Causeway, there was no skimmer nesting activity noted in the area. Very few skimmers were observed in the area during the summer, indicating that the lack of nesting was associated with the absence of skimmers rather than any lack of suitable nesting habitat.