

Breeding Shorebirds & Seabirds

Pre-nest Stage

The **pre-nest stage** includes establishing territories, courtship and copulation, and nest building. Be aware that all of these behaviors can occur a considerable distance from where a pair ultimately decides to nest.

Most shorebirds and seabirds are territorial, even highly colonial species will defend a tiny perimeter around the nest from neighbors.

For seabirds, which are primarily colonial in Florida, courtship can be elaborate and involve sky-pointing, bill-drooping, noisy vocalizations, and courtship feeding (male presents female with fish). In general, the courtship of shorebirds in Florida appears less complex consisting mostly of loud calls and more subtle displays. Copulation often follows courtship, particularly courtship feeding in seabirds.

Nest-building is simple for shorebirds and seabirds in Florida. Most only dig a shallow scrape in the sand which they, especially shorebirds, may line with shell fragments and bits of wrack. Some pairs may create several scrapes before selecting the one to actually use.

Photos: 1) Pairs of Least Terns engaged in courtship feeding (Alex Kropp). 2) Laughing Gulls copulating (Jack Rogers). 3) Least Terns doing sky-pointing displays (Maxis Gamez).

Nest Stage



Post-nest Stage



Pre-nest Stage

The **nest stage** pertains to breeding activities associated with the nest and includes egg laying, incubation, and brooding.

Depending on the size of the clutch, egg laying can take several days since shorebirds and seabirds generally lay one egg per day. Once the clutch is completed, incubation becomes more of a full time task.

Seabirds generally nest in colonies of varying size which are often conspicuous since the birds mob en masse to deter potential predators. Conversely, shorebirds do not nest in groups, and they rely on camouflage and trickery (e.g. broken-wing display) to distract predators from their nests.

Because shorebird chicks are precocial (down-covered and capable of running and feeding themselves shortly after hatching), and seabird chicks are semi-precocial, the period of time spent brooding in the nest is very short compared to other birds. Shorebird chicks will leave the nest immediately after hatching, while seabird chicks may remain in the nest for several days.

Photos: 1) Snowy Plover nest (Margo Zdravkovic). 2) Least Tern incubating (Alex Kropp). 3) Wilson's Plover doing broken wing-display (Mia McPherson). 4) Mobbing Least Tern (Maxis Gamez).

Nest Stage



Post-nest Stage



Pre-nest Stage

The **post-nest stage** pertains to chick rearing from the point the chicks have departed the nest until they are fully independent.

Since shorebird chicks are precocial (down-covered and capable of running and feeding themselves shortly after hatching), and seabird chicks are semi-precocial, the chicks spend very little time in the nest. Shorebird chicks will leave the nest immediately after hatching, while seabird chicks may remain in the nest for several days.

Adults remain with the chicks for several weeks after leaving the nest. Shorebirds travel in family groups and can be several hundred yards from the nest in a few short days. Shorebird chicks, except American Oystercatchers, generally feed themselves. On the other hand, seabird chicks are much more dependent on the adults and need to be fed. In addition, seabird chicks are not as mobile initially, and will only leave the colony once they have fledged (are capable of flight).

Photos: 1) Snowy Plover chick- one day old (Margo Zdravkovic). 2) Least Tern chick (Maxis Gamez). 3) Laughing Gull fledgling begging adult for food (Jack Rogers).

Nest Stage



Post-nest Stage

