

PRESS RELEASE



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Port Tampa Bay, Audubon Florida report the successful completion of multiple projects while protecting nesting birds

TAMPA, Fla.— This spring and summer, important projects that support shipping activities and enhance bay habitat were completed on the two dredge material management areas in Hillsborough Bay under the oversight of the Migratory Bird Protection Implementation Committee.

“Our collaborative partners, working together to manage the work on islands identified by the FWC (Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission) and BirdLife International as ‘globally significant’ for birds, resulted in projects being successfully accomplished while the nesting birds remained undisturbed,” Chris Cooley, Port Tampa Bay’s environmental affairs director, said. “We feel that this cooperation is key to keeping port activities on schedule.”

“There was a lot going on this nesting season on the dredge disposal islands of Tampa Bay,” added Cindy Fury, Wildlife Biologist with the US Fish and Wildlife Service’s Florida/Caribbean Migratory Bird Field Office. “Our Committee reviewed the projects in advance, and because all the contractors involved followed the recommendations we developed, the projects were accomplished safely for the birds and also for people.”

The projects included dredging of the Big Bend Shipping Channel by Tampa Electric Company (TECO). “Working with the Migratory Bird Protection Implementation Committee was key to getting permission to immediately begin the dredging that allowed safer movement of our ships into the power plant facility at Big Bend,” said Kristy Apostol, TECO’s environmental health and safety engineer. The silty material was piped into the northern of the two large disposal islands starting in April. Audubon’s sanctuary manager, Mark Rachal, worked closely with the contractor, Orion Marine Construction, Inc. “We surveyed the island shoreline and found a section where American Oystercatchers were not nesting. This allowed us to bring the dredge pipe onshore without impacting nesting birds,” Rachal said.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) oversaw installation of an oyster reef habitat creation project on the east side of Island 2D, the northern dredge material management island. This project was funded by fines resulting from the 1998 Mulberry Phosphate acid spill. Three linear limestone rock bars stretching a total of 1,400 feet were installed close to the island's eastern shore to offset oyster habitat lost during the acid spill. "Immediately after the limestone oyster bars were installed, they were full of small marine animals, including thousands of tiny crabs, and birds began to forage on the bars right away," stated NOAA's Jeanie Jennings.

The Army Corps of Engineers has been working through two nesting seasons on a large-scale project to raise the dikes on the southern of the two dredge material management areas (Island 3D) in Hillsborough Bay. Lead engineer for the Corps Andy Cummings said, "Our activities included clearing and excavating portions of the island interior, which promoted shorebird nesting on DMMA 3D. Extensive coordination with the MBPIC and our contractor, Carter's Contracting Services, allowed us to ensure this major construction work was carried out without endangering any birds or their chicks."

Because the Army Corps' project promoted Black-bellied Whistling-Duck nesting on Island 3D and so many ducklings were observed by the bird monitor, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission biologist who is studying the whistling duck population in Florida organized a duck banding effort. On July 30, 2015 a group agency, volunteer, and contractor effort that included staff from Port Tampa Bay, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission, Audubon, Carter's Contracting Services, Inc. and LG2 Environmental Solutions, Inc. was conducted to band a portion of the expanding population of nesting Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks on 3D Island. Although no birds were able to be banded this year, several ducks banded last year were seen on the island this year. The banding project is designed to add key basic biological information to the facts known about this duck in Florida.

The official nesting season runs from April 1 through August 31 and represents a cooperative effort between the port authority, Audubon Florida, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, and other local, state, and federal agencies to protect the nesting birds.

The islands provide protected nesting habitat for American Oystercatchers and many other sea bird species to complete their reproductive cycle. Each year, the islands become one of the bay area's

prime nesting sites, hosting as many as 1,000 nesting migratory birds. “This year saw nesting by over 40 pairs of oystercatchers, over 450 pairs of gulls, four species of terns, and about 55 pairs of Black Skimmers,” reported Mark Rachal. The nesting population of oystercatchers on the dredge disposal islands is the largest in the state, according to surveys conducted by Audubon and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. Oystercatchers remain one of Florida’s rarest species, with less than 400 pairs in Florida. In addition, more than 450 Black-bellied Whistling-Duck ducklings were observed on Island 3D.

“Audubon appreciates the cooperation of Port Tampa Bay, the Army Corps of Engineers, the general boating public, and others as we jointly strive to protect the water birds that nest in large numbers on the dredge disposal islands,” said Ann Paul, Audubon staff biologist.

Working closely with many key partners, the port authority has an integral role in the restoration, improvement and protection of the environmental health of Tampa Bay.

“In keeping with a firm commitment to the health and vitality of the waters around Tampa Bay and the native species that thrive there, we at the port will continue to engage in meaningful, long-term initiatives that sustain and improve life in these delicate habitats,” Paul Anderson, Port Tampa Bay president and CEO, said.

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About Port Tampa Bay

Port Tampa Bay is Florida’s largest port and the largest economic engine in west central Florida, supporting nearly 80,000 jobs and generating almost \$15 billion in annual economic impact. In addition to being a top 10 U.S. cruise port, the port handles a wide array of bulk, break bulk, containers and roll-on/roll-off cargoes, and is a major shipbuilding and repair center. Port Tampa Bay is the first seaport in the U.S. to receive the designation as “StormReady” by the National Weather Service.