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## Audubon urges care near nesting seabirds

By [YVETTE C. HAMMETT](#) | The Tampa Tribune

Audubon volunteers and staff will be out on many local beaches this weekend to educate beachgoers about the need to protect nesting seabirds and shorebirds.

For years, Audubon of Florida has worked with land managers and local governments, taking on the task of protecting nesting areas, handing out information and in some cases, roping off nesting areas.

This year, volunteers from Audubon chapters in St. Petersburg and Clearwater will don vests and set up umbrellas and spotting scopes near beach nesting bird colonies to help beachgoers avoid these sensitive areas, spot shorebirds and learn more about protecting them, said Ann Hodgson, science coordinator for the Audubon of Florida Gulf Coast Ecosystem.

The crush of people drawn to beaches on Memorial Day weekend can be disastrous for the nesting birds because humans often don't see the tiny scrapes in the sand where they deposit their eggs.

People also tend to scare the birds away by getting too close or bringing their dogs onto the beach.

"Essentially, there are places where the beach has been molded by the wind and the tides during the year and vegetation has been removed," said Ann Paul, regional coordinator for Audubon of Florida.

"These tiny birds' heads are about three inches off the sand, but they can see in all directions. They can see if a predator is sneaking up on them," Paul said. These are the same beaches that are most popular with locals and tourists.

"Most people think a mother bird is incubating her eggs to keep them warm," Hodgson said. "With Florida's beach-nesting birds, the parent is actually providing shade to eggs and chicks during the day," so they don't fry in the hot sun.

"A single significant disturbance can destroy an entire colony," Hodgson said.

Audubon urges beachgoers to walk around both posted and unposted groups of birds on the beach to avoid scaring the parents from the nests.

Other ways to avoid disturbing nesting birds is to avoid flushing groups of birds who may be resting, feeding or sheltering eggs and to keep dogs off the beach and away from bird colonies.

To learn more about the Audubon effort, visit [www.audubonoffloridanews.org](http://www.audubonoffloridanews.org).