

## Beach Birds – Common Winter Birds of Florida’s Atlantic Coast

This list includes commonly seen birds on Florida’s Atlantic beaches. It doesn’t include some beach birds such as sea ducks; egrets and herons; raptors; or songbirds that may be common in the dunes or woods near the beach.

Pelicans – Have a very long bill (with a pouch, of course!), short tail, totipalmate webbed (webbed on all four toes) feet. In flight, hold bill angled downward.

- 1) **Brown Pelican** (51”/8.2 lb)\* – The ‘beach pelican’ with plumage that varies seasonally. Adults have white head from about August to January, and brown back of head and neck with yellow on top of head from about December to August. Feed by diving into water. Young have brownish head and neck. Often fly in lines low over the waves. In flight, its large bill can be seen at a long distance.

Cormorants – Cormorants have a hooked bill tip compared to the Anhinga’s pointed bill tip. Think ‘C’ for cormorant is curved, ‘A’ for Anhinga is pointed. Dark birds with long necks and webbed feet. Totipalmate feet.

- 2) **Double-crested Cormorant** (33”/3.7 lb) – Black bird with a long neck and orange throat. Double ‘crests’ present only from about March to May. Young are brownish and paler below and have an orangish bill. Double-crested Cormorants fly with a kink in their neck. At a distance, compared with a pelican, cormorants hold their head above the line of their body. Found in more protected waters at the beach, but also common at inland waterways.

Shorebirds – Look at bill size and shape, overall size and shape, leg color, chest and back color and behavior.

Plovers – Long legs, run and stop foraging behavior. Short, stubby bills. Look at leg color, back color, collar, bill color and size. The Snowy Plover (grayish legs, partial collar, thinner black bill) is not included because occurs on the Gulf Coast, not the Atlantic.

- 3) **Black-bellied Plover** (11.5”/8 oz)– These common beach and mudflat shorebirds are only well-named in spring. Called Gray plover in Europe. They are the biggest beach plover and have longer legs and bill than other plovers. Black ‘armpits’ or axillaries are often visible when they fly.
- 4) **Wilson’s Plover** (7.75”/2.1 oz) –The largest of the small plovers. Have a longer bill than other small collared plovers, and long, dull flesh-colored legs. Florida breeder.
- 5) **Semipalmated Plover** (7.25”/1.6 oz) – This common plover is a winter resident. It is often seen in loose flocks on the upper beach. Has orangish legs and a pale orangish base to the bill that may be hard to see.
- 6) **Piping Plover** (7.25”/1.9 oz) – This endangered plover is a winter resident. It is often mixed with other small plover in loose flocks on the upper beach. It has a stubbier bill, a paler back, and brighter orange legs than other small plovers.

Oystercatchers – Are big and colorful shorebirds with bright chisel-like bills and pinkish legs.

- 7) **American Oystercatcher** (17.5”/1.4 lb) – Black head, brown back, white belly, pink legs and red bill.

Sandpipers – Have long legs and medium to long, thin bills, but bill length varies. Look at bill size and shape! Most have brighter plumage in spring and most nest in the arctic. Forage actively in the sand or mud.

6 Larger pipers, all with fairly long legs and neck:

- 8) **Willet** (15”/8 oz) – A very drab gray when its wings are folded, but has a distinctive black-and-white wing pattern. Long grayish legs and long, fairly stout black bill that is grayish at its base. Breeds in Florida at which time it is more brown and barred below. (Two subspecies may represent two species)
- 9) **Whimbrel** (17”/14 oz) – Has a striped head and a long, decurved bill. Grayer than next two species with a contrasting paler belly.
- 10) **Long-billed Curlew** (23”/1.3 lb) – The largest Florida piper, has a very long decurved bill. Buffy below with cinnamon underwing (but bill shape should clear up confusion with next species).
- 11) **Marbled Godwit** (18”/13 oz) – Has a very long, slightly upturned bill that is dark at the tip and reddish pink at the base. Buffy below with cinnamon underwing.

7 Smaller pipers:

- 12) **Ruddy Turnstone** (9.5”/3.9 oz) – Has a stubby, pointed bill. Turns over shells and beach wrack (and, of course, small stones). Distinctive back and dark and light wing and back pattern when flying. Colorful in spring. Think hot chocolate Sunday.

\*lengths and weights given after birds’ names are from *The Sibley Guide to Birds of North America*.

- 13) **Red Knot** (10.5"/4.7 oz) – They are pale gray most of year but turns a burnt red color in spring. Dull yellowish legs often appear black. Barring on sides sets them apart from following 4 species, also larger and chunkier.
- 14) **Sanderling** (8"/2.1 oz) – Commonly seen running along edge of surf. Palest gray peep with black legs and medium short, straight bill. Usually appears more pale, especially on head, and slightly larger than Western Sandpiper.
- 15) **Western Sandpiper** (6.5"/0.91 oz) – Has a medium long bill that is slightly decurved and thinner at the tip. Paler than Least or Dunlin, especially on the chest.
- 16) **Least Sandpiper** (6"/0.7 oz) – Smallest peep with short, slightly decurved bill, brownish back and chest, and yellowish legs that may be muddy and look dark.
- 17) **Dunlin** (8.5"/2.1 oz) – Look like a cross between the previous two birds but larger with longer bill. Rufous on the back in spring (also called the Red-backed Sandpiper) with a black patch on the belly.
- 18) **Short-billed Dowitcher** (11"/3.9 oz) – Dowitchers have a ‘sewing machine’ motion when feeding. Very long, straightish bills and greenish legs. Short-billed gives “tu-tu-tu” call and is found on the coast in winter. The other dowitcher species, the Long-billed, gives “keek” call and is commoner inland. Note: calls can vary and habitats overlap especially during migration.

Gulls – Have short legs, webbed feet, and medium long and medium thick bills. Much variation. Adults described here. To learn gulls, study structure, especially head and bill shape, and leg and back color, then start to learn immature plumages. Each species has several different plumages depending on age and season. Younger birds look “dirtier.” Laughing Gull is the only Florida breeder.

- 19) **Ring-billed Gull** (17.5"/1.1 lb) – One of most common gulls at beach and parking lots. Has pale gray back with black wingtips. Ring around bill in adult birds. Yellow legs. More rounded head and thinner bill than next 3 species.
- 20) **Herring Gull** (25"/2.5 lb) – One of the larger gulls. Same coloration as Ring-billed but head flatter, legs pink and bill thicker and without ring in adult.
- 21) **Great Black-backed Gull** (30"/3.6 lb) – The largest gull in U.S. Uncommon, very dark back with pink legs and a very heavy bill.
- 22) **Lesser Black-backed Gull** (21"/1.8 lb) – Uncommon, similar to Herring, but with darker back, yellow legs and dark ‘smudge’ around eye, more so than in Herring (think bad make-up).
- 23) **Laughing Gull** (16.5"/11 oz) – This very common, small gull has a dark back and black wingtips, and, for most of the year, black legs and a black bill and head smudged dark on the rear crown. In spring and summer, the adult’s head is all black and the bill is red and the feet dark red.

Terns – Compared with gulls, have thinner; more pointed bills; more pointed wings; longer, often forked tails; and more graceful flight. All have a black cap in the spring and summer, but all but Caspian have a white forehead in the fall and winter. Most feed by diving headfirst into the water to catch small fish.

Larger terns:

- 24) **Caspian Tern** (21"/1.4 lb) – Gull-sized, always with some black on forehead (even in winter), heavy red bill with dark tip, slightly forked tail, lots of black in wingtips.
- 25) **Royal Tern** (20"/1 lb) – More common than previous species usually with a thinner, orange bill, less black in the wingtips, and a more-forked tail than Caspian.
- 26) **Sandwich Tern** (15"/7 oz) – Has a slender, black bill with a yellow tip (think mustard on the sandwich).

Smaller terns:

- 27) **Forster’s Tern** (13"/6 oz) – Usually the most common tern in Florida in the winter. In winter has a black mask that doesn’t connect behind head. Longer legs than Common Tern.
- 28) **Common Tern** (12"/4.2 oz) – Mask in winter connects behind its head. Black carpal bar most visible on standing bird. Shorter legs than Forster’s. Less common than Forster’s.

Skimmers

- 29) **Black Skimmer** (18"/11 oz) – Distinctive coloration of black above, white below. Feeds by dragging lower mandible in water while flying.