

# A History of Avian Habitat Creation Through Dredged Material Deposition by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers



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**2) Majority of islands created during development of the Intracoastal Waterway System in the 1930-1940's**



**Boston, Massachusetts**

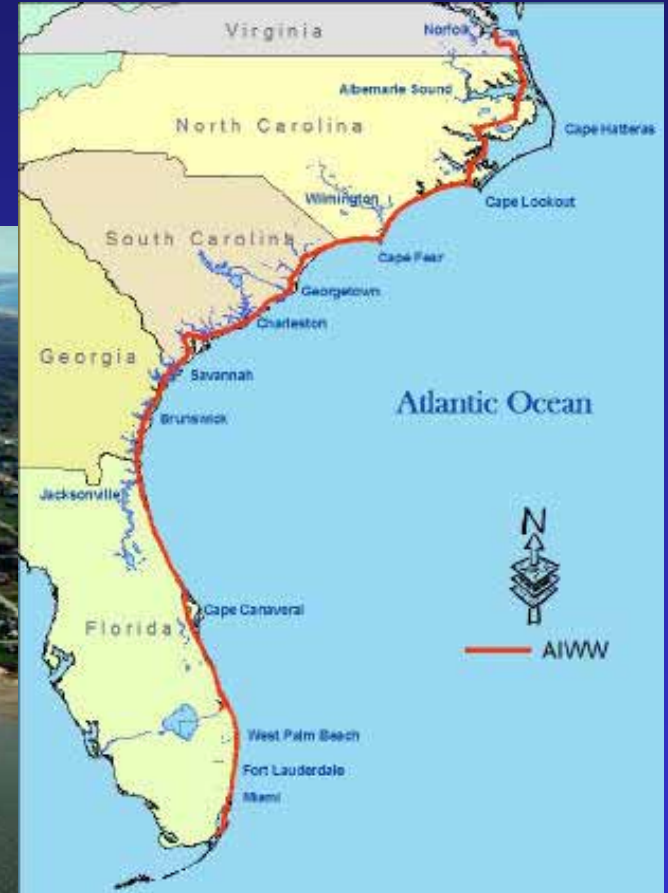


**Key West, Florida**

**Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway**

## Purpose of the Intracoastal Waterways system:

- 1) Promote navigation for the development of national and international commerce
- 2) Flood control
- 3) Fisheries management
- 4) Recreation



Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway

# Dredged-material Disposal Sites for Birds

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**Status: 1970 – 1990s**

Originally, the value of dredged material islands as wildlife habitat was not a concern.

With increases in human population along coastal areas, natural habitats for many birds were lost, and dredged material islands became vital habitat for many breeding, migrating, and wintering birds.



# U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Dredged Material Research Program (DMRP)

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## Research objectives during the 1970s

- 1) Document use of dredged material islands by colonial nesting birds
- 2) Document succession of vegetation on these islands
- 3) Compare vegetation and bird use on diked and undiked islands
- 4) Compare vegetation and bird use of natural and man-made islands
- 5) Study migratory and year-round use of dredged material islands by nesting and wintering birds



# Summary of Results: Soots and Landin 1978

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## Study Sites 1974-1977:

Entire coastal and estuarine areas of New Jersey, North Carolina, Florida, Texas, and Oregon/Washington;

Entire U.S. shoreline and islands of the Great Lakes;

Sandbars and islands along the Upper Mississippi River from Alton, IL to St. Paul, MN

PROCEEDINGS:  
INTERNATIONAL WORKSHOP  
ON  
DREDGED MATERIAL BENEFICIAL  
USES

Mary C. Landin, PhD, Editor

Hosted by  
US Army Engineer District, Baltimore  
US Army Engineer Waterways Experiment Station

Sponsored by  
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US Environmental Protection Agency

Omni Inner Harbor Hotel  
Baltimore, Maryland USA  
July 28 - August 1, 1997

# Summary of Results: Soots and Landin 1978

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Approx. 600,000 colonial nesting waterbirds of 35 species, and 59 species of non-colonial birds were detected

Majority of colonial species were tree nesters (Hérons, Egrets, Ibises, Cormorants, Pelicans, and Spoonbills)

Majority of individuals were ground nesters (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)





# Summary of Results: Soots and Landin 1978

## Colonial Nesting Waterbirds

Areas	Ground Nesters			Tree Nesters		
	Dredge Islands	Totals	%	Dredge Islands	Totals	%
<b>Texas</b>	122,554	203,387	60	33,604	54,012	62
<b>Florida</b>	171,050	311,000	59	80,438	241,000	52
<b>North Carolina</b>	64,66	86,072	75	15,130	15,362	99
<b>New Jersey</b>	--	93,246	--	--	11,164	--
<b>Great Lakes</b>	65,088	272,166	25	32	5,062	0.2
<b>Pacific N.W.</b>	1,554	17,214	10	0	750	0
<b>Upper MS River</b>	0	68	0	0	9,668	0
<b>Totals</b>	<b>445,110</b>	<b>994,317</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>137,578</b>	<b>337,018</b>	<b>30</b>

# Habitat Requirements of Colonial Waterbirds

(From: Soots and Landin 1978; data from 35 nesting species)

Substrate	No. Species
Bare ground – sparse herb	16
Medium Herb – dense herb	22
Herb/shrub – shrub thicket	21
Shrub/forest - forest	17



## Results from F. G. Buckley and C. A. McCaffery (1978):

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### Surveyed nearly 200 Dredged Material Islands along 190 km of the New Jersey Coast.

- Recorded 52,205 nesting pairs of colonial seabirds and waterbirds:  
Laughing Gulls (35,241 pairs), Common Terns (4,667 pairs), Herring Gulls (4,202 pairs), Snowy Egrets (2,094 pairs), Glossy Ibises (1,543 pairs), and Gull-billed Terns (18 pairs).
- A total of 16 colonial waterbird species were observed nesting on islands - other species include Little Blue Heron, Cattle Egret, Great Egret, Tri-colored Heron, Black-crowned Night Heron, Yellow-crowned Night Heron, Great Black-backed Gull, Laughing Gull, Forster's Tern, Least Tern, and Black Skimmer.
- Two State endangered species, the Least Tern and Black Skimmer, were found on 15 and 14 island sites, respectively; The Forster's Tern was the only observed Species not associated with any Dredged Material Islands.

# Summary of Results: Soots and Landin 1978

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## General Findings and Management Implications:

### Texas

More habitat needed for ground nesters in northern part; Habitat for arboreal nesters needed in southern part.

### Florida

Ground nesters need habitats of bare ground, sparse and medium herb cover.

### North Carolina

Shrub/forest habitat needed for arboreal species at river mouths and inlets; bare substrate needed for terns.

### New Jersey

Habitat needed for both ground and arboreal nesters

### Great Lakes

Common Terns and Herring Gulls need sparse habitats; habitat needed for arboreal species.

### Upper MS River

Isolated, bare substrate island needed to restore Least Terns.

# Summary of Results: Soots and Landin 1978

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## Existing Dredged Material Island Management:

- 1) Maintain or re-establish habitats
- 2) Increase size of islands/ stabilize islands
- 3) Change configuration, elevation, vegetation, or other features for more desirable habitats



# Summary of Results: Soots and Landin 1978

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## New Habitats/Islands are Needed When:

- 1) Nesting habitat is lacking
- 2) Alterations to islands have removed important habitats
- 3) Undesirable nesting habitat (e.g., thick vegetation) must be cleared



# Summary of Results: Soots and Landin 1978

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## Additional Concerns:

- 1) Islands or other dredged material sites are connected to the mainland; colonies are subjected to high levels of predation.
- 2) Nesting areas are subjected to excessive disturbance (e.g., Corps operations, recreational activities); colonies need protection.

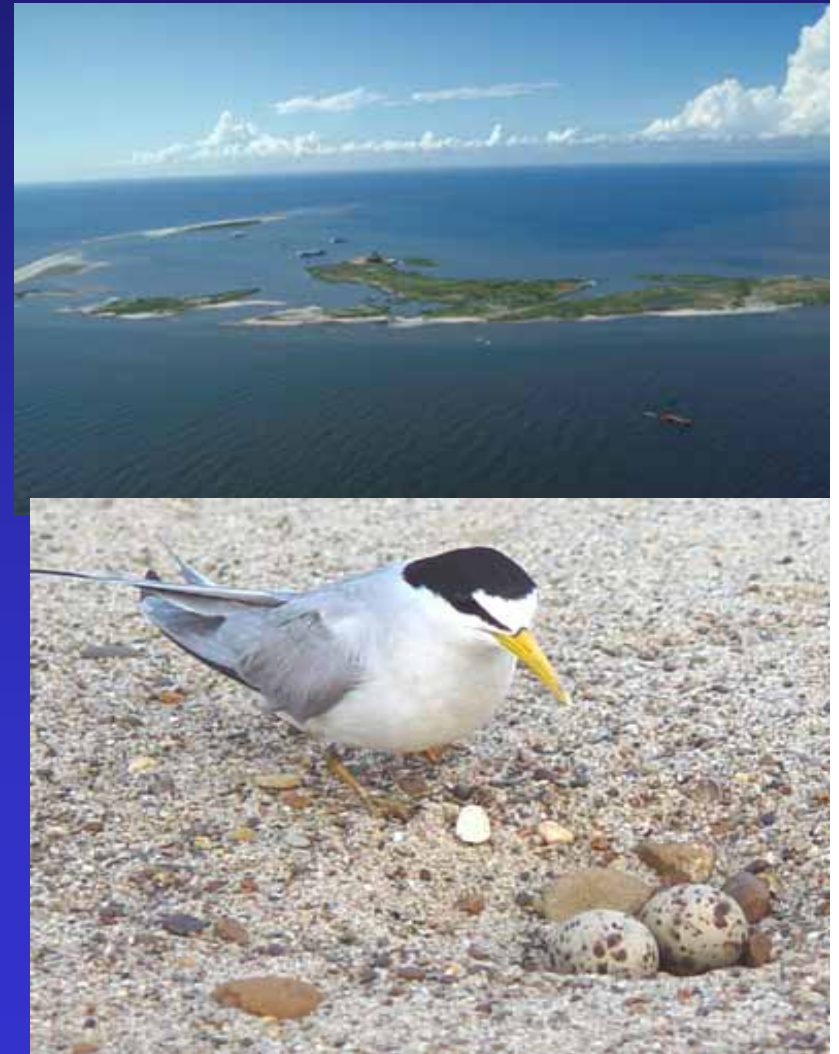


# Summary of Results: Soots and Landin 1978

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## Basic Concepts of New Island Creation:

- 1) Island should be isolated from predators and humans
- 2) Island should be created during fall or winter months
- 3) Island should be at least 2 –20 ha in size, few or no steep slopes, sand/shell substrate
- 4) ~ 2 m in elevation (high enough to limit flooding, low to avoid wind erosion).





# Current Status 2005: Dredged-material Disposal Sites for Birds

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## Problem

Habitat loss has made many bird species, some of which are federally endangered, dependent on dredged-material disposal sites

Disposal of dredged-material at some sites has caused conflict with nesting of several species, especially T&E

The Corps needs better guidance on improving management of dredged-material disposal sites for both active disposal and bird habitat management



# **Important Findings of DMRP Research: Landin 1997**

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- 1) Each waterbird/shore bird species have life-history requirements compatible with dredging operations and island creation when timing and locations concerns are accounted for.**
- 2) Habitats for nesting species can be accommodated through placement of dredged material using a rotational strategy for maintenance dredging scheduled operations.**
- 3) Islands between 2 – 20 ha are optimal; however, larger and smaller islands can be successful if isolation, location, topography, elevation, and substrate requirements are met.**
- 4) Slopes of more than 3-ft rise over 100 ft distance are too steep.**
- 5) Colonies on undiked islands are much more successful than nesting colonies on diked islands.**
- 6) Sand/shell cobble substrates are more desirable than silts and clays.**

# **Important Findings of DMRP Research: Landin 1997**

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- 7) New dredged material should be placed several months before breeding season to permit wind sorting of material that will provide a firm substrate for nesting.**
- 8) Nesting species can affect vegetation by killing plants through feces accumulation.**
- 9) Undisturbed bare ground habitats are the scarcest in supply in all U.S. waterways, forcing some species to use undesirable habitats including roof tops and parking lots.**
- 10) Islands should be at least 6 – 10 ft above mean high water or flood stage during the breeding season.**
- 11) Islands should not be closer than 0.5 miles from the shore to prevent predators and discourage recreational boaters from using island.**
- 12) Some species will only nest in close proximity to other species (e.g., Royal and Sandwich Terns).**

# **Important Findings of DMRP Research: Landin 1997**

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- 13) Birds vary in their site tenacity: arboreal species will persist in area even when nesting failure is likely; ground nesting species often move from island to island from year-to-year or within a year.**
- 14) Rock, riprap, and steep dike structure are deadly to young birds: young birds need an unimpeded access to the open water, beach habitats.**
- 15) Shallow water feeding habitat in close proximity to island for breeding adult birds aids in nesting and fledging success.**
- 16) Exotic vegetation will likely require vigorous control to protect nest site integrity.**
- 17) Colonizing nest predators will need to be controlled.**
- 18) Human use of islands will need to be discouraged during the breeding seasons and islands should be posted with no trespassing signs.**

# **Important Findings of DMRP Research: Landin 1997**

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- 19)** Islands can be actively repaired and upgraded using more dredged material during the breeding season if birds can be enticed to relocate to safer parts of the island.
- 20)** Erosion control on islands can be accomplished using dredge maintenance dredged material with positive effects on the active bird colonies.
- 21)** Coordination with and education of all interested parties, including local fisherman and environmental groups, should be on-going throughout the planning, design, construction, and monitoring phases of wildlife island development.

# Where do we go from here?

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- 1) More than 200,000 m<sup>3</sup> of uncontaminated coastal sediments are dredged each year for port maintenance:**
  - a) Numerous opportunities exist to use this material for new island creation and coastal wetland/marsh and beach restoration.**
  - b) Management techniques and habitat creation knowledge for colonial and non-colonial waterbirds is well developed, but poorly implemented.**
- 2) We need increased cooperation *and* communication between government agencies, state and local governments, and environmental organizations to promote active management of dredged material habitats for birds.**

# New Research Directions:

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- 1) Need to determine the best way to include management and creation of dredged material islands into regional shorebird management guidelines.



# New Research Directions:

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- 2) Need considerable research on the impacts of beach nourishment on avian use of beach habitat for nesting and foraging.





# New Research Directions:

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- 3) Need better understanding of local and regional impacts of human disturbances to determine best long-term management strategies for sustainable colonial and non-colonial waterbird populations.



