# SKIMMER ISLAND, WORCESTER COUNTY, MD

Ocean City locals and the Maryland birding community refer to Worcester County's most dynamic pieces of land as "Bird Island" or the "4th Street Flats." This complex of small islands and sand flats is officially named Skimmer Island. The main island is the primary nesting site for one of the state's most unusual birds, the Endangered black skimmer *(Rhynchops niger)*. As it flies, this graceful bird's lower, knife-like bill cuts through the water's surface in a skimming fashion to catch small fish. This low, sandy island near the center of Maryland's busiest summer resort area is also a critical nesting site for the Endangered royal tern *(Sterna maxima)*. This large, orange-billed tern engages in short, shallow dives to catch small crabs and fish. While Skimmer Island is only accessible by boat, visitors can see it easily with binoculars or a spotting scope from the sidewalk on the US 50 bridge, the west end of 1st Street, or from the fishing bulkhead that stretches from 2nd to 4th Streets in Ocean City. Skimmer Island (and a small buffer) is closed to public access from April 1st to September 15th to protect nesting bird colonies. Visitors can view these social birds from outside the marked buffer area in kayaks and shallow draft boats.

LOOKING NORTHEAST OF THE US 50 BRIDGE ANDY SERRELL

DAN PANCAMO / WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

**A black skimmer tends to its chick.**

Skimmer Island did not exist prior to the formation of the Ocean City Inlet and its flood tidal shoal. In 1933, the Chesapeake-Potomac hurricane opened the inlet and a slow natural process began that eventually resulted in the formation of the island. In the late 1980s, the flood tidal shoal was substantial, but Skimmer Island still didn't exist as dry land above most high tides. By the mid-1990s, Skimmer Island had accreted enough sand to become the most important breeding site in Maryland for three species of colonial nesting waterbirds: black skimmer, and royal and common tern. To breed successfully these birds require predator-free barren sand beaches. The surrounding sand flats also provide key foraging habitat for a variety of shorebirds during their spring and fall migrations between their breeding grounds in the arctic and wintering habitats in the southern hemisphere. The beaches of Skimmer Island are also a critical spawning area for horseshoe crabs, which crawl up from the ocean depths during the full moon each May, to lay their tiny green eggs at the ocean's edges. Despite the name, these prehistoric relics are more closely related to spiders and scorpions than to crabs. This area is owned by the State and managed by the Maryland Wildlife and Heritage Service as part of Sinepuxent Bay WMA.

## WATCH OUT FOR!

- Biting Flies
- Changing Tide

## THE BASICS

- Boat Accessible Only
- No Trails or Facilities
- Nesting Season Closure

## KEY ELEMENTS

- Black Skimmer
- Royal and Common Tern
- Coastal Beaches and Flats
- Horseshoe Crab Spawning Beach

RICHARD ARNOLD

**Left: Horseshoe crabs gather in great numbers at the water's edge on Skimmer Island to spawn and lay their eggs. The eggs will provide a valuable food source for many migrating shore-birds.**

GREGORY BREESE / USFWS

**Red knots gather to feed on horseshoe crab eggs during their spring migration.**

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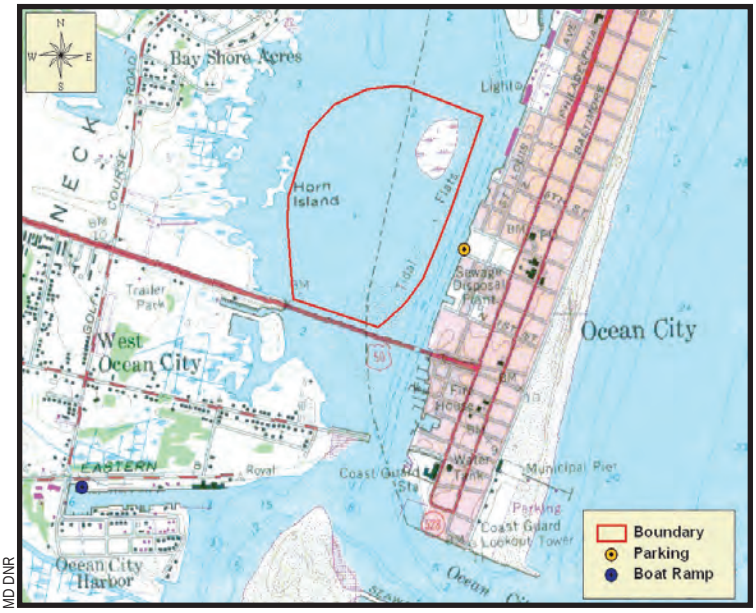


MD DNR

Skimmer Island Natural Area

## Directions

***From the Chesapeake Bay Bridge:*** Travel east 9 miles on US 50/301 and take the right turn to stay on US 50 at the split with US 301. Proceed nearly 95 miles to Ocean City. Turn left (north) onto MD 528 (Philadelphia Avenue), continue 3 blocks and turn left onto 3rd Street. Proceed 2 blocks, turn right, and park on the right. When not off-limits during the breeding season, Skimmer Island is accessible by boat.

***To avoid unnecessary disturbance of feeding and resting birds, landing on the island anytime is discouraged.***

### CONTACT

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***For more information:***
www.dnr.maryland.gov/wildlife/publiclands/eastern/sinepuxentbay.asp

## Selfish Herd: Safety in Numbers

Colonial waterbirds, like skimmers and terns, are part of a diverse group of birds that gather together in dense colonies for security during the nesting season. This gathering behavior is referred to as the "selfish herd" because when a predator is faced with a large number of individuals to choose from, there is an individual safety that results from being a member of a large group. In Maryland, colonial waterbirds are a group of over 20 species that include pelicans, cormorants, gulls, terns, egrets, herons, and ibis. Breeding waterbird colonies are most likely to form at predator-free sites, usually remote islands. These particular islands are disappearing as sea levels rise and erode the small habitats waterbird colonies select as critical nesting sites.

DAVE BRINKER

**A colony of royal terns and black skimmers on Skimmer Island.**

## Conservation Partnership

DAVE BRINKER

**Sand from the Ocean City Fishing Center is pumped onto the island.**

Skimmer Island is constantly being reshaped by tidal currents and storms. In the late 1990s, Skimmer Island was over seven acres in size. Since then it has been rapidly losing ground, and by 2009 was just over two acres. In 2009, a joint effort to conserve Skimmer Island was started by the Ocean City Fishing Center, the Maryland Coastal Bays Program and the Maryland Department of Natural Resources. These organizations are working in a public-private partnership to use clean sand dredged from the Fishing Center's approach channel to nourish and restore the island. Each March, sand is pumped onto Skimmer Island to improve nesting habitat conditions for skimmers and terns. This "design with nature" management approach places sand on Skimmer Island to balance what is lost to erosive tidal currents. As sea levels rise, managers will continue to nourish the island with clean, dredged sand to maintain critical habitats. Skimmers, terns, horseshoe crabs and a myriad of other species will take advantage of the habitats that Skimmer Island and the tidal sand flats provide.