

From: **Doig, Victor** <[victor\\_doig@fws.gov](mailto:victor_doig@fws.gov)>

Date: Tue, Jun 18, 2019 at 7:38 AM

Here is a brief summary of the Snake Key rookery survey results for this year. We do flight line surveys to estimate the population every year, but they are conducted now at nearby Snake Key (also part of CKNWR) as colonial wading birds no longer nest at Seahorse Key (see Audubon article for background info: <https://www.audubon.org/magazine/winter-2016/the-mystery-seahorse-keys-missing-bird-colony>)

The mixed species wading bird rookery at Snake Key is thriving this year. The numbers of birds are beginning to approximate the "glory days" of nesting at the recently abandoned Seahorse Key colony. Refuge staff and volunteers completed the annual wading bird flight line surveys for the Snake Key rookery in May. White Ibis have returned to nest in the area in huge numbers, with an estimated 2,500 - 3,000 nesting pairs. Also nesting in large numbers are Tri-colored Herons (est. 500 nests), Snowy Egrets (est. 400 nests), Great Egrets (est. 120 nests), Brown Pelicans (est. 100 nests), and Double Crested Cormorants (est 200 nests). Other notables include an estimated 60 Roseate Spoonbill nests and 3-4 Reddish Egret nesting pairs. We also recently completed drone flights over the colony in an effort to count and validate nesting data, but have not yet completed digital post-processing to begin analyzing that information.

This is also the first season with an official island closure during the nesting period at Snake Key (Refuge staff installed the signage back in February), and despite a few violations, most folks seem to be respecting the 300' buffer around the island in an effort to limit disturbance to this critically important wildlife area. The Seahorse / Snake Key rookery is the largest wading bird rookery on the Gulf Coast of Florida, and with nesting numbers reduced in the Everglades this year, the importance of our own colony cannot be understated. Collaborative efforts (with UF) are also underway to collect mating and nesting sounds from the Snake Key rookery to broadcast back on Seahorse Key, to be used in conjunction with bird decoys, in an effort to attempt to lure some nesting back to Seahorse Key since the much smaller Snake Key landmass is filled almost to capacity. Most folks will recall that the large Seahorse Key rookery was suddenly abandoned during the nesting season back in April of 2015. We still cannot definitively say why all the birds left their nests during that event, although disturbance was likely a factor.

