

Watch that line

Monofilament line is among the top threats to pelicans and other wildlife. Some simple steps can reel in a killer.

By TERRY TOMALIN, Times Outdoors Editor
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TIERRA VERDE - Ten years ago, Tampa Bay Watch's Peter Clark and I visited a "bird island" near the mouth of Tampa Bay.

We had paddled out to Tarpon Key in sea kayaks to see firsthand the havoc that discarded fishing line was wreaking on a local pelican rookery.

There, hanging from the tree like macabre Halloween decorations were the emaciated bodies of dozens of dead birds.

"If you were just passing by in a boat, you wouldn't notice a problem," Clark told me at the time. "But once you get up close, you can't help but see."

The victim, an adult brown pelican, had died recently. Clark theorized that the bird had probably grabbed a piece of bait at one of the fishing piers. The angler, probably thinking he was doing the bird a favor, likely cut the line.

"Little did they know they were signing the bird's death warrant," Clark said.

Discarded monofilament fishing line is the No. 1 killer of adult brown pelicans, according to the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission. As the number of recreational anglers continues to increase, so does the threat to the birds considered as much a part of our state's identity as palm trees and manatees.

Pelicans aren't the only birds killed by discarded fishing gear.

"Pretty much every type of water or shore bird can get caught up in fishing line," said Mark Rachal, a field biologist with Audubon of Florida. "We find dead cormorants, anhingas, herons, egrets, roseate spoonbills ... you name it."

Many of these species are considered by state and federal officials to be "threatened" or "endangered." These birds face numerous threats to their survival, including habitat loss, storm damage and predation from animals such as raccoons.

"Tarpon Key no longer has any pelicans nesting there," Clark said this week when contacted for this story. "A couple of raccoons got out there and wiped out all the eggs. The birds moved elsewhere."

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Tarpon Key, like many of the bird islands in Tampa Bay, is protected from humans. It is against the law to land there and harass or disturb the birds in any way. (In 1993, Clark and I received special permission from federal officials to visit the islands in order to document the effect monofilament line was having on the birds.)

But humans miles away can still have a devastating effect on these fragile ecosystems.

Birds are often hooked in the beak, wings or gullet after they strike a bait as it hits the water, or run afoul of the line as it floats in the air. An anglers' first reaction is to cut the line, which is the wrong thing to do. Anglers often get their hooks and rigs tangled in the mangroves. Rather than retrieve the tackle, they cut the line, which floats in the breeze, invisible to a bird that may land nearby.

"The problem with monofilament is that it does not go away," Clark said. "It can stay in the environment for hundreds of years."

But there is hope. Tampa Bay Watch, one of the area's leading environmental stewardship programs, and Audubon of Florida conduct cleanups on Tampa Bay's bird islands.

In 2005, 69 volunteers cleared monofilament line and other fishing gear from 43 sites in Tampa Bay and Boca Ciega Bay. They gathered more than 45 pounds of monofilament, which equaled 2,256 yards of line. The volunteers also collected the bodies of 43 dead birds, which organizers said had died as a result of entanglement.

But two birds were rescued and rehabilitated. Event organizers believe the cleanup probably saved the lives of 200 to 300 birds that could have died had the line not been removed.

Anglers can do their share to help seabirds by participating in this year's cleanup. Clark encourages fishermen to recycle their old line. Tampa Bay Watch maintains more than two dozen drop-off stations (see list).

If you do hook a seabird, slowly retrieve the line and bird, then wrap the bird's wings with a T-shirt, cover its eyes if possible, then remove the hook or cut the line as close to the hook as possible. If the bird is seriously injured, contact the FWC.

13th annual Monofilament Cleanup

When: Saturday

What: Remove fishing line and tackle from more than 50 islands throughout Tampa Bay where birds nest.

Volunteers and boat captains are needed. To be assigned a bird colony or bird habitat area, contact Mark Rachal at (813) 623-6826 or Kendall Sanderson at (727) 867-8166.

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This event is sponsored by Audubon of Florida's Coastal Islands Sanctuaries Program and Tampa Bay Watch. For more information, go to www.audubon.org or www.tampabaywatch.org.

Line recycling drop-off locations

Pinellas

Sunshine Skyway

Fort De Soto Bay Pier

Fort De Soto Gulf Pier

Fort De Soto boat ramp

Coffee Pot Bayou boat ramp

Demen's Landing boat ramp

North Shore Park

St. Petersburg Pier

Weedon Island boat ramp

Gandy Bridge Marina boat ramp

Coffee Pot Boulevard bin

Crisp Park

Maximo Park boat ramp

O'Neill's Marina

Jungle Prada boat ramp

Dunedin Municipal Marina

Grandview Park

Hillsborough

Picnic Island boat ramp

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Bobby Hicks Park

Upper Tampa Bay Park

Palonis Park

Gandy boat ramp

Lowry Park boat ramp

Rowlett Park

Manatee Viewing Center

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