

Good Beach Behavior

With Covid-19 stay-at-home orders in effect, more and more people are visiting Delaware's beaches as a way to get exercise while following social-distancing guidelines.

Fortunately spring is a spectacular time of year to enjoy Delaware's coast. Nesting birds like piping plover, American oystercatcher, and osprey have already begun to arrive to our shores to establish breeding territories and commence nest building. In just a few weeks, iconic species like horseshoe crabs will arrive to our protected beaches in the thousands to spawn. They will be trailed by thousands of migratory shorebirds stopping by the Delaware bayshore to rest and refuel on horseshoe crab eggs. Delaware's sand dunes provide important habitat to a diverse array of coastal plants and animals and are also an essential line of defense against coastal flooding and storms.

When visiting the beach this spring, remember to be a good coastal steward and follow these guidelines to protect Delaware's wildlife, habitats, and coastal resilience.

1. **Each spring, thousands of horseshoe crabs visit the Delaware's protected sandy beaches to spawn at high tide.** Throughout the spawning season it is not uncommon to find horseshoe crabs stranded upside-down on shore, unable to right themselves. Beach-goers can help this species by turning them back over and orienting them towards the water.

How does one safely help a stranded horseshoe crab? Horseshoe crabs may look a little scary but they are harmless. To right a stranded horseshoe crab, grasp both sides of the shell above the hinge, away from the tail – this portion of the shell is called the prosoma. Put it back down with its legs facing the sand. Although a horseshoe crab can sometimes use its tail, or telson, to flip itself over, you should not. Horseshoe crab tails are fragile and touching it can harm the animal.

2. **Sand dunes prevent or delay flooding and damage to inland areas by absorbing the impact of coastal storms and beach erosion.** Most dune formations and associated plants, which contribute to the stability of the dune, are extremely sensitive to human and vehicle trampling. For a resilient coast, do not walk or drive on dunes and dune plants; instead use established cross-overs to access the shore. In cases where driving on the beach is allowed, vehicles and walkers should avoid the base of the fore dune, where many beach plants grow.

3. **Always carry a bag to pick up your pet's waste so you can properly dispose of it.** Pet waste can pollute water and lead to beach closures!
4. **Although Delaware's beaches are beautiful, they are not immune to the presence of beach litter.** Consider bringing a bag to collect beach trash, which can be eaten by animals, lead to wildlife entanglements, and/or damage habitat. Plastic items like cigarette butts, food wrappers, bottle caps, straws, and broken-down plastic pieces are among the most common types of trash cleaned up from Delaware's beaches. Don't forget to wear your gloves, and take any collected trash with you to dispose of in a proper waste receptacle.
5. **Delaware's beaches provide world-class bird-watching opportunities, with thousands of migrating shorebirds visiting Delaware's coast each spring.** Just remember to keep your distance from flocks of sleeping, resting, or foraging shorebirds. Many of these birds have traveled long distances and depend on Delaware's beaches to rest and refuel. Approaching too closely can cause these tired and hungry birds to flush, which deprives them of what they need to survive – food and respite. Shorebirds and other wildlife should be enjoyed from afar. A pair of binoculars will enhance these wildlife viewing experiences.
6. **Some beaches in Delaware allow dog-walking, but even the most well-behaved of our canine pets can disturb nesting birds.** Nesting shorebirds need the upper beach to rest, feed, and raise families. The presence of dogs can cause nesting birds to stop feeding, waste time and energy needlessly defending eggs or chicks, and may even lead to nest abandonment. Signs posted for habitat and wildlife should be respected. Where dog-walking is permitted, leash your dog and walk along the lower beach by the water (but away from flocks of shorebirds) to minimize impacts to wildlife (beach-nesting birds and dune plants!).
7. **Respect areas that are fenced or posted for protection of dune habitats and wildlife.** Your actions will benefit dune resilience and sensitive species like sea turtles, terns, American oystercatchers, and black skimmers, piping plovers, and dune plants. Know that the loss of habitat has forced some beach-nesters to concentrate their efforts to only a few sites each year. They need these undisturbed spaces to breed, feed, and rest.
8. **When visiting Delaware's beaches, always remove your trash and food scraps.** This garbage can attract animals that might eat sensitive nesting animals, like the federally protected piping plovers.