**Rynchops niger** (Black Skimmer)

Family: Rynchopidae (Skimmers)
Order: Charadriiformes (Shore Birds and Waders)
Class: Aves (Birds)

![Image](http://www.gepog.org/sites/default/files/phototeque/Epelboin%2009%202014%20Rizi%C3%A8res%20Mana%20(53).jpg)

**Fig. 1.** Black skimmer, *Rynchops niger.*

downloaded 17 September 2016

**TRAITS.** *Rynchops niger* is known for its unique combination of colours, shape and bill. The body is horizontally divided into different colours: the upper surface is black and the lower surface is white (Fig. 1). Its bill is reddish-orange with a black tip. The lower mandible is 2-3cm longer than the upper mandible. The pupil is circular in shape however when constricted it may become oval and slit-like (Welty, 1962). The black skimmer is 41-46cm long, a large tern-like bird. The immature is dark brown instead of black, its bill, legs, and feet are more orange than red (Restall, 2007). The lower mandible is adapted to the constant friction and wear of the water even if there is a one-sided wear it would soon be reduced to a stump but it grows more rapid that the upper mandible. The mandible is covered with a single horny sheath and it is renewed from the lower portion when worn out (Welty, 1962). Its voice is a soft nasal ‘yep’ or ‘yip’ (Arlott, 2010). A sharp repeated ‘querk’ is given in alarm (ffrench, 2012).

**ECOLOGY.** The black skimmer resides on coasts in the Nearctic and Neotropical regions, including the Atlantic and Pacific coasts of the USA. They can be seen along the Gulf of Mexico and most of South America (Welty, 1962). They visit Trinidad, especially the west and south coasts (ffrench, 2012).
SOCIAL ORGANIZATION. Often seen in pairs but also in small groups or flocks. Extremely gregarious when resting on mud or sandbanks a flock will stay close packed with all the birds facing the wind (Fig. 2). When in flight they are distinctive in that they fly low with shallow, slow wingbeats, the wings held above the horizontal. At times they glide and all the birds synchronize their movements (ffrench, 2012).

FORAGING BEHAVIOUR. Black skimmers have an unusual type of foraging behaviour, they fly a few centimetres above the surface of undisturbed water and their knife-like lower mandible cuts the water and flips small fish and crustaceans into the open mouth (Fig. 3) (Welty, 1962). Ploughing water with lower mandible whilst skimming in flight is often done at night (Restall, 2006). When the skimmer touches the prey the bill suddenly clamps shut (Fig. 4). They feed sometimes at night, it is thought that feeding birds may gain an advantage by retracing their path at the end of a feeding flight (ffrench, 2012). It is possible that in tropical waters the phosphorescent organisms disturbed by the skimmer’s mandible attract prey so that the bird gains a distinct advantage by retracing its path (ffrench, 2012). If kept in captivity without the friction of the water against its lower mandible when foraging, this will grow twice as long as the upper mandible (Welty, 1962). Observations at the Temple by the Sea in Waterloo, Trinidad in October 2016 showed that black skimmers also caught floating food remains from fishermen cleaning their catch (S. Ramnarine, pers. obs.).

REPRODUCTION. Courtship includes mock nest building. The male passes a stick gently to the female just before mating (Welty, 1962). When feeding young, the parent holds the fish in its mouth (Fig. 5), continuously turning it, and periodically lets the young peck at it, then finally lowers its mandible and allows the young to eat it (S. Ramnarine, pers. obs.). When predators are close by the young quickly scratch a depression into the sand of the beach and proceed to stretch out in it so that their camouflaged backs are flush at ground level, since in the young stage their feathers are brown and black and can easily misguide predators (Welty, 1962). Juveniles skim close to the shoreline where small fish occur.

REFERENCES

Author: Samantha Ramnarine
Posted online: 2016
**Fig. 2.** Black skimmers facing the wind.
[S. Ramnarine, 22 October 2016]

**Fig. 3.** Black skimmer foraging.
[http://birdnote.org/show/why-black-skimmer-skims, downloaded 17 September 2016]
**Fig. 4.** Black skimmer with lower mandible clamped shut on prey.

[https://www.reddit.com/r/birdfacts/comments/4a3oc1/the_black_skimmers_lower_beak_is_much_longer_than/?ref=readnext_7, downloaded 17 September 2016]

**Fig. 5.** Black skimmer feeding its young.


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