

LITTLE DAUPHIN ISLAND - A NEW NESTING SANCTUARY

John Dindo and Ken Marion

Little Dauphin Island is a 3.6 km (2.25 mile) long tidal marsh 344 ha (851 acres) in size lying just north of Dauphin Island. The eastern end of the Island supports a small stand of loblolly and slash pine (*Pinus taeda*) and (*P. ellioti*), while the western end is a *Juncus* dominated marsh with shell mounds supporting growths of dwarf live oak (*Quercus virginiana* var. *geminata*). The northwestern portion of the island has a broad shoreline of sand flats.

Prior to Hurricane Frederick, Highway 163 from Mobile to Dauphin Island, crossed the western end of Little Dauphin and provided easy access to the island (see map, Figure 2). Adjacent to and east of Little Dauphin Island was much smaller Peavy Island, about 1.4 ha (3.5 acres) in size which was used by motor campers and others as sites for picnics and fishing. The frequency of utilization of these habitats by people had prohibited birds from using the island for nesting.

On 12 Sept. 1979 Hurricane Frederick's fury was felt all along the Alabama coastline, resulting in the loss of Peavy Island and sections of the causeway near Little Dauphin Island. With completion of the new bridge connecting Dauphin Island to the mainland in 1982, Little Dauphin was isolated from the causeway and became accessible only by boat.

As a result of the relative lack of disturbance by man, several species of birds began to colonize Little Dauphin including Great Blue Herons (*Ardea herodias*), Great Egrets (*Casmerodius albus*), and Green-backed Herons (*Butorides striatus*). The Great Blue Herons began nesting in early March, 1986, in the tops of the dwarf live oaks and three young were fledged from ten eggs. Great Egrets established nests in early June and fledged four young from six eggs. The Green-backed Herons raised three young from four eggs. In addition to these three species, the sandy beach areas supported a mixed breeding colony of approximately 100 Little Terns (*Sterna antillarum*) and 50 to 60 Black Skimmers (*Rynchops niger*). Sand Island, a barrier island to the south of Dauphin Island, had previously been the major site of nesting for these shorebirds, but hurricanes over the past five years and increasing human

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disturbances reduced the available nesting sites by approximately two-thirds.

Little Dauphin Island's exposed shell mounds have also provided breeding sites for two pairs of American Oystercatchers (*Haematopus palliatus*) and feeding sites for a multitude of other wading birds, including plovers, sandpipers and gulls.

It is apparent that hurricanes can be viewed in more than destructive terms. The isolation of Little Dauphin Island as a result of storm activity has created a sanctuary for many birds and nesting activity in this area is likely to increase in the future.

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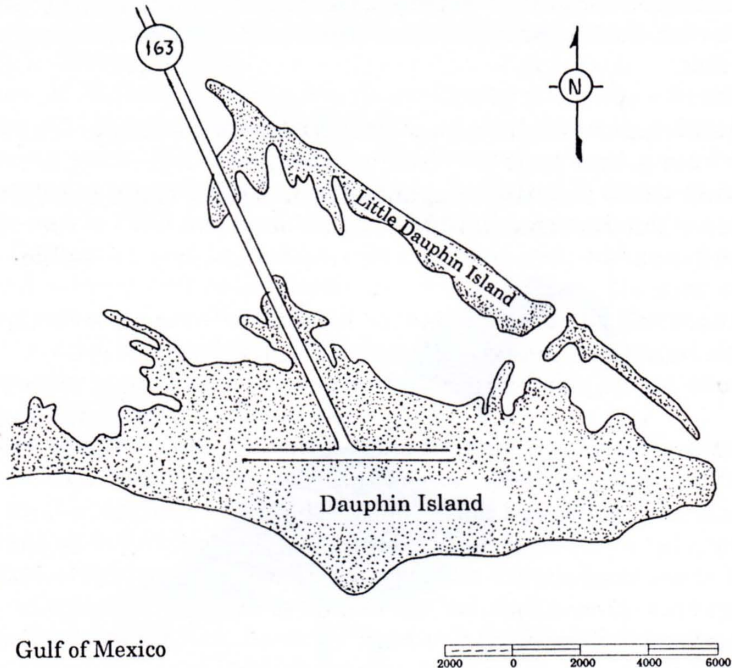


Figure 2. Dauphin and Little Dauphin Islands