

SHOWCASE SPECIES: SOUTHEAST

PIPING PLOVER IN THE SOUTHEAST

The Issue

Yearly counts of piping plover breeding pairs indicate that the population is increasing along the Atlantic Coast as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service works with private organizations and with state, county and other federal agencies to protect the species' habitat from development and harmful human intrusion.

Natural History

Typical shorebirds, piping plovers have sand-colored backs and crowns contrasting with white underbellies. Breeding birds bear a single black breast band, a black bar across the forehead, bright orange legs and a bright orange bill tipped with black. In winter, the birds lose the black bands, the legs fade to pale yellow, and the beak turns mostly black. Adults weigh 1.5 to 2 ounces and are about seven inches long from beak to tail tip, with a wingspan of 15 inches.

In the United States, the bird breeds in three distinct areas—the Northern Great Plains, the Great Lakes and the Atlantic Coast. The Atlantic Coast population nests on sandy beaches from Canada south to North Carolina. The birds scrape out shallow depressions that they line with light-colored pebbles and shell fragments, against which the mottled eggs—average clutch size is four eggs—are well camouflaged. Eggs hatch within a month and the young can fly about 30 days after hatching.

After nesting, Atlantic Coast plovers move south to spend eight to ten months—from July or even late June through March or April, with a few lingering into early May—along the coast from North Carolina through Florida and in parts of the Caribbean, joined there by piping plovers from all populations (North Carolina holds a unique position as the only state where the breeding and wintering ranges overlap and where the birds are present year-round.). The extensive use the plovers make of the Southeast Atlantic Coast indicates the region's importance to the species' survival.



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Habitat loss and human disturbance of nesting adults and chicks are key threats to these birds. Recreational and commercial development have brought people and predatory pets into nesting areas, and dune stabilization has resulted in the loss of the open, sandy beaches the piping plover requires.

Invasive, nonnative plants, such as a Pacific Rim ornamental called beach vitex, have overgrown stretches of shore, crowding out native plant species such as sea beach amaranth that, like the piping plover, inhabit recently disturbed beaches, such as those washed over and swept clean by storms. Human activities also have attracted wild predators in search of food to beaches used by piping plovers, increasing predation from raccoons, gulls and crows and causing abandonment of plover nesting sites and reductions in plover productivity.

Measures to counteract these threats (*see section on "Management"*) seem to be helping, however, as the estimate of breeding pairs on the U.S. Atlantic Coast indicates a 10.5 percent increase between 2001 and 2002 and a 0.4 percent gain in 2003. Preliminary figures for 2004 and 2005 suggest that these gains have remained stable. Recovery measures that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and other agencies take for piping plover recovery help a host of other species that use the same habitat, including the northeastern beach tiger beetle, loggerhead sea turtle and seabeach amaranth, all federally listed as threatened.

PIPING PLOVER

Listing

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1986 listed the Atlantic Coast piping plover as threatened.

Management

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has focused on habitat protection as the key approach to piping plover recovery. Working with state, county and private groups, the Service seeks to minimize human disturbance of the birds by limiting the use of motor vehicles in nesting and roosting areas and by requiring visitors with pets to keep dogs leashed, as dogs will chase the birds and disturb nests. The agency has developed beach management plans that include controlling human beach activity, protecting nests from predators such as raccoons and crows, and restoring natural beach vegetation while allowing natural processes, such as overwashing by storms, to produce and maintain the open stretches of beach vital to the birds.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service also has worked with local authorities, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and state coastal agencies to ensure that beach replenishment projects, which involve dredging sand from offshore and relocating it on eroding beaches in developed areas, are accomplished in ways that minimize damage to piping plover habitat. Removal of beach vitex and other invasive plants also is helping to restore beaches to conditions more favorable to the plover and other open-beach species.

Funding

Funding from all government sources for piping plover recovery outside the Great Lakes area ranks the species at 58 out of 1,311 species, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service fiscal year 2004 report (the most recent available) to Congress, *Federal and State Endangered and Threatened Species Expenditures*. Total recovery funding for piping plovers outside the Great Lakes area, from all state and federal sources that year, was about \$3.5 million, with \$496,000 coming from the



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Service. “Plovers are a shining example of a successful, well-funded recovery program,” says John Kostyack, director of Wildlife Conservation Campaigns at the National Wildlife Federation.

“Increasing funding to the Service for recovery will undoubtedly give us more of these success stories.”

Local Contacts

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Other Threats

Beach development and recreation are persistent threats.

THREATS FROM GLOBAL WARMING



Rising sea levels caused by global warming will jeopardize the piping plover by eliminating or damaging nesting and feeding habitat.

A significant increase in the rate of sea-level rise due to melting glaciers and ice caps and to thermal expansion of the oceans is one of the most direct consequences of global warming.

* The U.S. Fish and Wildlife *Federal and State Endangered and Threatened Species Expenditures* report incorporates subjective estimates provided by regulated entities without any independent verification and without effort to segregate Endangered Species Act expenditures from other related expenditures. However, for most listed species, no other funding data is available.