

30 YEARS OF THE ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT

PIPING PLOVER

Named for its melodic call, the piping plover, like many other shorebirds, is threatened by habitat loss and human disturbance. The Endangered Species Act has provided for intensive management of important nesting areas reversing the decline of the Great Lake and Atlantic populations. The Great Plains population is declining, however.

HISTORY OF ENDANGERMENT

The piping plover nests on beaches of the northeast Atlantic coast, shorelines of the Great Lakes, and river sandbars and lake shorelines of the Great Plains. The plover winters from North Carolina to eastern Mexico.

Piping plovers originally disappeared due to excessive hunting for the milliner trade, but they recovered partially after the enactment of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. However, after the 1940s, the populations again declined sharply.

Coastal development has destroyed much of the piping plover's beach habitat on the Atlantic



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Coast during the past 60 years. Human disturbance causes birds to repeatedly leave or even abandon nests, exposing eggs or chicks to the summer sun and predators. Off-road vehicles provide increased access to previously remote beach areas, cause disturbance, and can crush eggs or chicks. Dogs and cats can harass and kill the birds, and gulls and fox, which feed on our fish and food scraps, also can kill chicks. Efforts to stabilize beaches by building large storm berms to protect development from storms allow vegetation to overgrow open sand nesting areas. In the Great Plains, extensive drought has dried habitat and allowed

vegetation encroachment in certain areas, while in certain rivers, agency manipulation of river levels has reduced the early spring floods that maintain sparsely vegetated sandbar habitats while summer releases wash out nests and flightless chicks.

Recent surveys estimate the Atlantic population at 1690 pairs, the Great Lakes population at 51 pairs, and the Northern Great Plains at 1291 pairs.

ROAD TO RECOVERY

In 1986, the Atlantic Coast and Northern Great Plains breeding populations were listed as threatened, and the Great Lakes breeding population was listed as endangered. The Great Plains and Great Lakes breeding populations and the wintering range have critical habitat; all three populations have recovery plans. Monitoring of nesting populations has provided information that aids conservation efforts, but additional studies are needed, particularly of migratory and wintering plovers.

CONSERVATION TODAY

State and federal agencies, environmental organizations, and local citizens are protecting piping plover nesting areas on public and private lands through the management and monitoring, reducing disturbance and predation, and protecting natural processes that sustain habitat. Threats still remain, particularly to migratory and wintering habitats as well as Great Plains breeding habitats.

ECOLOGICAL VALUE

The piping plover is an integral component of several beach, river, and lake ecosystems. Protecting areas critical to the piping plover will help preserve the natural character of our disappearing beaches, as well as aid numerous threatened and endangered species such as the roseate tern, loggerhead sea turtle, northeastern beach tiger beetle, and sea-beach amaranth.

OUTLOOK FOR THE FUTURE

Piping plover populations would again decline if the protections for nesting areas and habitat were discontinued. Human population growth in coastal areas continues to increase threats from habitat destruction and disturbance.

Some off-road vehicle users continue to oppose piping plover protections. Long running disputes regarding agency manipulation of river levels on the Great Plains raise significant concerns about political interference with recovery efforts. However, overall, extensive conservation efforts have been very helpful for the piping plover. Without the Endangered Species Act's significant legal protections, the future for this beautiful shorebird would be in question.



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