

Plover predators euthanized to save birds in Kennebunkport

Bird supporters say euthanasia is the only answer to saving population

By [Laura Dolce](#)

ldolce@seacoastonline.com

April 23, 2009 6:00 AM

KENNEBUNKPORT — Bob Domine had seen the truck before.

With "USDA" emblazoned on the side and the back full of traps, it was hard to miss.

On this day, though, after dropping his daughters at the school bus stop, he decided to stop and ask.

"I was aware last spring that they were trapping animals," he said. "But I never asked what they did with them."

The young man driving the truck told him the animals were being trapped because they were predators of the piping plovers, shorebirds found on local beaches as well as the state list of endangered species. Domine, who lives about half a mile away across the salt marsh from Goose Rocks Beach, said he was shocked to hear that the trapped animals — including raccoons, skunks and foxes — were on their way to being euthanized to stop them from preying on the plovers.

"It was the silliest thing I ever heard," he said.

Fired up, Domine sat down and wrote a letter to the Coast Star, expressing his outrage.

"I think I felt I had to say my piece," he said. "It makes no sense. It's such an obvious losing battle."

But one worth fighting, say those trying to protect the plovers.

"The numbers are going the wrong way," said Ward Feurt, director of the Rachel Carson National Wildlife Refuge. According to Feurt, while there were 66 pairs of plovers in the state just five years or so ago, there were only 24 last year.

"With these declining numbers, we contracted with USDA to help control predators," he said.

That was two springs ago, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture has been handling predator control ever since.

"We conduct trapping activities on any predators before and during the nesting season," confirmed Adam Vashon, a wildlife biologist with the federal agency. "Because once a predation event occurs, it would be too little, too late."

While many other birds are able to keep themselves somewhat safe, building their nests high up in trees, the plovers scrape out a little depression right on the beach and set to nesting.

"They're wonderful birds — we just love them," said Feurt. "But they're not the best nest-builders in the world."

To keep the nests safe, the plover protectors "exclose" them, Feurt said, by building 15-foot wire enclosures around them. In addition, interns and volunteers baby-sit nests from as early as 4:30 in the morning to as late as 9 in the evening.

But while the fencing can keep predators out, it can't keep the plovers in, Feurt said.

And once the new chicks hatch — 28 days after the eggs are laid — they are especially vulnerable to attack.

"For the first 10 days, they look like little fluffy ping-pong balls running up and down the beach," he said. "Anyone can eat them."

To prevent that from happening, Feurt said the wildlife refuge works together with both the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Department and the Maine Audubon Society to keep the plovers safe beginning in April, when they lay their eggs, through the summer, when the fledglings are better able to protect themselves.

Over the course of the plover season, Vashon said the USDA likely euthanizes 20 or 30 raccoons per beach, five or 10 skunks and a few foxes, coyotes, opossums and mink. They also conduct some night raids, shooting predators such as crows or the foxes or mink that may attack the birds.

Domestic cats that are caught in traps are released or returned to their owners, and Feurt said neighborhoods such as Goose Rocks Beach are given a letter reminding them that plovers are nesting and to keep dogs and cats away.

So far, he said, the combined efforts of both neighbors and wildlife experts alike are working. Last year, Goose Rocks Beach was one of the top two plover nesting areas in the state.

But Domine said saving the plovers is really an idea for the birds. Killing foxes — one of whom befriended his cat last year — to save a bird too silly to save itself just doesn't make sense.

"This is not like saving the bald eagle from DDT," he said. "They were at least smart enough to build their nests in tall trees."

Feurt said losing these little birds forever simply isn't an option.

"It's a concept so abhorrent to me ...;" he said, pausing. "I've spent my entire career here for the wildlife."