

Increase in plover numbers point to preservation efforts

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It's been 20 years since deeper restrictions and vigilant monitoring threw an extra ring of protection around piping plover chicks as they frolicked on the beach.

While some contend only the blood pressure of beachgoers is up, the fact is the plover population has nearly quadrupled in Massachusetts since the mid-1980s. The birds have rebounded on the entire Eastern seaboard and the number of pairs is close to the target of 2,000.

"Massachusetts is one of the leading states in terms of the increase. Long Island is another important place," noted Scott Hecker, executive director of the Goldenrod Foundation.

Hecker was the director of Mass Audubon's Coastal Waterbird Program from 1987 to 2002. He remembers the original court victory over Orleans in 1990 that appealed a conservation commission decision and led to vehicle restrictions.

"We ended up with a superseding order of conditions for Orleans that set a precedent," Hecker recalled. "There would be no vehicles within one hundred yards of a hatched piping plover. That's pretty big. We went town to town to make sure they followed the same procedures."

By 1995 most beaches were directing traffic around the plovers' chicks.

"Eric Strauss studied Sandy Neck and piping plover success increased four-fold when off road vehicles were restricted," Hecker said.

The early plover censuses logged between 126 and 139 nesting pairs statewide from 1986 to '90. By 1995 the count was 441. Last year there were a record 566 pair and 343 fledged chicks. In the 1980s monitors had started putting up protective netting to keep predators out.

"That alone would not have worked very well because when the chicks hatch they walk away from the nest site. They're very small, about the size of a ball of cotton with toothpick legs and the exact color of dry sand," explained Hecker. "Vehicle restrictions are one of the most important things that exist to help the plovers."

When they're frightened, the plover chicks scramble to depressions in the sand (tire tracks) to hide. Fledgling success rose to more than two per pair in the early 1990s; it has since tailed off to 1.29 last year. Predators, not beach buggies, are the big threat today.

Crows, foxes, skunks, gulls, raccoons, possums and coyotes all dine on plovers and their eggs. The nests, settled in open sandy beach frontage, are easily accessible. Blustery storms can wash them away.

"We have nests pretty much everywhere, pretty much all of the Cape and Islands – right on schedule," noted Ellen Jedrey, assistant director of the Barnstable-based Coastal Waterbird Program. "We have all of our staff on it and another 12 come on in the next two weeks. We'll have roughly 26 seasonal technicians monitoring beaches from Revere to Buzzards Bay. We monitor 86 sites on an almost daily basis and another 140 at least once."

They've got a little more than 80 nests so far.

"There are some predator issues. No washovers yet," Jedrey noted. "Weather is definitely a factor. On Nantucket, there are feral cats. We use two types of fencing to protect nests; one is a 10-foot circle of welded wire to protect the nest and we also use electric fencing at sites like Corn Hill (Truro), Osterville, Buzzards Bay."

Bird monitoring

Massachusetts hosts about a quarter of the East Coast population. South Beach in Chatham has the most, 50 pairs, followed by 30 to 40 pairs in Sandwich (three beaches), and six to eight pairs in West Dennis, Corn Hill (Truro) and Sampsons Island (Osterville) beaches.

The Sandwich sites were very productive; 41 pair produced 87 chicks last year, 2.12 apiece. That's well above the 1.29 average. Ecologists estimate 1.24 chicks per pair is the break-even point for the species. Sandwich was one of the most successful sites last year. The CWP provided two staffers and a volunteer to keep an eye on seven town beaches and despite lots of people, campfires, dogs and such, Taylor Long and Annie-Marie Hammesfahr received the "Plover Persistence Against the Odds" award.

The small sites, with one to three pair, were the most productive. While they were more difficult to monitor, they produced 129 chicks from 69 pairs (on 44 beaches). That's a 1.74 rate per pair. In contrast, at the four most populous beaches 88 pairs produced 88 chicks.

Nauset Beach in Orleans, home of the original court fight, is hosting around 20 pairs now.

We have four or five pairs with one or two egg nests and other pairs that haven't put down eggs yet," said parks and beaches director Paul Fulcher.

"Birds are still coming in. Last year we had 24 pairs."

One tandem is nesting on the bayside near Brewster.

Monomoy National Wildlife refuge is another hot spot.

“We’ve found 10 nests so far,” said staff biologist Monica Williams. “All the nests are on South Monomoy. We haven’t lost any yet. We have several pairs with four eggs in a nest – a full clutch. We expect more the next couple of weeks.”

Last year 27 pairs of plovers nested in the refuge, 26 on South Monomoy, and they produced one chick per pair.

“They like open sandy beaches, especially on the west side of South Monomoy,” Williams noted. “They like cobble and sand, and some sparse beachgrass.”

Most of Cape Cod’s plovers are on the outer beaches; 91 pairs in all last year with an additional 64 on the Mid-Cape, 43 on the Upper Cape, 14 on the South Shore, six on Nantucket, 23 around Buzzards Bay, 21 on Martha’s Vineyard and four in Greater Boston.

Beach management

Two weeks ago an adult plover was run over on Nauset Spit. That hasn’t happened since the 1960s. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have the bird and are doing an autopsy. An adult should be able to avoid an automobile.

Last year, Orleans considered requesting a Section-10 exemption, that would have allowed guided access to the beach during breeding season. Vehicles were banned from beach access for 38 days in 2007. Orleans usually takes in \$250,000 a year from vehicle permits but that amount has fallen as the viable season has shortened.

But the application alone would have cost \$25,000 to \$30,000 to file and mitigation costs would have added more.

“The board of selectmen decided not to go forward,” Fulcher explained. “It would have required predator control and have the town go out and hire someone to come in and take care of the coyote, skunk and fox population and that is not anything the board wanted to get involved with.”

Currently, Orleans employs two part-timers and one full-time person to monitor the plovers.

Beautiful as they are, our sandy beaches aren’t the only place piping plovers call home. There are three populations; 1,848 pairs are on the United States and Canadian Atlantic Coast (up from 790 in 1986), there are 63 pairs on the Great Lakes and another 2,000 or so scattered along the Great Plains, nesting along the shallow rivers or remote empty lakes of Canada.

“They nest on sand bars that are exposed as long as they are not mud,” Hecker said. “There has also been a shift to try to understand the distribution of the birds on their winter grounds and to protect them. The vast majority winter from North Carolina to Texas, some are in the Bahamas, Cuba and Mexico.”

Hecker sees plover protection as an umbrella that shades other vulnerable plants and animals.

“A lot of damage is done by recreational use, cars on the beach,” he said. “We actually protect the birds by law and that immediately benefits many other birds that are using those nest sites, for example terns. Least terns nest in the same habitat. Other birds are horned larks and American oystercatchers.”

Oystercatchers are up from 20 pairs in 1980 to 200 in Massachusetts today.

“(This) protects birds like Wilson’s plover in Virginia and black skimmers along with northeastern beach tiger beetles, sea turtles, beach mice and beach amaranth,” Hecker concluded.

That may not convince all the fishermen or those who like to park above the surf at sunset, but it isn’t a tale of failure.

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