

# Storms delay breeding season for many shorebirds



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Regional -

Don't blame the plovers, blame the weather.

A spate of ill-timed spring storms swept away many early piping plover nests and their re-nesting efforts have pushed the breeding season into August on some beaches. So while some plovers have fledged, returning beach space to ORVs, others are still waiting for their eggs to hatch.

It takes about 25 days from hatching until a plover can fly, and thus evade beach vehicle tires.

Piping plovers were first listed as a federally endangered species in 1987. That summer in Massachusetts there were 126 breeding pairs. That number rebounded to 538 by 2002 and has since leveled off. When the population was on the uptick, each nest produced about 1.5 to 2 chicks a year. Over recent years that success rate has slipped to 1.25 or lower.

Paul Fulcher, Orleans Parks and Beaches superintendent, said that while they've recorded 22 pair of plovers on Nauset Beach, in line with past years, they're a tad behind schedule.

"As far as the numbers of eggs and the numbers of young chicks that have hatched out, I wouldn't say it's been a banner year," he reflected. "A lot of nests were lost to storms and high tides. In April through June the storms coincided with the moon high tides. So normally where you have 12-foot tides there were 14-foot tides."

Add a storm surge to that and a lot of nests were washed away. The birds at Nauset also had to deal with crows, foxes and coyotes.

"At Nauset Spit the last chicks will fledge around Aug. 11," Fulcher said. "On South Beach the last two will fledge around the first to fourth of August."

Nina Coleman, the Sandy Neck Park manager for the town of Barnstable, said they were hosting 35 pairs of plovers this summer.

"We usually have 30-plus," she said. "We have lost a lot of nests. We lost a few to storms and a bunch to predators."

Coyotes and crows are the main problem – the crows eat the eggs. Gulls also may take young chicks. "We had 42 nests because a lot were lost and birds re-nested," Coleman said. "We still have eggs in a few places, some have fledged, others have fledgling chicks."

Coleman has been able to keep a large chunk of the beach open lately.

"The beach was completely closed for the first time in memory in June. It opened for three miles for a couple of weeks around the Fourth of July. Now it's down to two miles and it will be down to two miles for another month," she said.

Sandy Neck has 6 1/2 miles of beach, of which 4 1/2 are drivable.

"Two miles is a lot of beach," Coleman noted. "It's a lot more than the other beaches have now. So I

feel we're doing fine. You can get a lot of people in two miles of beach. So far we've been able to accommodate everybody."

Becky Harris, director of Massachusetts Audubon's Coastal Waterbird Program, monitors nests all over the South Coast of Massachusetts. Currently she has her eye on 222 pairs.

"For both terns and plovers it's an extended season. It's pretty mixed. It's not terrible. It's not fantastic," she said. "We monitor most of the South Shore, Cape Cod, the Islands and Buzzards Bay. We do about half the state population at 118 sites."

She guides 25 staffers and numerous volunteers.

"A couple of sites had really bad predation, in Sandwich there was a problem with fox predation and they only fledged seven chicks total," Harris noted. "Some nests are still unhatched at this point. There were some early fledging birds at Black Beach in Falmouth. They were successful with their first nest and that allowed them to get out early."

Dead Neck and Sampson's Island near Cotuit has been receiving dredge spoils, which attract plovers. "That site has the densest nesting of piping plovers," Harris said. "Last year there were 23 pair, this year there are 20. But there are a lot of predators keying on that site. There is a tern colony at each end. We've enclosed it with electric fence but the coyotes have learned to jump the fence. And ants were getting into the least tern eggs as they were hatching and eating them alive."

Ants weren't the most disturbing problem.

"That's been a bad site for human disturbance. It's been attracting vandals. The fencing was destroyed and burned in bonfires. They also took tern chick shelters. We had piping plover nests in wire enclosures and someone reached in and took the eggs out. That was clearly human caused," Harris recounted. "Usually that was a site we could rely on for good productivity."

With South Monomoy reconnected to Chatham and a new break at North Beach, there was concern about the bird colonies at the Cape's elbow.

"South Beach has been late," Harris said. "There is no fledging there yet. There are 40 piping plover pairs there. That's mainly due to predation. The high tide in June washed away many nests on North Beach. But Nauset Marsh, for the first time in many years, has nesting terns. There used to be a large colony there."

Plovers like a lonely beach and the Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge used to have a lot of those.

"We've lost a lot of nests to a mixed bag of predators and weather," observed Mike Brady, the refuge manager. "And we did lose an adult plover to a coyote this year."

There are 10 nests on South Monomoy and nine on Minimoy.

"We have less than one chick per nest, we have 12 chicks now," he noted. "This is not a banner year. The weather has been bad. And we lost two to three American oystercatcher adults to predators. Our habitat on the island has changed. South Beach's east side has eroded away. The west side is narrow and sandy where it used to be cobble. So the plovers have moved up into the vegetation." That change is due to the new hydrodynamics of the area, with South Monomoy now linked, at low tide, to the mainland.

"The whole south end is starving for sand," Brady noted.

Coyotes and foxes can now also stroll over to South Monomoy but that hasn't affected the giant tern colony there much.

"We are down a thousand pairs. There are around 9,000. But it's not as bad as we thought it would be," Brady said. "We are a little late. The terns should be 23 days old and only about a quarter are that old now."

Salmonella often hits the tern chicks at this time, so Brady is concerned. It killed 700 terns last year. On the plus side, 42 pairs of endangered roseate terns are nesting on Minimoy.

"They depend on a strong common tern colony to protect them," Brady noted. "Common terns are more aggressive."

Harris and her crew also spent a lot of time this spring creating tern habitat on Tern Island in Chatham.

"We didn't attract any common terns," she noted. "But Monomoy seems to be doing well, there wasn't a mass exodus. The least tern colony is doing quite well unlike last year. We had 133 nests during the census and already a few have fledged. The area they are using has expanded. It's all fenced off with electric fencing. One piping plover nested in the middle of the tern colony."

They've tried to rig a tern-cam but so far it hasn't worked. Harris could then monitor the colony from the comfort of her office at the Long Pasture Sanctuary in Barnstable. The tern fencing will be up until late August or early September.