

Trull: Misconceptions about piping plovers

By Peter Trull/ Guest commentary

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Certainly the issue related to protecting piping plovers on the beaches of Cape Cod, most notably the outer beaches where folks can drive their ORVs, has become a major point of discussion this summer. Reading and listening to opinions and concerns, a person is likely to hear any number of misconceptions related to these small, cryptic shorebirds.

Shorebird is a collective term and it relates to about 20 species of sandpipers and plovers (it's OK to say the name either way, rhyming with land rover or your lover ... plover, doesn't matter how you say it, everyone knows what you're talking about). Sandpipers and plovers, shorebirds, may be either residents or migrants. The piping plover, along with willets and American oystercatchers, other shorebirds, nest here on the Cape and along the Atlantic Coast, while the majority of shorebirds are Arctic nesters and begin their migration south for the most part, in July.

In the 1980s I studied market trapping in the South American country of Guyana, where more than 90 percent of the population lives on about 4 percent of the land, a narrow coastal strip. The food in these small villages consists of fish and rice, as well as birds, mostly shorebirds that have migrated from the Arctic tundra to winter in South America. The birds are netted at night and/or "whip-wired" during the day along the tidal flats. They are then either eaten by the trapper and his family or sold at market.

I, living with these hospitable people and studying their ways of trapping, ate virtually all of the migrant shorebirds that pass over the Cape in July and August. Take note that piping plovers do not migrate any farther than our Gulf Coast, from Florida to Texas. Check their range in any bird guide.

It is a major misconception to say or think, "Why do we protect them here when they only get eaten in South America." Piping plovers are not eaten in South America. It was in the late '80s that the Cape Cod National Seashore visitor center in Eastham called me and said that an ORV organization was handing out my research paper about market trapping. As they did, they were suggesting that we shouldn't close our beaches to protect a bird that just gets eaten in South America. An amazing misconception that still holds today in some people's minds. That misinformation also gave rise to the now ubiquitous bumper sticker - Piping Plovers Taste Like Chicken. I know what black-bellied plovers and semi-palmated plovers taste like, and it's not chicken. Nobody eats piping plovers.

Ironically, most people who drive or fish on the beach care about and work to protect our beaches and coastal environment. People have difficulty when a bird requires a large area to breed successfully, and piping plovers do. We also protect the graceful seabirds called terns on our beaches, but they are colonial nesters. Terns adhere to a behavioral trait called group adherence; they like being in proximity to each other so they nest in large colonies. We post signs around the perimeter of the colony so people and terns share the beach. Plovers are different; they nest singly and require lots of space.

Plovers require habitat from water's edge back to the dunes in order to be successful. The only way to ensure their success is to keep people away from them. It's the wonder and the scourge of the beach, depending on who you are and how you feel. Wouldn't it be great to herald the fact that we have done so much to bring a species back from virtual extinction in Massachusetts in the mid '80s, to the recovered numbers we have today. To the ORV driver, there are too many piping plovers; to the local, state and federal agencies, there are not enough.

Love the beaches, protect the piping plover, deal with the inconvenience.

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