

Plover myths: separating truth from tackle-shop talk



Photo courtesy Mass. Audubon Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary

A piping plover

[Kaimi Rose Lum](#)

Banner Staff

Piping plovers do not taste like chicken. Piping plovers do not fly south to Mexico for the winter only to be hunted and eaten as delicacies. And as long as we are attempting to set the record straight, piping plovers are not experiencing a population “boom” in Massachusetts; in fact, their numbers have shown signs of decreasing.

The shorebirds ORV drivers love to hate have been the subject of some widespread mythologizing in the 20 years since they gained protected status under the Endangered Species Act. Perhaps the most entrenched belief is the second in the list above — that piping plovers get privileged treatment on the Cape's beaches, enjoying exclusive, fenced-off areas forbidden to off-road vehicles, only to fly off at the end of the breeding season to some South or Central American locale where they are trapped and eaten by foreigners.

Not so, according to wildlife experts, who this week helped the Banner separate the truth from the tackle-shop talk.

"They don't go to South America and they are not being shot and eaten during the wintertime," said Ellen Jedrey, assistant director of Mass. Audubon's Coastal Waterbirds Program. The Atlantic coast piping plovers actually winter in the Caribbean and in southern locations of the U.S. along the Atlantic coastline, such as eastern Florida. The poaching of plovers there "is not an issue," Jedrey said.

Nor is it true that, because of conservation efforts, the Massachusetts population of piping plovers has skyrocketed to the point where the birds could "take over" the beach in the next few years, as some ORV drivers have suggested at recent public hearings held by the National Seashore.

In reality, Jedrey said, biologists have been seeing a lower productivity rate among the plovers that come to our coastline. Last year they recorded the lowest number of chicks produced per pair since 1986, when they began closely monitoring the population. The rate was 1.06 chicks per pair, below the target rate of 1.26 chicks per pair. And it wasn't an isolated instance. There have been low productivity rates for the last five or six years, Jedrey said.

That means the population could go down in the next five years, she said, because it is the same adult plover pairs who are returning to our shores each spring, year after year for the five to seven years in their lifespan. If they don't produce enough offspring, then the next generation of plovers will be smaller.

What is true about the Atlantic Coast piping plovers is that they are completely dependent on barrier beaches for their survival. Unlike other species of shorebird, like oystercatchers and common terns, piping plovers nest exclusively on open sandy beaches with sparse grass (oystercatchers can nest on rocky terrain and common terns can nest on rooftops).

The plover chicks, especially, need undisturbed shoreline. "Plover chicks get up their first day of life, walk to the shoreline when they weigh only about six grams, and start feeding," Jedrey said. Other shorebird babies get fed by their parents, who bring fish or other treats back to the nest, but all the piping plover parents do is lead their chicks to the water.

It is also true that certain species of plover are killed for their feathers and meat — but not the piping plover. Brewster-based wildlife specialist Peter Trull, co-author of a research paper titled "Shorebirds and Noodles," traveled to South America in the early '80s to do research on migrating plovers. He lived among plover trappers in the country of Guyana and documented their

activities, which included catching black-bellied plovers and semipalmated plovers and either eating them or turning them into bracelets.

They tasted nothing like chicken, said Trull, who sampled some plover meat himself. “They taste like starling.”

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