

# Cape beaches make U.S. list of most threatened habitats

By Rich Eldred

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Cape Cod's beaches are not only our biggest tourist draw, they are now one of the 20 most threatened bird habitats in the nation.

Actually, the American Bird Conservatory listed all New England beaches as threatened but the sands of Cape Cod certainly sport significant populations of breeding water birds such as piping plovers and least terns.

Rebecca Harris, director of Mass Audubon's Coastal Water Bird Program, will be speaking to that topic and related ones March 14 at Truro Public Library.

Harris has watched both plover and least tern population plateau in recent years.

"If you look back 20 years ago we're in way better shape," Harris declared. "There are four times the number of piping plovers, three times the least terns on the sites we cover. But in the past five years the population has been stable. The productivity of fledglings has actually gone down. That is a major concern."

In the case of piping plovers, the number of pairs has gone from 139 in 1986 to 501 in 1999, increasing almost every year. But since then the numbers are flat; there were 478 pairs in 2005. While the number of fledglings was above 1.5 per pair eight times between 1989 and 1999, it hasn't been that high since, hitting a low of 1.07 in 2005.

"It is possible we can't fit any more birds into the available habitat," Harris said. "Least terns, in the last five years, have also started declining. So things are going well but we're possibly at a tipping point. Least terns are long lived so by the time you see an actual decline it may be after the fact."

Water birds have their share of troubles.

"It's basically the same story, loss of habitat," she said, "adding in climate change to the mix and sea level rise, you could have even less area to nest."

Sea level rise is quite distant but more immediate problems include beachfront development and increasing threats from predators such as coyotes, raccoons, skunks and other bird species.

Predators aren't new but they've adapted well to living with humans and as the birds have fewer isolated places to go, a couple of predators can have a much greater impact.

"Before development the birds would cycle through sites so they wouldn't be decimated by predators," Harris said. "Now the birds are down to very little remaining habitat where they can nest."

The different water bird species are fairly particular where they nest.

"We've changed the coast for development. With revetments and such there are hard surfaces, and we've removed sandy surfaces and places like winter overwash sites, which they like," Harris said. "The beaches as birds like them are prime sites for beachgoers and dogs off leashes."

Piping plovers like open sand, not grassy areas. They can spot predators approaching and the eggs, which are sandy colored, blend in.

The Coastal Water Bird Program has been monitoring piping plovers, least and common terns and oystercatchers for close to 20 years.

"We cover about half the piping plover population in the state," Harris said. "Oyster catchers are kind of the forgotten water birds but they have the same nesting habitats as plovers. They are solitary and don't like any kind of disturbance. But they're ignored because they're not on any list."

But Harris isn't ignoring them.

"We're up to 200 pairs in the state. That's more than when the program started 20 years ago. But people are concerned because their productivity is down to half a chick per pair. That's not even enough to replace the adults that die off."

It was piping plovers that kick-started the program. The numbers were down to 126 pairs in 1987 when they were first listed under the federal Endangered Species Act and Mass Audubon began monitoring the nests.

“We would fill in the gaps on beaches that were not monitored,” said Harris. We now have over 100 sites we monitor. It is monitoring and management. We make people aware of the birds nesting there.”

Each summer the program has 25 to 30 field staff scouring the sands of Southeastern Massachusetts, 18 of them based on Cape Cod. They cover many of the smaller sites, not on federal land or handled by towns as Sandy Neck is.

South Beach in Chatham had the most piping plover pairs (53) but productivity was alarmingly low, at half a chick per pair.

“It’s probably the predators, avian and land, everything got the birds last year,” Harris said. “It was a free meal everywhere you looked. Barrier beaches are the preferred habitat for piping plovers. They like the option of feeding on both the ocean and bay side.”

Harris worked at the Tufts Veterinary School seabird project until last June when she became the director of Coastal Water Bird Program, which is based at Audubon’s Long Pasture Sanctuary in Barnstable.

Next summer they’ll study the foraging behavior of least terns, which favor sand lances in their diet. Also planned is a look at the activities of endangered roseate terns, which nest on three islands in Buzzards Bay.

“Roseate terns congregate in large numbers getting ready to migrate; South Beach and Monomoy are the main places that happens,” Harris noted. “In preliminary work we’ve found a lot of movement across Nantucket Sound to Falmouth, quickly back and forth. That has a lot of implications for wind farm development. They have fledglings accompanying parents, usually the father. They eat as much as possible before they migrate to South America then rest at a place like South Beach.”

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More about water birds

Talk by Rebecca Harris, director of Mass Audubon’s Coastal Water Bird Program 9:30 a.m., Wednesday, March 14 at the Truro Public Library, 5 Library Lane (off Standish Way).