

Ways of humans, nature take toll on birds

The Boston Globe

By Robert Knox, Globe Correspondent | March 22, 2007

Bird populations in the area's beaches, marshes, and forests are declining, pressured by increased human activity and nature's drive to replace open land with woodlands, according to scientists working to protect nesting birds on South Shore and Buzzards Bay beaches.

As staff and volunteers gear up to protect endangered shorebirds that return to the area to nest later this month or early April, Rebecca Harris, the director of Massachusetts Audubon's Coastal Waterbird Program, said nesting populations of birds that use the beaches have either leveled off or declined recently after years of recovery.

Piping plover has declined 10 percent in recent years, to 480 nesting pairs last year from a high of 538 four years ago. Terns once dominated area beaches, outnumbering gulls. Today least terns, a threatened species, have been reduced to a few hundred.

These trends accord with national developments, a recent study published by the American Bird Conservancy on the "Top 20 Most Threatened Bird Habitats in the United States " suggests. A growing human population has affected bird populations through habitat destruction and practices such as permitting cats to roam outdoors, the study says.

"All habitats are at risk from development," said Harris. But birds that like "nice, broad open sandy beaches" to nest suffer most from human presence because humans like those same places.

"Everything associated with human use" of the region's sandy beaches is a threat to these birds, Harris said. Eggs and chicks are in danger of getting stepped on, run over by four-wheel drive vehicles, harassed by dogs, or eaten by predators attracted to human presence. For example, the chicks of the endangered piping plover are mobile, completely on their own, and need large areas to search for food -- which often puts them in humans' way.

With the help of volunteers and interns, Mass. Audubon staffers are monitoring some 100 coastal nesting sites, including at least half of the region's piping plover and least tern populations. The sites include Duxbury Beach, Third Cliff beach in Scituate, and sites in Marshfield, Marion, and other Buzzards Bay shoreline spots. Plymouth Beach, another important nesting site for piping plover and terns, is being monitored by the town.

Mass. Audubon's labor-intensive piping plover program, which began 20 years ago, raised the state population of the bird from 130 pairs to 500 pairs. At Duxbury Beach, the "most intensively managed beach" in the region, college and high school students "baby-sit each nest" and keep track of nests near traffic areas, Harris said.

In addition to plover and terns, the region's beaches and salt marshes are used for nesting or migration stopover points by clapper rail and saltmarsh. as well as Nelson's sharp-tailed and seaside sparrow.

Massachusetts woodlands are more extensive than at any time since American independence, said Wayne R. Petersen, director of Mass. Audubon's Important Bird Areas Program. But while the growth of the deciduous forests sounds good for the environment, he said, today's woods are not good for birds, which require what bird scientists call "early successional habitats" -- the earlier stages of forest growth. These habitats need lightning, tree blow-downs, and fires -- exactly what Smokey the Bear told us to prevent -- to create the open "shrub land" birds require to breed and find food.

Myles Standish State Forest is "the quintessential example" of forest land that undergoes periodic fires in its natural state, Petersen said.

Fires knock down the vegetation and benefit birds that thrive "where the edge is" between trees and clearings.

But just as more people going to the beach pressures shorebird habitat, more homes built in or near forests is not good for shrub land birds like the whip-poor-will and the brown thrasher, because towns suppress naturally occurring fires to save homes.

Grassland birds such as the bobolink, the eastern meadow lark, and the upland sandpiper flourished over a century ago when more of the New England countryside was used for farming, but they are rare today. In fact, some species "that have not appeared on the radar screen of bird conservationists are quietly slipping away," Petersen said. The golden-winged warbler, for example, is listed as an endangered species.

Petersen said ways to increase the habitat these birds need include managing power line right-of-way cuts to keep clearings at shrub level and selective cutting in forests to create open space.

A side from volunteering for efforts such as the Coastal Waterbird Program (for information, e-mail coastalbirds@massaudubon.org), individuals can help support bird populations by respecting the low fencing placed around nesting areas and obeying other beach use restrictions. Dogs should be leashed, especially if they are in nesting areas.

Cats, too, can be a problem. According to the American Bird Conservancy, domestic cats kill "hundreds of millions of birds each year" from cardinals and jays to rarer species. The organization advises owners that cats kept indoors live longer -- as do their potential preys.

"One of the things people can do is be cognizant of the problem," Petersen said, particularly when open space issues crop up locally.

For instance, he said, many golf courses destroy shrub land habitat. "Do we need to put in yet another golf course?"

And, if you own property with "a brushy wood lot," Petersen said, "you don't have to cut it down. Let it be."

Robert Knox can be reached at rc.knox@gmail.com. ■