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In Aid of a Bird, Some Inconveniences for People

By [KATIE ZEZIMA](#)

REVERE, Mass. — When two Atlantic piping plovers nested on busy Revere Beach last summer, scientists knew that the tiny birds indicated something big.

The Atlantic piping plover has been on the endangered species list for more than 20 years after dwindling to 722 nesting pairs. Scientists have gone through a difficult, and sometimes contentious, program to restore them, which involved shutting down parts of various beaches for weeks at a time and banning off-road vehicles.

However, the efforts appear to have worked.

In 2006, biologists tracked 1,743 pairs of mating plovers on the Atlantic Coast. And the population appears to be heading toward the 2,000-pair mark that will take the bird off the endangered species list.

“It’s a good indication that we’re doing something right; we think it’s a positive sign,” said Rebecca J. Harris, director of the Coastal Waterbird Program at the Massachusetts Audubon Society.

“Twenty years ago,” Dr. Harris said, “we would have never been able to dream of seeing a plover at Revere Beach,” which is one of the largest and most crowded beaches in the state.

[Massachusetts](#) has the largest number of piping plover pairs on the East Coast, with 480 in 2006.

“It’s the highest population we’ve ever seen in the state,” Dr. Harris said.

Helping the population grow has not been easy. Plovers weigh only about 50 grams and blend easily into sand. Their eggs are the size of a quarter, and their predators, Dr. Harris said, are “just about everything.”

Humans are no exception. Development has pushed the birds out of their habitat; they and their eggs are easily susceptible to human damage, especially being stepped on or driven over.

“They camouflage and blend into their surroundings, which makes them particularly vulnerable to disturbance,” said Joseph Janssen, director of the [Nature Conservancy](#) of Long Island’s Coastal Species Recovery Program. “People just don’t see them.”

Biologists have used twine to rope off habitats and, in many cases, close parts of a beach until the plover chicks hatch and grow strong enough to get around on their own. Plover development is fast; it takes about three weeks for chicks to reach adult size.

Efforts to protect the birds have led to closed beaches, canceled fireworks, lawsuits, warnings to cat owners

and shelters to not release the animals near the shoreline and closed trails for all-terrain vehicles.

“When I first started this job almost 20 years ago it was really heated,” said Susi von Oettingen, an endangered species specialist with the federal [Fish and Wildlife Service](#).

The Cape Cod National Seashore must carry out the scientists’ recommendations for protecting the bird. Steve Prokop, chief ranger at the seashore, said he thought relations had improved between it and beachgoers and A.T.V. riders. The seashore has an 8.8-mile off-road vehicle corridor.

“The closures are still fairly controversial,” said Mr. Prokop, whose team did an assessment last winter to find alternative trails should some be closed for the plovers. “We try to be reasonable in our closures to provide access, but the protection of a threatened bird species that’s protected under the Endangered Species Act is paramount.”

The Massachusetts Beach Buggy Association, an organization for off-road vehicle users, has said it wants plovers to thrive. It has proposed that volunteers redirect off-road vehicles away from areas with plovers rather than have the seashore issue blanket closures.

Mr. Jannsen said one of the more important elements in recovery is educating the public and making sure all parties involved with the issue have a say.

“Public education is a big part of our work,” Mr. Jannsen said. “People need to know that these areas are roped off because of potential human impact, but the rest of the beach is still open.

“From our standpoint,” he added, “we think the program is a success, but we’re still not at recovery.”