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Piping Plover Update—Low Productivity on Fire Island in 2007 Park Flight Volunteer from Panama Joins This Season’s Plover Program

Patchogue, NY—Fire Island National Seashore’s 2007 piping plover nesting season came to an end on Saturday, August 18, 2007 when the last nest successfully fledged two chicks. From a total of 25 nesting pairs, only 18 chicks survived long enough to fledge, or fly from the nest. This year’s piping plover brood productivity is one of the lowest recorded at the park with a total productivity of .72 piping plover chicks fledged/nest site, out of a possible 4.0.

Fire Island National Seashore has been monitoring and protecting its five federally listed threatened and endangered (T & E) species since 1986. The most productive season recorded was in 2005, when park biologists recorded 17 breeding pairs of piping plovers (the same number as the year before) which fledged 40 plover chicks (3 more chicks than were fledged in 2004). In 2006, the number of nests and the number chicks fledged were reduced (of 21 breeding pairs, there were only 15 successful nests which fledged 32 chicks), but the average productivity (1.5 chicks/nest) had increased.

“We appreciate everyone’s support for the piping plover recovery program. We will continue to consult with local agencies and attempt to find some possible explanation for our overall productivity and high nest loss,” stated Wildlife Biologist Daniel Barrera, Jr.

Preparations for the [plover program begin in March](#) each year. This year’s volunteer staff included an international participant from the Park Flight program (*see article below*).

(more)

In 2007, the 25 nesting pairs sought a home for their young in the park through a total of 35 nesting attempts. Unfortunately, only 11 of the 35 total nesting attempts survived long enough to meet their 25- day fledge date. A total of 18 chicks, out of a possible 100 chicks at 4 chicks/nesting pair, survived long enough to fledge.

24 of the 35 nesting attempts failed for reasons spanning from predation, wash- out as a result of a high tide, or abandonment. Eleven nesting attempts were lost as a result of abandonment, with no explanation found. While several possible theories have been examined in trying to identify the source for such loss, nothing has yet to be singled out.

In 2007, nesting piping plovers were located at five different dune crossings, the first time this has been recorded in Fire Island National Seashore. The extra nesting sites caused a rerouting of essential service traffic through several Fire Island communities and the expansion of restrictions on dogs and kites. Respect and tolerance for these requirements has been greatly appreciated.

One noticeable “side effect” of protective measures for piping plovers and other T & E species, is the extra protection afforded beach grass in the symbolically closed areas at the base of the dunes. Where you can see side- by- side the condition of a dune with and without plover fencing, you can realize the impact of hundreds of feet trampling dune vegetation. It’s the beach grass and other dune plants that hold the sand in place, forming the protective sand dune.

Fire Island National Seashore’s [2007 Threatened and Endangered Species Monitoring Program Summary](#) is now available on- line. To learn more about the park’s [threatened and endangered species program](#), or for further information about Fire Island National Seashore, visit www.nps.gov/fiis .

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Field Season Summary for Park Flight Volunteer Mauricio Hoyos Gracia
By Wildlife Biologist Daniel Barrera, Jr.
Fire Island National Seashore

In late August 2007, Park Flight program participant Mauricio Hoyos Gracia from Panama City, Panama will be ending a nearly 4- month- long volunteer program at Fire Island National Seashore (FINS). He has assisted park’s resource management staff monitor the breeding and nesting activity of the federally- threatened piping plover (*Charadrius melodus*) shorebird species. The piping plover was listed as a protected species under the Endangered Species Act in 1986 and relies on the beaches of Fire Island to provide a healthy habitat for them to breed and successfully raise their young each summer season.

The [Park Flight Migratory Bird Program](#) is a partnership between the National Park Service, National Park Foundation, and National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, with financial support from American Airlines and the NPS Natural Resource Challenge. One component of the program is technical assistance, including training workshops, personnel exchanges, and participation of Latin American professionals in U.S. National Parks through the NPS Office of International Affairs Volunteers in Parks Program.

Mauricio was selected from an extensive pool of qualified applicants, all of whom shared experience in avian protective measures such as bird banding and seasonal bird counts. His interest in acquiring knowledge of protected shorebird species earned him the position at Fire Island National Seashore,

working along FINS wildlife biologist Daniel Barrera and Student Conservation Association (SCA) interns Jonathan Erz, Colleen Siudzinski, and Jessica Blick. Since his arrival in early May, Mauricio quickly adapted to his surroundings, both culturally and environmentally.

With each passing week of the piping plover breeding season, Mauricio assisted field staff with the placement of over 25 nest enclosures—large cages set in place over the piping plover nest as a means to ensure the nests' protection from possible predators. Daily monitoring efforts were already underway as Mauricio arrived. His daily monitoring efforts included walking 7 miles of beach and monitoring 27 miles of barrier island. Almost every observable trait a piping plover could display—from foraging, to walking, to nest incubation sessions, to preening its feathers—was all recorded on a daily basis in an attempt gain a better understanding of a species that we're still learning so much about.

Mauricio and the rest of the FINS field staff were able to appreciate the value of their protection efforts when they observed their first piping plover nest hatch in early June. Piping plovers lay a full clutch of 4 eggs incubated for a period of 27 days. Piping plover chicks are born precocial, meaning that the chicks are capable of foraging for themselves within hours of hatching. The chicks' ability to be precocial made monitoring a time- consuming activity, which Mauricio enthusiastically participated in.

Upon reaching 25 days of age, piping plover chicks literally begin to spread their wings and fly. Mauricio's efforts helped FINS successfully fledge a total of 18 piping plover chicks after a breeding season which saw numerous challenges and dilemmas. The experience Mauricio gained has been evident with each passing day. He has become aware of each individual nesting pair's status and has learned about the various issues dealing with shorebird protection measures, from off- road vehicles to dogs on the beach invading piping plover nesting habitat.



Left: Adult piping plover feigns a broken wing to lure potential predators away from its nest.
Right: Park Flight program participant Mauricio Hoyos Gracia conducted field observations along 27 miles of Fire Island during the summer of 2007.