

Where Have All the Plovers Gone?

The Seashore has historically been an important nesting and wintering area for the federally threatened western snowy plover (*Charadrius alexandrinus nivosus*). The population decline over the past thirty years prompted the listing in 1993, largely due to loss of habitat by encroachment of non-native vegetation, predation pressure, and disturbance from recreational use of beaches. PRBO Conservation Science (PRBO) has been working closely with the National Park Service to reach the target population increase of the Snowy Plover Recovery Plan of 64 breeding birds (32 nesting pairs) within the Seashore. The current total population estimate is around 2,300 based on a survey in 2005, and the California estimate is around 1,719, up from 1,680 in 2005. The US Fish and Wildlife Service estimates that the population has increased over the past 15 years because of the strong protection provided by the Endangered Species Act.

Over the years, PRBO and PRNS have experimented with a variety of management measures to help the plovers reproduce successfully, including erecting exclosures around nests, creating seasonal closures around nesting habitat and removing invasive plants. After all of this effort, the plover nesting season in 2006 was the most successful since 1995. An estimated 24 nests were protected with exclosures and 51 eggs hatched out of 69 laid (74% hatching success). Of the chicks hatched, 23 fledged, yielding a 45% fledging rate.

Over the past five years, the Seashore has restored around 50 acres of coastal dune by removing European beach grass and ice plant from an area around Abbotts Lagoon. The restoration effort is greatly benefiting the recovery of plovers at the Seashore because plovers have more habitat to nest and forage in, and to avoid predators. Two nests occurred in the restored habitat in 2005 and another two in 2006, and many more chicks were raised there.

Visitor education is very important to the success of plovers at the Seashore because the birds are easily disturbed by recreationists on beaches, unaware of the issues. When disturbed, chicks are exposed to predators and use energy needed for growth. Egg failure and chick mortality remain high because of disturbance, predation, environmental factors and other reasons, with 18 eggs failing to hatch (26%) and 29 chicks failing to fledge in 2006. The survival of every chick is important during this time of building up the population, and the park will continue the protection, restoration and education programs in the near future until the population reaches and is sustained at the recovery plan target number of 64 breeding birds, and reproduces at least 1 chick per male.



Western snowy plover on nest

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