

PACIFIC COAST WESTERN SNOWY PLOVER

The Issue

Each restoration and control of human and predator activities on beaches are helping recover the western snowy plover along California's Pacific Coast.

Natural History

The western snowy plover is a small shorebird that forages for invertebrates in intertidal zones, in dry sandy areas above the high tide line, in salt pans and along the edges of salt marshes. The birds of the Pacific Coast nest near tidal waters along the mainland coast and offshore islands from southern Washington to southern Baja California. Most nesting occurs on unvegetated to moderately vegetated dune-backed beaches and sand spits, though the birds may nest on salt pans, dredge spoils and salt-pond levees. Their nests are shallow depressions that they scrape out in open areas of dry sand. The birds prefer nesting areas isolated from human disturbance and predation.

Nesting and chick rearing generally occur between March and September. During the non-breeding season, western snowy plovers may remain at breeding sites or migrate to other locations, with most of the birds wintering south of Bodega Bay, California. Many birds from the interior of the continent winter on the central and southern coast of California.

Urban development and encroachment of nonnative invasive plants, such as European beachgrass, have caused the loss of nesting habitat for the Pacific Coast population of the western snowy plover and have reduced the bird's reproductive success at many locations.

Human activities such as walking, jogging, unleashed pets, horseback riding and off-road vehicles frequently crush and destroy western snowy plover nests and chicks. These activities also flush adults off nests and away from chicks, interfering with incubation and chick rearing. Chicks are especially vulnerable to dogs, because the young birds typically freeze in their tracks and rely



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on camouflage to protect them when approached by a predator.

Listing

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1993 listed the Pacific Coast population of the western snowy plover as threatened.

Management

The Pacific Coast western snowy plover population, as defined by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, refers to birds along the coast of California and Baja California, Mexico. About half the plovers in this population live in Mexico, where the Service has no jurisdiction.

In its 2001 recovery plan for this population, the Service outlined six recovery units, or distinct population segments. All six are required to meet recovery goals before delisting can occur. Presently, some of the units are doing well and others poorly. Among the recovery goals is a target population of 3,000 birds throughout the historic range. In 2005, the birds tallied about 2,600 individuals, so they are approaching healthy numbers. A slight dip, however, occurred in 2006.

The Service and various private, county and state entities, such as the Coal Oil Point Preserve in central California owned by the University of California-Santa Barbara, have taken land management measures that

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have helped increase plover numbers. Fences have been used to keep people and dogs off nesting beaches, and volunteer docents have talked with beach-park visitors about plover protection and have helped scare predatory crows and ravens away from nesting beaches, using slingshots. As a result of such activities, western snowy plovers recently nested at the Coal Oil Point Preserve for the first time in 30 years.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife and the state wildlife agency also are working to restore beach habitat for plovers, removing invasive, nonnative plants that choke the open sandy areas plovers need for nesting and planting native species.

These measures also help other beach species, including butterflies and various native plant species.

Funding

Funding from all government sources for western snowy plover recovery nationwide ranks the species at 46 out of 1,311 species, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service fiscal year 2004 report (the most recent available) to Congress, *Federal and State Endangered and Threatened Species Expenditures*.^{*} Total recovery funding for the plover from all government sources that year was about \$4.5 million, with less than \$1.4 million coming through the Service. “The good news is that this species is showing positive trends thanks to management measures like control of beach traffic,” says John Kostyack, director of Wildlife Conservation Campaigns at the National Wildlife Federation. “Yet more could be done in a more efficient manner if Congress provided the Service with enough funding to cover all the needs of plover protection. Congress should make sure that the Service—the lead federal wildlife agency—has the funding to move quickly on the ground and take advantage of management opportunities as they arise.”

Local Contacts

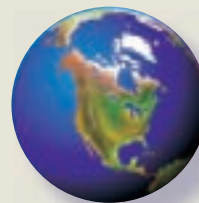
National Wildlife Federation Northwest Natural Resource Center, 206-285-8707; Fish and Wildlife California/Nevada Operations Office, Endangered

Species Program, 916-414-6464; California Department of Fish and Game, 916-653-4633; Wendell Wood, long-time conservation activist who initiated listing for the snowy plover, 707-465-6541.

Other Threats

The prognosis for the western snowy plover along the California coast is good under current management regimens and offers promise for many other species.

THREATS FROM GLOBAL WARMING



Global warming poses a dangerous threat in the future, as plovers and other shore-nesting birds are highly vulnerable to the sea level rise that many scientists anticipate in the wake of higher global temperatures.

A significant increase in the rate of sea-level rise due to melting glaciers and ice caps and to thermal expansion of the oceans is one of the most direct consequences of global warming. Scientists project an average sea level rise of 7 to 23 inches before this century ends and perhaps as much as 31 inches if the rate of ice melt from Greenland and Antarctica increases as some models predict. Along coasts with gradually sloped shores, such as Florida and the Gulf Coast, a 31-inch sea level rise translates into an advance of water inland by as much as 500 feet.

^{*} The U.S. Fish and Wildlife *Federal and State Endangered and Threatened Species Expenditures* report incorporates subjective estimates provided by regulated entities without any independent verification and without effort to segregate Endangered Species Act expenditures from other related expenditures. However, for most listed species, no other funding data is available.