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Western Snowy Plover Nesting Success Up on Oregon Coast in 2003

The nesting success rate of western snowy plovers on Oregon beaches was better in 2003 than in any year since the bird was listed a decade ago for protection under the Endangered Species Act, according to state and federal agencies.

Biologists attribute the higher number of fledglings this year to good weather, habitat improvement projects, cooperation from the public in avoiding nesting areas and better chick survival. Biologists add that the key to recovery of the species, however, is to get the population trend to increase over a much longer period of time.

Dave Lauten, a biologist with the Oregon Natural Heritage Information Center who has been monitoring plovers on the Oregon coast since 1997, said 59 chicks successfully left their nests this year. That's a success rate of 46%, which is nearly 10% better than average.

"That's on par with what we would need to recover the species," Lauten said. "It's reason to be optimistic that the birds are doing better."

Oregon's plover population went from 72 in 1993, when it was listed as threatened, to 141 in 1997, but the effects of El Nino weather patterns in the winters of 1997 and 1998 caused plover numbers to decline along the Pacific coast.

"In Oregon, about 40 adults were lost during El Nino and the population really hasn't regained ground, remaining relatively constant at about 100 birds," said Kerrie Palermo, a senior wildlife biologist for the Bureau of Land Management in Coos Bay who has worked on plover issues in Oregon and California for the last 15 years. "We're

excited that this was a good breeding season, but chick production has still not been high enough to make gains in the overall population."

Several major habitat restoration projects over the past few years, including those at Dunes Overlook, the North Spit of Coos Bay, Bandon Beach State Park, and New River, have provided better nesting areas, and the birds seem to be responding. For example, at New River more than 100 acres have been restored to provide plovers with nesting habitat. In 2003, four nests producing seven fledglings were recorded at New River.

Seven of Oregon's eight critical habitat units, designated for the plover by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1999, successfully produced plover chicks this year.

Also, a public education campaign on Oregon beaches over the past few years has helped people realize that they can help plovers stand a better chance of nesting successfully by avoiding roped-off dry sand areas, and keeping their dogs leashed until they reach wet sand.

Snowy plovers are small, pale-colored shorebirds with dark patches on either side of the upper breast. The coastal population, of which only about 2,000 individuals remain, breeds along the Pacific coast from southern Washington to southern Baja, California in Mexico. The inland and coastal populations are listed collectively by the State of Oregon as a threatened species. Federal protections under the Act apply only to the coastal population.

The birds prefer coastal sand spits, dune-packed beaches, beaches at creek and river mouths and salt pans at lagoons and estuaries. The breeding season in Oregon extends from April through early August. Biologists attribute the decline of the species to loss of nesting habitat due to development of dune areas, the encroachment of European beach grass into former open dune areas, human disturbance of nest sites, and nest predation by raccoons, ravens and non-native red foxes.

Historically, there were between 24 and 28 breeding sites for the coastal population of snowy plovers in Oregon. Only nine remain, primarily as a result of habitat loss. Restrictions on public use of dry sand portions of beach are in place on about 18 miles of beach in Oregon between Florence and Port Orford. Fencing (roped areas) and signs delineating restricted areas have been in place seasonally for about 10 years.

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