

Cape Hatteras

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Cape Hatteras National Seashore



Protected Species - Piping Plover

Description and Status



The piping plover is a small, stocky shorebird with a short, stout bill; sandy upperparts; orange legs; and a plaintive “peep-lo” call that is often heard before the bird is seen. An adult only weighs 1.5 to 2 ounces, is 7 inches long, and has a wingspan of 15 inches.

There are three breeding populations of this plover – Atlantic Coast, Great Plains and Great Lakes. Under the Federal Endangered Species Act, the species was listed as Threatened on December 11, 1985 in its entire range except in the Great Lakes where it is listed as Endangered.

Life History

The Atlantic Coast population of the piping plover breeds along the sandy beaches from Newfoundland to North Carolina from late March/early April to early September. These birds prefer sparsely vegetated open areas that are slightly raised in elevation. Their breeding territories generally include a feeding area such as a dune pond, moist sandflats, or near the ocean edge. Breeding birds on the North Carolina coast are mostly found from Cape Lookout northward.

The nests are a depression in the sand lined with stones or small fragments of shell on the upper beach close to the dunes. Both eggs and young are well camouflaged with a

sandy coloring. Occupied nests are generally 150-300 feet apart. The average clutch size is four eggs. The young hatch about 27-31 days after egg laying and fledge about 4 weeks after hatching. If the eggs are destroyed early in the season, the birds usually lay a second clutch.

This plover winters on the Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico coasts from North Carolina to Mexico and in the Bahamas West Indies on coastal beaches, sandflats or mudflats.

North Carolina is the southern most breeding range and the northern most wintering range of the piping plover.

Threats

The piping plover nearly disappeared due to excessive hunting for the millinery trade during the 19th century. Although the species has rebounded somewhat, fewer than 3,000 breeding pairs were found in the US and Canada in 2001.

Current threats include, but are not limited to:

- Habitat modification and destruction including dune stabilization
- Recreational and commercial development including pedestrian and vehicular traffic
- Human disturbance, which can affect breeding

activities, disturb nesting adults and flightless chicks, and crush eggs and flightless chicks

- Beach development and use, which attracts predators.
- Weather events
- Predation including ghost crabs, opossum, fox, and other birds.
- Off-road vehicles and beach equipment

The Piping Plover on the Cape Hatteras National Seashore

The Atlantic Coast piping plover utilizes the expansive beaches of the Cape Hatteras National Seashore for breeding grounds.

In 2004, there were only three breeding pairs found on the entire Seashore. This is an 80% decline in breeding pairs from the peak number of fifteen in 1989.

Only two of the three pairs actually nested. One nest produced four eggs and the other had two. The eggs in the nest on Hatteras Island hatched successfully but the ones on Bodie Island did not. No chicks survived to fledgling age.

In 2005, there were once again only three breeding pairs and two nests. However, the breeding season was more successful since six birds fledged.

A rate of 1.2 fledglings per breeding pair annually is needed to sustain a population; higher is needed to increase a population.

The Cape Hatteras National Seashore has been the wintering grounds for all populations of this species including the Endangered Great Lakes piping plover. The Seashore is also extremely important to migrating plovers.