

Partnering for Piping Plovers

A Conservation Success Story

by Todd Pover

A piping plover at the Nantucket National Wildlife Refuge in Massachusetts. Photo Credit: Amanda Boyd, USFWS

Collaboration is widely accepted as one of the key elements of conservation success. But successful collaboration can be elusive. Developing strong conservation partnerships takes time, hard work, patience, and the right mix of personalities. This makes the case of the range-wide recovery effort for the Atlantic Coast population of piping plovers (*Charadrius melodus*) all the more remarkable.

Piping plovers are small, sand-colored shorebirds that breed on coastal beaches from North Carolina to the Canadian Maritime Provinces. This includes some of the most heavily visited and recreated beaches along the Atlantic Coast. Intensive on-the-ground management, which includes fencing and posting of nesting sites and regular patrolling during the busy summer tourist season when piping plovers nest, is essential to minimize the impacts of human disturbance. A

number of other strategies, ranging from restricting public off-road vehicles and dogs on nesting beaches to placing cages around nests to prevent predators from destroying eggs, are utilized to increase reproductive success of this species.

Although some efforts to protect these rare birds are not always popular with the public because they may involve closing portions of beaches during the breeding season and restricting some recreational activities, the recovery effort appears to be working. The Atlantic Coast breeding population has more than doubled from 790 pairs when it was first listed as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act in 1986 to nearly 1,800 pairs today—close to the range-wide recovery goal of 2,000 pairs.

The various management tools are a critical part of this success, but from the outset collaboration has been the

hallmark of the piping plover recovery effort. “Despite their vulnerability to pervasive and persistent threats, piping plovers are an incredibly lucky species because they’re the beneficiaries of an amazing recovery cooperator network,” says Anne Hecht, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s (Service) Recovery Team Leader for the Atlantic Coast Population of Piping Plovers. “National Wildlife Refuges, the National Park Service, state wildlife agencies, municipal beach managers, private conservation groups, and individuals devote thousands of hours every year to protect piping plovers on their breeding grounds.”

In New Jersey, the most densely populated state within the plover’s breeding range, the Service is working closely with the New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife and municipalities along the state’s coast, to develop management plans to help piping plovers and other vulnerable beach

species. The plans address a wide range of potential impacts on beach nesting birds—not just those caused by beach goers, but by the municipalities and their process of maintaining and cleaning their beaches. Such plans are critical for long-term recovery of the species, but their effectiveness ultimately hinges on the strong partnerships developed in creating them—implementation of such plans would not be feasible otherwise.

Under the federal recovery plan for the Atlantic Coast population of piping plovers, four recovery units have been established on the breeding grounds in Southern, New York-New Jersey, New England, and Eastern Canada. Although there is a biological basis for the division – in order to insure long-term survival of the species its distribution needs to be spread across the range not just in a few locations – the approach also fosters regional cooperation. Furthermore, the recovery plan is somewhat unique

in that it includes both the U.S. and Canada, making this an international partnership as well.

Until recently, the primary focus of piping plover recovery has been on the breeding grounds. Yet, one of the five major recovery tasks for the Atlantic Coast population targets protection on the species' wintering grounds. This is extremely important considering plovers are only on the breeding grounds from about mid-March to mid-August. The majority of their life cycle is spent either in migration or on their wintering grounds.

According to Hecht, the emergence of a parallel collaborative effort is now being seen in the wintering range. "Collaboration and communication between partners from the breeding and wintering ranges continue to build, which will substantially enhance recovery implementation now and in the future," adds Melissa Bimbi, an endangered species biologist in the

Service's South Carolina Field Office who is helping lead the non-breeding range conservation effort.

One of the best examples of the power of collaboration was the wintering segment of the 2011 International Piping Plover Census. This effort, which is organized by the U.S. Geological Survey every five years, relies on conservation partners across the range to conduct the surveys. In 2011, strong emphasis was placed on the Bahamas, which was believed to host significant numbers of wintering piping plover, but had proved difficult to survey in the past because of the vast amount of suitable habitat and its relative inaccessibility.

In January and February 2011, an international team including biologists, researchers, and volunteers from the U.S., Canada, and the Bahamas and from a diverse group of agencies organizations, including the USGS, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Audubon Society, Bahamas National Trust, Canadian Wildlife Service, Bird Studies Canada, Massachusetts Audubon Society, and Conserve Wildlife Foundation of New Jersey, converged on the Bahamas for the survey. In the end, just over 1,000 piping plovers were tallied on the survey, more than doubling the number recorded in 2006 and contributing an important piece of new information towards the piping plover recovery effort.

Piping plovers are the beneficiaries of an extensive recovery cooperators network. Federal and state agencies, state municipal beach managers, and non-governmental organizations focus a considerable amount of attention on the research, monitoring, protection, and management of these small shorebirds.

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