

Research Team Visits Abaco to Conduct Bird Survey Partners with Local Groups, including the Bahamas National Trust and Friends of the Environment



Piping Plovers wintering in the Bahamas

A team of local and international bird experts completed a winter survey of piping plovers in the Bahamas from January 24 to February 6, 2011. The census of this endangered shorebird has been conducted every five years since 1991 by the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), with the Bahamas portion being done in close collaboration with the Bahamas National Trust.

In an attempt to increase coverage, fifteen piping plover biologists from the breeding grounds in the U.S. and Canada joined the Bahamas survey this year. It appears as though the extra effort paid off; a preliminary estimate indicates just over 1000 piping plovers were spotted throughout the Bahamas, substantially more than previously found.

In 2001, just 35 piping plovers were reported in the Bahamas census. In 2006, 417 were found, an increase that was attributed to a more intensive survey effort. However, with hundreds of islands, cays, and intertidal flats spread over hundreds of miles, making a comprehensive survey difficult, it was believed even more piping plovers likely wintered in the Bahamas. This year's survey results helped prove that theory.

The Bahamas segment of the 2011 census covered the major islands and some outlying cays from Bimini to Great Inagua. It was part of a larger effort across the entire wintering grounds from Tamaulipas, Mexico east to Florida, up to Virginia, and throughout the Bahamas.

Closer to home, here on Abaco, a preliminary estimate of 74 piping plovers were found, observed on Green Turtle Cay, Great Guana Cay, Man-O-War Cay, Elbow Cay, Sandy Point, and several beaches on the east coast of the island between Little Harbor and Crossing Rocks. Most of the sites had just a handful of birds although a flock of 26 plovers was observed roosting (resting) on a beach close to Crossing Rocks.

The Abaco portion of the survey was conducted by a team from the Massachusetts Audubon Society's Coastal Waterbird Program (Ellen Jedrey, Gabrielle Gareau and Edie Ray) and Conserve Wildlife Foundation of New Jersey (Todd Pover), as well as some local participants.

"None of this work could have been accomplished without the local knowledge, guidance, and logistical support provided by the people and organizations here on Abaco," Jedrey stated.

David Knowles, Chief Park Warden for the Bahamas National Trust on Abaco, was critical in coordinating and directing the local effort. Important support came from the Friends of the Environment, which hosted a public information session on January 31 at their headquarters with the visiting research team. Woody Bracey, a well-known bird expert from Treasure Cay, provided much needed information prior to the census, helped transport and house the research team, and participated in various segments of the survey. Bruce Wolck provided similar birding expertise and support on Elbow Cay. Other local help came from Lindsey McCoy of Friends of the Environment, Matt McCoy and his film crew with Loggerhead Productions, and Kathryn Pieman, a PhD candidate from UCLA working on Abaco.



Todd Pover, from the Conserve Wildlife Foundation of N.J., surveying for Piping Plovers in the Bahamas

“This was a true partnership in every sense of the word,” Pover said “And now that the survey results have confirmed just how important the Bahamas are for piping plovers, we hope it is the start of a long-term relationship that can help advance piping plover awareness and conservation in the Bahamas, especially here on Abaco, where a strong environmental support network already exists.”

Although the number of piping plovers found on Abaco was just a small part of the overall Bahamas survey total, the research team believes even more birds probably winter here. They noted piping plover tracks at many sites, even though no birds were seen. Gaining a better understanding of how the sites are used by piping plovers under different tidal stages and other conditions is important to help inform the next survey and aid conservation, according to Pover.

Another notable accomplishment of the census was that such a significant portion of Abaco and its cays were surveyed this year. In 2006, only one Abaco site (Green Turtle Cay) was surveyed, whereas many additional cays and miles of coastline were covered this year. Even so, the research team believes other suitable sites probably still remain, particularly in the Marls, the vast area on the west side of Abaco.

In summing up why she believes people should care about this tiny seemingly inconsequential bird, Jedrey said, “Piping plovers, just like Bahamians and Cape Codders [where she is from in Massachusetts], are dependent upon the same thing: healthy coastal beaches. Our beaches support wildlife, and they support our respective economies. So we all have a shared incentive to protect and conserve the coastal habitat that piping plovers use, because when we protect piping plovers, we can effectively protect the resources that are so precious to us all.

Pover added in summary, “Coming here to the Bahamas as a researcher on the breeding grounds in New Jersey, I thought of piping plovers as ‘our New Jersey’ birds, but now I have a better appreciation of the role played by the wintering sites such as the Bahamas. Piping plovers spend up to eight months on the migratory and wintering grounds - the key to recovering this at-risk species is realizing this linkage and extending conservation efforts across the entire range.”

Both Jedrey and Pover indicated they hope to be able to return to the Bahamas, especially Abaco, to continue the work initiated with the 2011 census and try to build local support for the project. Preliminary plans are set for them to participate in the Abaco Science Alliance Conference, scheduled for January 5-7, 2012, and sponsored by the Friends of the Environment.