

**THE WINTER ECOLOGY OF THE PIPING PLOVER (*Charadrius melodus*) IN COASTAL GEORGIA.** Brandon L. Noel<sup>1</sup>, C. Ray Chandler<sup>1</sup> and Bradford A. Winn<sup>4</sup>.  
<sup>1</sup>Department of Biology, Georgia Southern University, Statesboro, GA, 30460-8042. Phone: (912) 681-5657; Fax: (912) 681-0845; bnoelmarinebio@hotmail.com, chandler@georgiasouthern.edu. <sup>2</sup>Georgia Department of Natural Resources, One Conservation Way, Brunswick, GA, 31523-8600; Phone: (912) 262-3128; Fax: (912) 262-3143; Brad\_Winn@dnr.state.ga.us.

Most conservation-related research on Piping Plovers (*Charadrius melodus*) has focused on the breeding grounds, although Piping Plovers spend only 3-4 months out of the year there. There is a need to quantify the ecology and critical habitat needs of this species on the wintering grounds. Therefore, we quantified the abundance, movements, and habitat use of Piping Plovers, many from known breeding populations, wintering on Little St. Simons Island (LSSI), Georgia during the winters of 2003-2004 and 2004-2005. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has designated LSSI as one of 137 areas along the south Atlantic coast and Gulf Coast that provide critical habitat for wintering Piping Plovers. During 2003-2004, we found a weekly average of 53 plovers on LSSI. Based on observations of color-banded birds, a minimum of 30 plovers from the Great Lakes population, 7 from the Northern Great Plains, and 9 from the Atlantic coast wintered on or migrated through LSSI. As of November 2004, the numbers of plovers is up approximately 37% over the same time period last winter, and we have observed a minimum of 38 plovers from the Great Lakes population. Of these 38 plovers, 15 were seen during the winter of 2003-2004. Ten individuals returned to winter in the same GPS area as they did during 2003-2004. Distribution of plovers is non-random within the island, and resource sampling and behavioral observations are in progress to better understand habitat selection within the island. Based on comparisons with the Georgia 2004 Winter Waterbird Survey (Georgia DNR, unpubl. data) and the 2001 International Piping Plover Survey (Ferland and Haig 2002), LSSI is the most important wintering site for Piping Plovers in Georgia and supports one of the highest relative densities of wintering Piping Plovers along the south Atlantic coast.