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WESTERN SNOWY PLOVER NESTING SUCCESS IN 2006 HIGHEST IN 16 YEARS

The nesting success of western snowy plovers on Oregon beaches is the highest on record since monitoring of the bird began in 1990, according to state and federal agencies. This year, 109 young birds survived long enough to learn to fly and become independent of their parents. An additional plover chick was released after being rehabilitated at the Oregon Coast Aquarium this summer, for a total of 110 fledglings. This number is more than double the average of 45 produced annually since 1990. In 2004, 108 young birds survived.

“Plover biologists are excited about the record-breaking number of young birds produced this year,” said Kerrie Palermo, a senior wildlife biologist with the Bureau of Land Management in Coos Bay. “One of our recovery goals for the species is 200 adult breeding plovers in Oregon. If these young birds can survive to become reproductive adults we may be able to achieve that goal in the not too distant future.”

Despite excellent chick production in recent years, the population of breeding plovers is not as high as biologists would like. Not all of the estimated 150 adult plovers on the Oregon Coast nest every year. It is also thought that winter mortality of adult and fledged plovers has increased, resulting in lower numbers of returning plovers.

“The record numbers of young cannot be attributed to one factor alone. We do a lot of habitat restoration, recreation management, and predator control that all help to make this a successful year,” said Jim Heaney, a Bureau of Land Management wildlife biologist.”

Habitat restoration projects include sites at Sutton Beach, Siltcoos Estuary, Tenmile Estuary (northern Coos County), the North Spit of Coos Bay; Bandon Beach State Natural Area and New River area beaches. Approximately 440 acres have been restored and maintained in these areas primarily through the elimination of invasive plants such as European eachgrass.

Carefully targeted predator control took place at all active nesting sites on Oregon beaches this year for the third consecutive year. The Bureau of Land Management and Bandon State Natural Area began predator management programs at plover nesting areas in 2002, with the USDA Forest Service joining in 2004. The data indicate that predator control is helping plover numbers climb toward recovery goals.

During nesting season, March 15 to September 15, seventeen miles of the Oregon Coast has restricted access to the dry sand portion of the beach. The wet sand is open to beach users year-round.

“Beach visitors were generally positive when approached about the plovers this season,” said Cindy Burns, a wildlife biologist with the Forest Service in Florence. “Once people understand the importance of providing a place for this threatened shorebird to nest in peace, most are willing to comply with the beach restrictions.”

Snowy plovers are small, pale-colored shorebirds with dark patches on either side of the upper breast. The birds prefer coastal sand spits, dune-backed beaches, beaches at creek and river mouths and salt pans at lagoons and estuaries. 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.

The coastal population of snowy plovers, which breeds along the Pacific coast from southern Washington to southern Baja California in Mexico, was listed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as “threatened” in 1993 under the federal Endangered Species Act. In Oregon, the inland population and the coastal population are listed collectively as a threatened species. They are considered a species of concern in California, and a threatened species in Washington.

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 545 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resources offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign and Native American tribal governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.