

ABUNDANCE AND PRODUCTIVITY ESTIMATES – 2010 UPDATE ATLANTIC COAST PIPING PLOVER POPULATION

Population monitoring on the breeding grounds has been an integral part of the recovery program for Atlantic Coast piping plovers since 1986, and annual coastwide censuses have tracked local and regional progress toward recovery.

Abundance

Abundance of Atlantic Coast piping plovers is reported as numbers of breeding pairs, i.e. adult pairs that exhibited sustained (≥ 2 weeks) territorial or courtship behavior at a site or were observed with nests or unfledged chicks (USFWS 1996). Annual estimates of breeding pairs of Atlantic Coast piping plovers are based on multiple surveys of almost all breeding habitat, including many currently unoccupied sites. Sites that cannot be monitored repeatedly in May and June (primarily sites with few pairs or inconsistent occupancy) are surveyed at least once during a standard nine-day count period (Hecht and Melvin 2009).

The 2010 Atlantic Coast piping plover population estimate was 1,782 pairs, more than double the 1986 estimate of 790 pairs (Table 1). Discounting apparent increases in New York, New Jersey, and North Carolina between 1986 and 1989, which likely were due in part to increased census effort (USFWS 1996), the population posted a net increase of 86% between 1989 and 2010. The largest net population increase between 1989 and 2010 has occurred in New England (266%), followed by New York-New Jersey (56%). In the Southern recovery unit, net growth between 1989 and 2010 was 54%, but almost all of this increase occurred in two years, 2003-2005. The Eastern Canada population has fluctuated from year to year, with increases often quickly eroded in subsequent years.

The uneven pattern of population growth among recovery units has also been accompanied by periodic declines in both overall and regional populations. Most recently, the total Atlantic Coast population estimate attained 1,890 pairs in 2007 before declining 6% to 1,782 pairs in 2010. Decreases during this period occurred in all recovery units except New England, where the population grew 7% between 2007 and 2010. Abundance in both the Eastern Canada and New York-New Jersey recovery units declined 15%, while the Southern recovery unit population experienced an 8% net decrease. Other periodic regional declines include decreases of 21% in the Eastern Canada population in just three years (2002-2005) and 68% in the southern half of the Southern recovery unit during the seven years (1995-2001). The 64% decline in the Maine population between 2002 and 2008, from 66 pairs to 24 pairs, followed only a few years of decreased productivity and provides another example of the continuing risk of rapid and precipitous reversals in population growth. Thus, optimism about progress towards recovery should be tempered by observed geographic and temporal variability in population growth.

Productivity

Atlantic Coast piping plover productivity is reported as number of chicks fledged per breeding pair. For purposes of measuring productivity, chicks are counted as fledged if they survived to 25 days of age or were seen flying, whichever occurred first. We calculate productivity by dividing the number of fledged chicks by the number of pairs that were monitored and for which number of fledglings could be determined. This includes both successful pairs and pairs that fledged no chicks because they failed to nest or because no eggs hatched or no chicks survived to fledging. Accurate assessment of productivity is facilitated by repeated visits to nesting beaches to monitor individual nests and broods during May, June, July and, if necessary, August.

Annual productivity estimates, 1987-2010, are summarized by recovery unit and state in Table 2. In 2009, storm tides, as well as continuing threats from predation and human disturbance, contributed to the

lowest overall U.S. average productivity (1.03 chicks/pair) since Endangered Species Act listing and the subsequent drop in abundance between 2009 and 2010. Overall productivity rebounded in 2010 (1.27 chicks/pair in the U.S. portion of the Atlantic range), but remained low in New York (0.79 chicks/pair). Productivity in 2010 was 1.59 chicks/pair in Eastern Canada, 1.56 chicks/pair in New England, 1.39 chicks per pair in the New Jersey part of the New York-New Jersey recovery unit, and 1.20 chicks/pair in the Southern recovery unit.

Hecht and Melvin (2009) evaluated latitudinal trends in Atlantic Coast piping plover productivity and relationships between productivity and population growth. Overall productivity for the Atlantic Coast population 1989-2006 was 1.35 chicks fledged per pair (annual range = 1.16-1.54), and overall productivity within recovery units decreased with decreasing latitude: Eastern Canada = 1.61, New England = 1.44, New York-New Jersey = 1.18, and Southern = 1.19 (Hecht and Melvin 2009). Within recovery units, annual productivity was variable and showed no sustained trends. There were significant, positive relationships between productivity and population growth in the subsequent year for each of the three U.S. recovery units, but not for Eastern Canada. Regression analysis indicated a latitudinal trend in predictions of annual productivity needed to support stationary populations within recovery units, increasing from 0.93 chicks fledged per pair in the Southern unit to 1.44 in Eastern Canada. Relatively small coefficients of determination ($r^2 = 0.09-0.59$) for the relationships between annual productivity and population increases in the subsequent year indicate that other factors, most likely annual survival rates of both adults and fledged chicks, also had important influences on population growth rates.

The estimate of productivity needed to maintain a stationary population within New England, 1.21 chicks fledged per pair, based on regression analysis (Hecht and Melvin 2009), is similar to the value of 1.24 that was estimated through population modeling based on survival estimates derived from 1985-1988 banding studies in Massachusetts (Melvin and Gibbs 1996). Regression analysis estimated productivity of 1.44 chicks fledged per pair needed to maintain a stationary population in eastern Canada (Hecht and Melvin 2009), while Calvert et al. (2006) estimated 1.63 chicks per pair for eastern Canada exclusive of southern Nova Scotia, based on estimates of survival derived from 1998-2004 banding studies.

References Cited

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Table 1. Estimated abundance of breeding pairs of Atlantic Coast piping plovers, 1986 – 2010

State/RECOVERY UNIT	Pairs																								
	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Maine	15	12	20	16	17	18	24	32	35	40	60	47	60	56	50	55	66	61	55	49	40	35	24	27	30
New Hampshire												5	5	6	6	7	7	7	4	3	3	3	3	5	4
Massachusetts	139	126	134	137	140	160	213	289	352	441	454	483	495	501	496	495	538	511	488	467	482	558	566	593	591
Rhode Island	10	17	19	19	28	26	20	31	32	40	50	51	46	39	49	52	58	71	70	69	72	73	77	84	85
Connecticut	20	24	27	34	43	36	40	24	30	31	26	26	21	22	22	32	31	37	40	34	37	36	41	44	43
NEW ENGLAND	184	179	200	206	228	240	297	376	449	552	590	612	627	624	623	641	700	687	657	622	634	705	711	753	753
New York	106	135	172	191	197	191	187	193	209	249	256	256	245	243	289	309	369	386	384	374	422	457	443	437	390
New Jersey	102	93	105	128	126	126	134	127	124	132	127	115	93	107	112	122	138	144	135	111	116	129	111	105	108
NY-NJ	208	228	277	319	323	317	321	320	333	381	383	371	338	350	401	431	507	530	519	485	538	586	554	542	498
Delaware	8	7	3	3	6	5	2	2	4	5	6	4	6	4	3	6	6	6	7	8	9	9	10	10	9
Maryland	17	23	25	20	14	17	24	19	32	44	61	60	56	58	60	60	60	59	66	63	64	64	49	45	44
Virginia	100	100	103	121	125	131	97	106	96	118	87	88	95	89	96	119	120	114	152	192	202	199	208	193	192
North Carolina	30	30	40	55	55	40	49	53	54	50	35	52	46	31	24	23	23	24	20	37	46	61	64	54	61
South Carolina	3		0		1	1		1			0					0						0			
SOUTHERN	158	160	171	199	201	194	172	181	186	217	189	204	203	182	183	208	209	203	245	300	321	333	331	302	306
U.S. TOTAL	550	567	648	724	752	751	790	877	968	1150	1162	1187	1168	1156	1207	1280	1416	1420	1421	1407	1493	1624	1596	1597	1557
EASTERN CANADA*	240	223	238	233	230	252	223	223	194	200	202	199	211	236	230	250	274	256	237	217	256	266	253	252	225
ATLANTIC COAST TOTAL	790	790	886	957	982	1003	1013	1100	1162	1350	1364	1386	1379	1392	1437	1530	1690	1676	1658	1624	1749	1890	1849	1849	1782

* includes 1-5 pairs on the French Islands of St. Pierre and Miquelon, reported by CWS

Table 2. Estimated productivity of Atlantic Coast piping plovers, 1987 – 2010

State/RECOVERY UNIT	Chicks fledged/pair																							
	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Maine	1.75	0.75	2.38	1.53	2.50	2.00	2.38	2.00	2.38	1.63	1.98	1.47	1.63	1.60	1.98	1.39	1.28	1.45	0.55	1.35	1.06	1.75	1.70	1.63
New Hampshire											0.60	2.40	2.67	2.33	2.14	0.14	1.00	1.00	0.00	0.67	0.33	2.00	0.40	1.50
Massachusetts	1.10	1.29	1.59	1.38	1.72	2.03	1.92	1.81	1.62	1.35	1.33	1.50	1.60	1.09	1.49	1.14	1.26	1.38	1.14	1.33	1.25	1.41	0.91	1.50
Rhode Island	1.12	1.58	1.47	0.88	0.77	1.55	1.80	2.00	1.68	1.56	1.34	1.13	1.79	1.20	1.50	1.95	1.03	1.50	1.43	1.03	1.48	1.68	1.46	1.76
Connecticut	1.29	1.70	1.79	1.63	1.39	1.45	0.38	1.47	1.35	1.31	1.69	1.05	1.45	1.86	1.22	1.87	1.30	1.35	1.62	2.14	1.92	2.49	1.68	1.91
NEW ENGLAND	1.19	1.32	1.68	1.38	1.62	1.91	1.85	1.81	1.67	1.40	1.39	1.46	1.62	1.18	1.53	1.26	1.24	1.40	1.15	1.34	1.30	1.51	1.04	1.56
New York	0.90	1.24	1.02	0.80	1.09	0.98	1.24	1.34	0.97	1.14	1.36	1.09	1.35	1.11	1.27	1.62	1.15	1.46	1.44	1.55	1.15	1.21	0.93	0.79
New Jersey	0.85	0.94	1.12	0.93	0.98	1.07	0.93	1.16	0.98	1.00	0.39	1.09	1.34	1.40	1.29	1.17	0.92	0.61	0.77	0.84	0.67	0.64	1.05	1.39
NY-NJ	0.86	1.03	1.08	0.88	1.04	1.02	1.08	1.25	0.97	1.07	1.02	1.09	1.35	1.19	1.28	1.49	1.07	1.23	1.28	1.36	1.03	1.10	0.96	0.92
Delaware		0.00	2.33	2.00	1.60	1.00	0.50	2.50	2.00	0.50	1.00	0.83	1.50	1.67	1.50	1.17	2.33	1.14	1.50	1.44	1.33	0.30	1.30	1.56
Maryland	1.17	0.52	0.90	0.79	0.41	1.00	1.79	2.41	1.73	1.49	1.02	1.30	1.09	0.80	0.92	1.85	1.56	1.86	1.25	1.06	0.78	0.41	1.42	1.09
Virginia		1.02	1.16	0.65	0.88	0.59	1.45	1.66	1.00	1.54	0.71	1.01	1.21	1.42	1.52	1.19	1.90	2.23	1.52	1.19	1.16	0.87	1.19	1.35
North Carolina			0.59	0.43	0.07	0.41	0.74	0.36	0.45	0.86	0.23	0.61	0.48	0.54	0.50	0.17	0.46	0.65	0.92	0.87	0.26	0.30	0.70	0.77
SOUTHERN	1.17	0.85	0.88	0.72	0.68	0.62	1.18	1.37	1.05	1.34	0.68	0.99	1.04	1.09	1.22	1.27	1.63	1.95	1.38	1.12	0.92	0.67	1.14	1.20
U.S. average	1.04	1.11	1.28	1.06	1.22	1.35	1.47	1.56	1.35	1.30	1.16	1.27	1.45	1.17	1.40	1.34	1.24	1.43	1.24	1.30	1.13	1.19	1.03	1.27
EASTERN CANADA*		1.65	1.58	1.62	1.07	1.55	0.69	1.25	1.69	1.72	2.10	1.84	1.74	1.47	1.77	1.18	1.62	1.93	1.82	1.82	1.14	1.47	1.22	1.59

* includes St. Pierre and Miquelon, reported by CWS