

California State Parks
Western Snowy Plover Management
2002 Systemwide Annual Report Overview
3-5-03

Background

- About one half of the Pacific coast breeding population of the WSP (4,000 birds) nest in the United States, the remainder on the coast of Mexico.
- About 1,800 birds (90%) of the birds nesting in the United States nest on the coastline of California.
- 33% of the 133 important “recovery locations” for WSP in California, as identified in the draft (May 2001) USFWS Recovery Plan, include lands in 45 State Park System units managed by the Department.
- 30 of the 45 State Park System units are in “recovery locations” where goals have been established in the Recovery Plan for breeding bird numbers. The remaining 15 units are in recovery locations that only provide winter habitat or are locations where breeding goals have not yet been established.

Highlights for 2002

- DPR’s WSP Systemwide Management Guidelines published and distributed to field offices (March).
- Headquarters conducts a special management meeting for all DPR coastal superintendents in June. The purpose was to provide training on WSP ecology, regulatory issues, previously distributed WSP management guidelines, and to clarify expected management actions. Directive given to provide the level of protection to nesting areas needed to avoid disturbance or loss of WSP from park operations and visitor use.
- The Department increases public and park staff awareness of the importance and need to protect plover nesting habitat.

Produce and distribute park brochures on WSP informing the public of the status of WSP, explaining protection needs and special rules and regulations. 110,000 (standard park brochure, color 4-fold) and 220,000 (B/W, 3-fold)

Produce WSP field training program and provide training to field staff in units with WSP habitat, includes several hundred employees.

Conduct WSP conservation outreach in local communities.

- The Department increases efforts to delineate nest areas and restrict public access and uses known to adversely impact nesting. Includes interpretive and warning signs, symbolic fence (single line strung between temporary stakes) and fenced enclosures, as appropriate, to protect nesting areas.
- The Department conducts and is involved in special studies/surveys on visitor use and potential WSP disturbance.
- Additional restrictions are imposed on beach fires, camping, fireworks and other activities known to impact nesting activity in sensitive areas.
- Additional restrictions on unleashed and leashed dog in important WSP habitat. 113 miles (45 %) of state park coastline are now closed to dog use - 30 miles of which due to recent actions needed to protect important WSP habitat. (134 miles of state park coastline remains open to dog use.)
- Increased enforcement of regulations aimed at protecting plover habitat. 2,350 enforcement contacts made for dog violations in 2002 (45% increase over 2001). 300 citations given (52% increase over 2001).
- Increased predator control efforts where ecologically appropriate.
- 30 State Park System units now have established WSP management programs that include nest monitoring activity and special nest area protection (warning and interpretive signs and brochures, staff WSP orientation and training, visitor interpretation and outreach, enforcement, symbolic fencing, fencing, nest enclosures, and predator control, as appropriate). WSP winter surveys are conducted in these units as well as others.
- Nests were reported from 16 units managed by the Department during the 2002 breeding season.

Major Results

- 440 nests total nests were reported in state park units in 2002. Of which, 226 (51%) were known to be successful in hatching at least one egg. (Note: females typically lay 3 eggs per nest, and may nest 3 or 4 times during the breeding season, and more if initial clutches are lost.) A total of 457 chicks were reported.
- Of the 440 nests reported:

226 nests (51%) were in units in San Luis Obispo County

95 (42%) of these nests were successful. The most successful of these nests were in Oceano Dunes SVRA, where 71% of the 35 nests were successful in hatching 62 chicks. 35 (56%) of these chicks were known to have fledged (reaching flying age, about 28-33 days from hatching). The number of nest reported at Oceano Dunes was similar to that of last year (33 nests) but the number of chicks fledged was much higher in 2002 (35 fledglings) than in 2001 (3 fledglings).

Other park units in this area with nesting included Montana de Oro SP (109 nests, with 30 known to be successful), Estero Bay/Villa Creek Beach property (44 nests, 25 successful), and Morro Strand SB (37 nests, 14 successful. Information on nesting at Montana de Oro SP is not as reliable as for other monitored areas due to the frequency of monitoring, only once a week, and inherent difficulties of surveying the 4-mile long sand spit. However, survey information did reveal a significant reduction in clutch loss due to predation in 2002 (35%) compared to 2001 figures of 70%. The reduction is considered to be the result of predator control initiated during the 2002 nesting season. Skunk and red fox, a non-native predator, were removed from the nesting area. Both of these animals are known from other studies to be major plover nest predators.

155 nests (35%) were in units in Santa Cruz and Monterey Counties.

98 (63%) of these nests were successful and hatched 254 chicks. 94 chicks (37%) were reported to have fledged. Causes of clutch loss were reported as predators (45%) - mostly ravens, crows and gulls, high wind or tide damage (23%), and 32% from abandonment or unknown causes, including possible human related disturbances.

The Santa Cruz/Monterey Bay area has the longest record of plover monitoring and protection in the state, dating back to the mid-1980s with the Point Reyes Bird Observatory. Since then, State Parks and USFWS have become increasingly involved in cooperative monitoring and management activities in the study area which includes State Parks System units, other state lands, federal property and other lands. The area extends from Waddell Creek (Big Basin Redwoods SP) in the north to the City of Monterey in the south. Most nesting habitat lies along the extensive sandy beaches within the bay. A few pocket beaches north of the City of Santa Cruz support some nesting. Intensive monitoring efforts in this area provides a comprehensive assessment of nesting activity and results. Adult WSP and their chicks are tagged with identifying leg bands (necessary for the most reliable information on numbers of

chicks hatched and their fate. PRBO prepares and publishes annual reports on nesting activities for the study area.

The 155 nests on State Park System lands in this region are 49% of the total nests reported in the study area in 2002 (319).

Nest success on non-DPR lands in the study area was 81%, compared to 63% on DPR lands. Fledgling success on non-DPR lands was 34%, slightly less than the 37% on DPR lands.

A total of 289 nesting adults were reported in the study area in 2002, a 26% increase over 2001 and 91% of goal for the area established in the draft recovery plan.

43 nests (10%) were in Silver Strand SB and Border Field SP in San Diego County. 12 (50 %) of the 24 nests in Silver Strand were successful in producing 62 chicks. However, heavy predation by gull-billed terns, only 7 chicks (11%) are known to have fledged. At Border Field, 15 (79%) of the 19 nests reported were successful. Of the 41 chicks known to have been produced, 6-10 chicks (15-24%) were reported to have fledged.

The remaining 16 nests reported in the State Park System were from Little River SB (10 nests, 6 chicks fledged), Half Moon Bay SB (4 nests, 6 chicks fledged), and McGrath SB (2 nests, 4 chicks)