

# Western Snowy Plover in Oregon

## Community Creates Recovery

by Laura Todd

“Heroes are people who say: ‘This is my community, and it’s my responsibility to make it better.’”  
– Tom McCall, Governor of Oregon  
1967–1975

Like many other successful conservation stories, the story of the western snowy plover (*Charadrius alexandrinus nivosus*) in Oregon is one of a vanishing bird brought back from the brink by a community committed to conserving the bird and its beach habitat. From just 35 adult plovers in 1992, the Oregon coast population of the plover has rebounded to a record 214 adults and 168 fledglings in 2011.

As Oregon nears its recovery goals, success comes from the dedication of committed agencies, biologists, and a public that respectfully uses Oregon beaches.

The western snowy plover was listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act in 1993 as a result of habitat lost to invasive beach grass, development, and heavy beach use, as well as predation. Since this time, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) and Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife have had tremendous support from the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and Bureau of Land Management

(BLM), and more recently, the Corps of Engineers and the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department (OPRD), in managing plover habitat. Working with the Institute for Natural Resources’ Oregon Biodiversity Information Center (ORBIC) and USDA’s Wildlife Services (USDA-WS), a strong Interagency Working Group was formed to address habitat needs and threats to the bird, establish priorities, and coordinate management across these land ownerships.

In an effort to restore plover habitat, land management agencies and private landowners have committed to invasive

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Western snowy plovers were seen on Nestucca Spit this winter for the first time since 1984.. Photo Credit: David Smith



non-native beach grass removal and maintenance of the sparsely vegetated dune habitats these small shorebirds use for nesting. Initial restoration efforts involve heavy equipment that scrapes the beach grass and creates the shallowly sloped dunes that plovers prefer. Follow-up treatments such as hand-pulling, spot herbicide treatment, disking and plowing, or bulldozing are often needed to combat regrowth. Habitat restoration and maintenance is an ongoing effort to adapt and implement effective techniques to combat invasive beachgrass and continues to be the foundation of plover management in Oregon.

Since West Coast beaches are extremely popular and attract many visitors from March through September – the period in which plovers breed and nest – management approaches have been developed to help minimize disturbance. The USFS, BLM, and OPRD mark nesting areas with signs, while rangers and volunteers work to educate visitors about plovers and encourage responsible beach use, such as walking on the wet sand in plover nesting areas, keeping dogs away from nesting areas, and avoiding roped areas. Law enforcement at the local, state, and federal level provides assistance when informal reminders prove insufficient. Semi-annual law enforcement coordination workshops help ensure consistency and clarify rules and roles for all involved.

After 13 years of conservation efforts, productivity and survival were still inadequate for recovery, and many nests and chicks were still being lost to predation, primarily by crows and ravens. Early efforts to reduce predatory losses included predator exclosures over nests, removal of predator-attracting trash and carcasses from nesting areas, and the addition of oyster shell hash to provide camouflage in nesting areas. When these efforts



**Plover researchers from Oregon Biodiversity Information Center monitor nests and broods, band plovers, and erect predator exclosures to protect unhatched nests.** Photo Credit: ORBIC

proved insufficient, USDA-WS implemented an integrated predator management that focused on removing only those predators that target plovers. The success of this effort was immediate and dramatic—plover numbers nearly doubled, and even during years where adverse weather conditions resulted in poor winter survival, productivity goals have either been met or exceeded.

The cornerstone in evaluating Oregon's plover recovery program has been 21 years of monitoring provided by ORBIC. Through this annual monitoring, the Service is able to determine the number of adult birds in Oregon, the number of nests laid, and the success of those nests.

To ensure the plover conservation efforts continues into the future, OPRD completed a Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) in 2010. The plan

protects existing sites, identifies areas for future plover nesting, and ensures conservation of plovers in Oregon for the next 25 years, while still allowing recreation on Oregon's beautiful beaches. To synchronize federal management with the HCP requirements, a Memorandum of Understanding has been signed to ensure state and federal agencies work together to implement the HCP and maintain consistent management across jurisdictional boundaries.

The courage, conviction, and commitment needed to recover species can be daunting, but these traits can also provide extraordinary results. The recovery of western snowy plovers is just one example of the power of community. This success story is entirely the product of the community that manages, recreates, and loves the Oregon coast.

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**Agency personnel and volunteers explain plover biology and responsible beach use to visitors throughout the nesting season.** USFWS

