

NEWS RELEASE

**U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
134 Union Boulevard
Lakewood, Colorado 80228**

February 12, 1999

Karen Gleason 303-236-7905
Diane Katzenberger 303-236-7905
Bob Leachman 970-243-2778
Sharon Rose 303-236-7905

SERVICES PROPOSES TO LIST MOUNTAIN PLOVER AS THREATENED

The U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service will propose to list the mountain plover, on Tuesday February 16, 1999, a native bird of short-grass prairie and shrub-steppe landscapes, as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. The Service invites public comments on this proposal until April 17, 1999.

A species is designated as threatened when it is likely to become endangered within the foreseeable future throughout all or a significant portion of its range.

"The population of mountain plovers has declined by more than 50 percent since 1966 to fewer than 10,000 birds," said Ralph Morgenweck, the Service's director for the Mountain-Prairie region. "The problems faced by the mountain plover are common to other species that share our nation's short-grass prairies and a warning sign to us that this habitat is in trouble."

The decline of mountain plovers likely is due to a combination of factors, including the replacement of grasslands by agricultural and urban areas and the decline of prairie dogs, which provide ideal conditions for the mountain plover. Biologists are trying to determine if spring tilling and planting on the drylands of southern Wyoming, eastern Colorado, southwestern Kansas and northwestern Oklahoma may also be a factor in the species' decline. Mountain plovers have been observed nesting on cultivated land in these areas, and nests may be destroyed or abandoned during planting season. Service biologists will be working with landowners to develop recommendations as to how land uses can be modified, if necessary, to benefit both farmers and mountain plovers. The Service will soon be scheduling workshops with agricultural producers within the mountain plover breeding range. Biologists are also studying whether exposure to pesticides, especially in wintering habitat, is a possible factor in the species' decline.

If the Service lists the mountain plover, it should not have an impact on grazing. Grazing can be beneficial to mountain plovers by maintaining needed short-grass habitat. In fact, plovers evolved in association with buffalo and other grazing animals.

Mountain plovers are approximately 7 inches tall, or about the size of the more commonly seen killdeer. Predominantly light brown in color with an even lighter colored breast, these birds lack the contrasting dark breast belt common to many other plovers. Unlike other plovers, mountain plovers are not found near water or wetlands, favoring instead short grasslands and barren ground where they can easily find insects, the mainstay of their diet. During the breeding season, it has a distinct black cap and a thin black line between the bill and eye.

Plovers breed and nest across a widely distributed area, from Montana south to Texas, with most occurring in Colorado, Montana, and Wyoming; fewer breeding birds occur in Arizona, Kansas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas, and Utah. Wintering mountain plovers are most numerous in California; fewer birds winter in Arizona, Texas, and Mexico.

Grassland birds as a whole are experiencing the highest rate of decline among bird groups, with mountain plover populations declining the most of any grassland bird. The decline of this species, as well as other prairie natives, is indicative of the overall reduction and degradation of grassland ecosystems, which provide habitat for many birds, mammals, and fish.

Comments and supporting materials should be submitted to the Assistant Field Supervisor, U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 764 Horizon Drive, South Annex A, Grand Junction, Colorado 81506-3946.

A complete description of the Service's proposal to list the mountain plover as threatened was published in the Federal Register on February 16, 1999.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish and wildlife and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 93-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System comprised of more than 500 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands, and other special management areas. It also operates 66 national fish hatcheries and 78 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 governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

