

PROPOSAL TO LIST THE MOUNTAIN PLOVER  
AS A THREATENED SPECIES

**FACT SHEET**

February 1999

**DESCRIPTION:** An endemic bird of the short-grass prairie and shrub-steppe landscape. The mountain plover is about 7 inches tall, about the size of a killdeer, but lacks the breast belt common to the killdeer and other plovers. During the breeding season, the mountain plover has a distinct black cap and thin black line between eye and bill. Diet is 95 percent insects.

**STATUS:** Current population less than 10,000 and has declined by 50 percent since 1966, according to 30 years of Breeding Bird Survey data, which is the highest rate of decline of any other grassland bird. The mountain plover is threatened by certain practices of plowing, sodbusting, and range management; oil and gas activities; and prairie dog control. Pesticides may also affect the population of the bird.

**DISTRIBUTION:**

*Breeding:* In order of abundance - Colorado, Montana, Wyoming, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Kansas, Utah, Nebraska, Texas. Most breeding plovers occur in Colorado, Montana and Wyoming; many fewer in the other states. Distribution in Colorado is primarily east of the continental divide. Historically, the Pawnee National Grassland in Colorado was considered the breeding stronghold in the state, and perhaps the entire population. New breeding sites found since 1995 suggest that the plover may be more widely distributed in Colorado than previously known. Plovers occupy breeding range from about April 1 to August 1.

*Wintering:* Approximately 90 percent of the mountain plovers spend the winter in California, primarily at two areas: 1) the Central Valley from Sacramento south to Bakersfield and west of Highway 99, and 2) the Imperial Valley. Mountain plovers are also seen during the winter in Arizona, Texas, and Mexico. Plovers occupy winter sites in California from mid-October to mid-March.

**HABITAT:**

*Breeding:* Mountain plovers evolved on grasslands that were once inhabited by bison, pronghorn, and numerous burrowing rodents. Current research shows breeding habitat requirements are typically sites where the vegetation is less than 10 cm in height, has at least 30 percent bare ground, a conspicuous object such as a manure pile, clump of forbs, or rock nearby, and less than 5 percent slope. Nest sites are also usually heavily grazed by domestic livestock or prairie dogs. Vegetation commonly found at Colorado nest sites consists of blue grama, buffalo grass, and

pricklypear cactus. Taller vegetation or other structure (e.g. fence post) may be sought by chicks for shade. Mountain plovers are rarely near water.

**The distribution of the Mountain Plover. The breeding population in Davis Mtns., TX, may not migrate. The northern limits of the winter range in Mexico are uncertain.**

*Wintering:* Winter habitat characteristics are very similar to those at breeding sites, i.e., mountain plovers are found on sites with short vegetation, bare ground, which are commonly heavily grazed. In California, habitat that is commonly used by the federally listed giant kangaroo rat and blunt-nosed leopard lizard may also be used by mountain plovers. Mountain plovers also occur on cultivated lands and sod farms. However, research in the San Joaquin, California has determined that while mountain plovers are commonly seen on agricultural lands, they actually prefer the remaining natural landscapes to the agricultural lands.

**HABITAT MODIFICATION TECHNIQUES:** Mountain plovers are attracted to sites that are disturbed by grazing and burning. Consequently, mountain plovers are found on sites that are heavily grazed, have been burned to manipulate the vegetative structure and composition, or that have been cultivated in the spring. Mountain plovers try to nest on cultivated lands in Colorado, Oklahoma, and Kansas, but many times are unsuccessful. The most recent data shows that the type of implement used for tillage and the timing of tillage are important factors in mountain plover survival on cultivated lands. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologists will be working together with local landowners in developing recommendations as to how different cultivation practices may need to be looked at, and possibly modified, to benefit plovers and landowners.

**CONSERVATION NEEDS:** The mountain plover is a species that can benefit from short-grass grazing management practices, some changes in cultivation practices, and reduction of prairie dog control measures. While these practices may not be possible at all sites throughout their range, there are mechanisms available that may promote their adoption on public lands and private lands. The Service will begin to implement land management practices on national wildlife refuges in California and Montana to enhance winter and breeding habitat. The Service will also seek the cooperation of public land agencies to enhance opportunities to reverse the declining trend on public lands. On private lands, the Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program can be used to encourage farming practices that will benefit mountain plover habitat. The Conservation Reserve Program also offers incentives to farmers for managing habitat of declining species.

