

Mountain Plover Questions and Answers

February 1999

1. What does the recent proposal to list the mountain plover as a threatened species mean?

The proposal means that the Fish and Wildlife Service, after thoroughly examining the best scientific information available, believes that the mountain plover is likely to become endangered in the foreseeable future throughout all or a significant portion of its range unless actions are taken now to reverse the decline in population.

While there is not an immediate threat of extinction, several factors were identified that may have caused the decline, and which are likely to continue in the future. Unless these problems are solved, the mountain plover is likely to disappear at some currently occupied sites, which could increase the likelihood of extinction throughout its range.

2. What is the difference between a threatened and an endangered species listing?

By definition, an endangered species is one that is in immediate danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range; a threatened species is one that is likely to become endangered within the foreseeable future throughout all or a portion of its range. Protections under the Act are generally the same for threatened and endangered species. However, for threatened species, special rules can be developed which allow for greater flexibility in land use.

3. Why is the mountain plover important?

Like canaries in coal mines, the mountain plover and other native species are indicators of the health of native prairies. The decline of the mountain plover and its habitat is an early warning that the replacement of many native grasslands with urban development, as well as some specific grazing and farming practices, are hindering the survival of the short-grass prairie.

The mountain plover is one of only nine birds unique to the short-grass prairie environment. It is about the size of a killdeer, but unlike other plovers, it is not found near water. The mountain plover is a full species, and there are no recognized sub-species.

As a group, short-grass prairie bird populations are declining more rapidly than other birds. Mountain plovers are declining faster than other grassland birds. Breeding Bird Survey trends from 1966 to 1996 document a population decline of over 50 percent.

Studies have shown that the American people desire to maintain a natural diversity of plants and animals nationwide.

4. Extinctions of animals have occurred since the beginning of time; therefore, why should any effort be made to protect this species?

Human activities have greatly sped up the rate of species extinction beyond what is caused by natural forces. With accelerating destruction of natural habitats and extinction of species, we are eliminating forever the chance of new discoveries which may benefit all of us. For example, on any given day, Americans use hundreds of drugs, foods, and other products that owe their existence to native plants and animals.

5. What has caused the decline in the mountain plover?

The decline in population is due to a combination of factors --native grasslands being replaced by agriculture and urban development; early spring plowing and planting on dryland nesting sites; grazing practices that encourage taller grasses and forbs; and loss of prairie dogs and other burrowing rodents.

While mountain plovers are commonly found attempting to breed on plowed land in several states, surveys have found that successful nesting is interrupted by subsequent planting and crop growing before nesting is completed. This may create a "reproductive sink" for the species, where mortality on the cultivated lands is greater than the number of birds produced. In addition, livestock grazing practices that encourage taller grasses and forbs eliminate mountain plover habitat.

Mountain plovers share habitat with prairie dogs at many core breeding sites, and with kangaroo rats on winter habitat in California. But with a great number of prairie dogs eliminated throughout their range, mountain plover habitat has also been severely restricted.

6. Are pesticides a problem for the mountain plover?

Possibly, but the data about pesticides is not conclusive. We do know that mountain plovers are exposed to pesticides on their winter habitat in the U.S.; information about pesticide use in Mexico is not available. Pesticides may also pose a potential threat on breeding grounds during the years when pesticides are used to control grasshopper infestation..

7. What effect would a listing of the mountain plover have on pesticide uses?

The Environmental Protection Agency regulates the registration of pesticides and is required to comply with the Endangered Species Act. Consequently, if the bird is listed, the Service will work with the EPA to reduce or eliminate any adverse impacts and to ensure that label restrictions alert the public of potential effects of pesticide use.

8. Are there any current efforts to protect the mountain plover?

Yes. The Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management have used prescribed burning to maintain the needed short-grass habitat at both breeding and wintering sites. The use of fire promotes short-grass habitat that attracts mountain plovers to sites that would otherwise not

provide suitable breeding or wintering habitat. The Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management have also incorporated some time-of-year and spatial buffers to protect nesting mountain plovers when granting leases for oil and gas development. The Fish and Wildlife Service and the Colorado Division of Wildlife are using a Memorandum of Agreement to pursue conservation of the mountain plover in Colorado. Many state and federal agencies and private groups have conducted surveys in recent years to better describe the distribution of the mountain plover and the potential threats to its survival. Many states have designated the mountain plover as a species of special concern to promote attention to its conservation needs.

9. If the mountain plover is listed, what impact will this have on prairie dog control?

Prairie dogs can create mountain plover habitat, and prairie dog towns are now considered some of the best remaining breeding habitat in Montana and Colorado. If mountain plovers were known to successfully nest on prairie dog towns, and if eradication of prairie dogs would likely eliminate the mountain plovers, prairie dog control would be examined on a project-by-project basis to determine if such measures would be allowed at those sites where mountain plovers were documented nesting in prairie dog towns.

10. Would farmers be allowed to plow and plant their fields if the mountain plover is listed?

Biologists are working with landowners in developing recommendations as to how different cultivation practices may need to be looked at and possibly modified to benefit both landowners and mountain plovers. More information is needed as to how these practices affect the plover. The Service will be holding workshops to coordinate efforts with local landowners and develop recommendations as to possible changes in land uses that will benefit both plovers and landowners.

11. Doesn't the government prosecute landowners if their actions harm endangered species?

There is a myth that the government has prosecuted hundreds of thousands of landowners for things they did on private land. The reality is that the General Accounting Office reported that between fiscal years 1988 and 1993, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service asked the court only four times to stop or delay activities harming endangered species on non-federal lands (Beattie 1995).

12. Will the Fish and Wildlife Service regulate grazing if the mountain plover is listed?

No. Grazing can be very beneficial to mountain plovers by maintaining needed short-grass habitat. The Service is convinced that grazing practices can be managed to benefit both livestock and mountain plovers.

Published literature documents that mountain plovers often inhabit heavily grazed sites. The Service is beginning to meet with ranchers to come up with solutions for managing both domestic livestock and habitat for mountain plovers, which may help to reverse the species declining trend.

13. How would a listing of the mountain plover affect activities authorized by the Natural Resources Conservation Service?

The Natural Resources Conservation Service administers many programs to benefit food production on private lands throughout the range of the mountain plover. Programs authorized by the NRCS that are proposed in areas occupied by the mountain plover will require compliance with Endangered Species Act.

For example, if the NRCS is reviewing a farm plan, and mountain plovers are known to use cultivated fields on the farm, the Fish and Wildlife Service would work with NRCS and the landowner in recommending alternative farming techniques be implemented to minimize the risk of "taking" mountain plovers. Consequently, it is likely that the NRCS would need to review its individual programs to ensure compliance with the Act.

14. How does the Conservation Reserve Program fit into the habitat needs of the mountain plover?

The implementation of the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) currently did not provide nesting habitat for mountain plovers. The NRCS in Colorado has recently designated the mountain plover as a species eligible for credit in CRP programs chosen by farmers, and is alerting farmers in Colorado to mountain plover management needs. Planting native warm-season grasses (such as buffalo/blue grama) may benefit mountain plovers by restoring historic vegetative characteristics. The Service will continue to work with the NRCS to see if other nest site requirements can also be created on CRP lands by habitat manipulation. CRP lands planted with native grass mixtures adjacent to existing mountain plover nesting areas are likely to contribute the most to their conservation. CRP lands established with nonnative grass species have little value for the mountain plover. Even though contract renewal may limit the number of years the CRP lands may be managed for mountain plovers, opportunities to manage CRP even for a short time could help define effective conservation strategies.

15. What about critical habitat?

By law, the Fish and Wildlife Service must, to the maximum extent prudent and determinable, designate critical habitat for a species at the time of its listing as endangered or threatened. The Service is proposing in the rule that critical habitat for the mountain plover is not prudent, and therefore would not be designated.

The Service will review the comments received on the proposal and judge whether new information argues that designation of critical habitat should be considered. If it is determined that critical habitat does warrant designation, the Service will publish a separate rule proposing designation following the required public input and economic analysis.

16. In terms of the Endangered Species Act, what happens now?

With the proposal to list the mountain plover, the Service asks the public, including local landowners, scientists, and other agencies, for comments on the proposed rule for 60 days, and

will conduct public hearings at locations requested by the public. Following analysis of the comments received in writing or at the public hearings, the Service would either prepare a final rule to list the species, or withdraw the proposed rule if the biological information no longer supported the listing.

For information specifically about the proposed listing of the mountain plover, please contact:

**U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Colorado Ecological Services Office
764 Horizon Drive, South Annex A
Grand Junction, Colorado 81505
970-243-2778 (Robert Leachman)**

or

**U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Colorado Ecological Services, Lakewood Field Office
755 Parfet Street, Suite 361
Lakewood, Colorado 80215
303-275-2370 (LeRoy Carlson)**

For general information about the Endangered Species Act, please contact the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Ecological Services Field Office nearest you, or the Service website <http://www.fws.gov>