

Piping Plover Fact Sheet

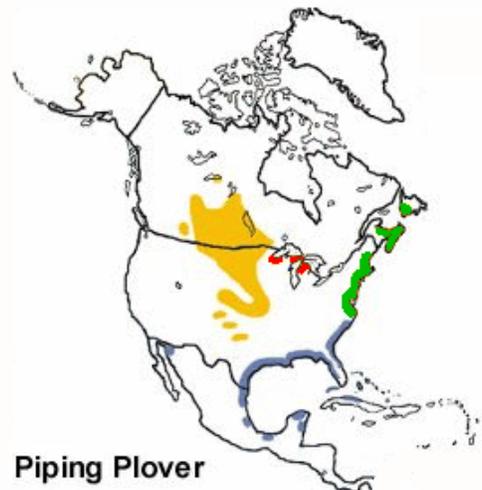


SCIENTIFIC NAME: *Charadrius melodus*

DESCRIPTION: The piping plover is a small, stocky shorebird, with a sandy-colored plumage on its back and crown and a white underside. Breeding birds have a single black breast band, a black bar across the forehead, bright orange legs and bill, and a black tip on the bill. During the winter, the birds lose their breeding plumage; the black bands are lost, the legs fade to pale yellow, and the bill becomes mostly black.

DISTRIBUTION: Piping plovers breed in North America in three geographic regions: the Atlantic Coast, the Northern Great Plains, and the Great Lakes. Atlantic Coast plovers nest on coastal beaches, sand flats at the ends of sand spits and barrier islands, gently-sloped foredunes, sparsely-vegetated dunes, and washover areas cut into or between dunes. Plovers in the Northern Great Plains make their nests on open, sparsely vegetated sand or gravel beaches adjacent to alkali wetlands, and on beaches and sand bars of major river systems. Great Lakes piping plovers breed on sparsely vegetated beaches, cobble pans, or sand spits along the Great Lakes shorelines. Plovers from all three breeding populations winter along coastal beaches and barrier islands from North Carolina to Texas, the eastern coast of Mexico, and on Caribbean islands.

STATUS: The piping plover was listed as endangered in the Great Lakes watershed and threatened elsewhere within its range on January 10, 1986. All piping plovers on migratory routes outside of the Great Lakes watershed or on their wintering grounds (which includes North Carolina) are considered threatened. According to recent breeding censuses, the Atlantic Coast population is the largest of the three breeding populations, numbering approximately 1,427 breeding pairs. The Northern Great Plains population consists of 1,291 breeding pairs, and the Great Lakes population has only 29 breeding pairs. The winter censuses have located about 63 percent of the estimated number of breeding birds, suggesting that important wintering areas are still unknown. Of the plovers located on the United States wintering grounds during these censuses, 90 percent were found on the Gulf Coast and 10 percent were found on the Atlantic Coast. Information from observations of color-banded piping plovers indicates that the winter range of the breeding populations overlap to a significant degree.



Piping Plover

- Northern Great Plains Population
- Great Lakes Population
- Atlantic Coast Population
- Wintering Range (all populations)

REPRODUCTION: The piping plover begins arriving on the breeding ground as early as mid-March and remain there for three to four months. Plovers lay 3 to 4 eggs in shallow scraped depressions lined with light colored pebbles and shell fragments. The eggs are camouflaged and blend extremely well with their surroundings. Both sexes incubate the eggs which hatch within 30 days, and both sexes feed the young until they can fly, about 30 days after hatching.



MIGRATION AND OVERWINTERING: Piping plovers begin arriving on the wintering grounds in early July, with some late nesting birds arriving through late October. A few individuals can be found on the wintering grounds throughout the year, but sightings are rare in late May, June, and early July. Migration is poorly understood, but a recent study suggests that plovers use inland and coastal stopover sites when migrating from breeding areas to their wintering grounds. In late February, piping plovers begin leaving the wintering grounds to migrate back to their breeding sites. Northward migration peaks in late March, and by late May most birds have left the wintering grounds.

North Carolina is uniquely positioned in the species' range, being the only State where the piping plover's breeding and wintering ranges overlap and the birds are present year-round.

HABITAT: Breeding and wintering piping plovers feed on exposed wet sand in wash zones; intertidal ocean beach; wrack lines; washover passes; mud, sand, and algal flats; and shorelines of ephemeral ponds, lagoons, and salt marshes by probing for invertebrates at or just below the surface. Plovers use upland beaches adjacent to foraging areas for roosting and preening. Small sand dunes, debris, and sparse vegetation within adjacent beaches provide shelter from wind and extreme temperatures.

THREATS: Threats to the piping plover on the breeding and wintering grounds are similar. Habitat loss and degradation due to coastal development, recreation, navigation, dredging, and shoreline stabilization and replenishment projects have been major contributors to this species' decline. Human activity on beaches, such as walking, jogging, walking pets off leash, and operating vehicles may prevent birds from feeding, flush birds from roost sites, alter habitat conditions, and destroy camouflaged eggs and young. Human activities have aided range expansions and population increases of predators such as gulls and raccoons, and introduced non-native predators such as feral cats and Norway rats; these factors have resulted in increased predation pressure.



WHAT YOU CAN DO TO PROTECT THE PIPING PLOVER:

- **Learn** - Learn more about the piping plover and other endangered and threatened species. Understand how the destruction of habitat leads to the loss of endangered and threatened species and our nation's plant and animal diversity. Tell others about what you have learned.
- **Join** - Join a conservation group; many have local chapters.
- **Protect** - Protect natural coastal dune habitats by staying on boardwalks and existing trails. Do not enter restricted areas. If walking your dog on a beach or in other natural areas, please keep your pet leashed to prevent disturbing nesting, roosting, or foraging birds.
- **Volunteer** - Volunteer your time at a nearby National Park or Seashore, Wildlife Sanctuary, or National Wildlife Refuge.