

# ***Plover Season 2014 – Off to a Great and Interesting Start!***

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2013 was a fantastic year for piping plovers at Parker River National Wildlife Refuge, with a record number of pairs nesting on the refuge beach (32 pairs – topping the previous record of 27 pairs, set in 2012). We also had our highest number of fledglings ever – with 43 taking flight from the refuge (the previous high count was 39 in 2012). Our 2014 season is just underway, and already things are looking promising.

While we're excited about the high density of nesting plovers, another event causing some excitement among refuge staff is the presence of a leucistic plover for three consecutive years. In 2012, a very lightly colored female plover, with only traces of the usual coloration, was spotted nesting on the refuge beach. This plover and its partner, with four eggs in the nest, eventually fledged two young. In 2013, another leucistic plover was spotted, but this one was completely white, with colored feet, beak, and eyes. This plover paired up and had a one-egg nest – a nest that was soon abandoned. This spring we have spotted a plover with coloring very similar to the plover that was seen in 2013!

Leucism is a genetic mutation in animals in which some or all pigmentations are not properly deposited, causing the affected animals to appear washed out. Although similar to albinism, leucism only affects feathers in birds. Whereas albino birds have red eyes, and pink bills and feet, a leucistic bird will have normal pigmentation in the feet, bill, and eyes.

Because leucistic birds may change patterns after each molt, we are uncertain if the bird seen in 2012, 2013 and this spring are the same individual. But recently we were contacted by a researcher who spent this past winter in the Bahamas and spotted a bird whose plumage matched our 2012 plover. Since we know that the leucistic plover that left our beach in 2013 was completely white, this Bahama bird, which had some pigment, must be different. What are the chances of two leucistic plovers using the Parker River NWR beach in consecutive years! As leucism is hereditary, there is the possibility that the plover seen in 2013 and/or 2014 is an offspring of the 2012 plover, although we cannot be sure of this. We can be certain that seeing such a rare, natural phenomenon is always special and we're excited to see what the future holds for these unique birds!



**This is the leucistic piping plover that was seen on the refuge beach in 2012.**