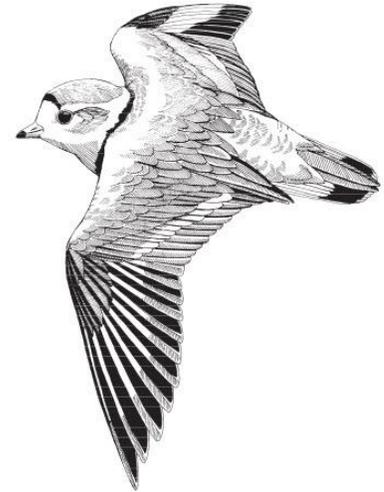


The Piping Plover and Beach Closures at Parker River National Wildlife Refuge

Piping plover management began at the Refuge in 1986 when the species was listed under the Endangered Species Act. After several years of partial closures, the Refuge decided to close the entire beach in order to provide optimal nesting conditions. Then, in 2001, Refuge managers decided to allow beach access at Lot 1 in order to provide the public with recreational opportunities. We have been able to maintain Lot 1 access because the plovers have typically nested south of this area, thus avoiding direct conflicts with people. However, if nesting pairs or chicks are discovered in the public use area of the beach, we may need to temporarily restrict Lot 1 access as well.



Q: Why does the Refuge close its beach when neighboring beaches are able to accommodate plovers *and* people?

Parker River is part of the National Wildlife Refuge System, the only national network of lands and waters protected and managed primarily for wildlife. We encourage and promote wildlife – related activities (e.g. , photography and wildlife observation), but as the primary agency responsible for recovering endangered and threatened species , we are obligated to prioritize the conservation of wildlife and their habitats. Also, the size and shape of the beach are taken into consideration. Our shoreline is very narrow, creating a much harsher environment, compared to beaches that are able to successfully manage for plovers and accommodate people. For example, Crane’s Beach is able to allow public use and successfully manage for plovers because they have wide beach where human activity tends to be concentrated away from plover nesting habitat. Conversely, Salisbury State Park’s beach is narrow, similar to the Refuge, and although they remain open to the public, their plover productivity is poor to none (similar to the Refuge before closure – see “Has the beach closure helped the plovers?” below).

Q: Does the entire beach need to be closed for just a few plovers?

Yes. The plovers nest or feed on all six miles of the Refuge beach. The beach at Parker River is very narrow and during high tides the majority of the refuge beach (especially the southern end) is only 15 yards wide, making it difficult for beach users to keep a safe distance from plovers. Federal and state guidelines recommend that people remain a minimum of 55 yards from nests and potential nesting habitat during the egg-laying season (April 1 to July 7th). Another guideline recommends maintaining a 300 yard plover – human buffer until the chicks begin to fly. As the chicks fledge, we will begin to open the Refuge beach from the north or south, as appropriate.

Q: Has the beach closure helped the plovers?

Yes. The Refuge beach is one of a few “untouched” beaches in a region where coastal development and recreation have significantly reduced the plover’s breeding habitat, and for the reasons stated above, the Refuge staff feels that the beach closure has contributed greatly towards piping plover

recovery. For example, prior to beach closings, the refuge averaged 1 to 3 plover pairs every season. Since the Refuge implemented a full beach closure, breeding pairs have increased dramatically, averaging 12 pairs per season. In some years we have supported as many as 17 - 21 nesting pairs! The Refuge now has the second largest plover population on the North Shore.

Q: How can a relaxing day at the beach be harmful to the plovers?

Most people don't realize it, but plovers may perceive basic beach activities as a "threat." Constant human disturbance can cause a plover to abandon a nesting site, especially early in the breeding season. To give plovers the best chance at success they need a "safe" area (the recommended 55 yards) for nesting and raising their young, where they won't be disturbed by people or predators. Even short, inadvertent disturbances can be detrimental to a nesting pair of plovers. For example:

- Short, repeated interruptions of incubation can cause the eggs to overheat or become chilled, potentially killing the embryos.
- Plovers tend to feed in the intertidal zone, which is also a common area for people to walk or jog. Disturbances can interrupt feeding, and this can be especially harmful for developing young. Chicks typically triple their weight during their first two weeks and those unable to do this most likely will not survive. Chicks can also become separated from their parents when they are running to avoid pedestrians (potentially increasing the chance of predation).
- Energy that could be used for growth and migration is "wasted" when birds are forced to run away from beach users.
- People often leave behind food scraps and trash which can attract scavengers and predators that will prey upon eggs and birds.

Q: What can I do to help?

- Volunteer as a plover warden. Contact our visitor services staff at (978) 465-5753, extension 208, if interested.
- If you see a plover, observe it from a safe distance. If the bird appears to be running from you or exhibiting the "broken wing display," back up to give it more space.
- Respect the Refuge regulation of no kite flying. Plover's perceive kites as aerial predators.
- Do not leave or bury scraps of food on the beach. Food attracts plover predators.

For more information about the piping plover, visit this web site:

<http://www.fws.gov/northeast/pipingplover/>

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Parker River National Wildlife Refuge, administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, was established in 1942 to protect and provide habitat for migratory birds and other wildlife species. Today the refuge protects fragile coastal habitat for over 350 bird species, as well as many plants, mammals, fish, insects, reptiles and amphibians.