

# Species Fact Sheet

## Western Snowy Plover

### *Charadrius alexandrinus nivosus*



**STATUS: THREATENED**  
**CRITICAL HABITAT: DESIGNATED**

Western snowy (coastal) plover currently occurs in Grays Harbor and Pacific counties, Washington.

*(Map may reflect historical as well as recent sightings)*

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The western snowy plover, *Charadrius alexandrinus nivosus*, was federally listed as threatened in 1993. Critical habitat was designated in 2005 along the coasts of California, Oregon and Washington. A recovery plan was finalized in September 2007 and the critical habitat designation is currently being revised.

### ***Current and Historical Status***

The Pacific coast population of the western snowy plover is defined as those individuals that nest beside or near tidal waters, and includes all nesting colonies on the mainland coast, peninsulas, offshore islands, adjacent bays and estuaries from southern Washington to southern Baja California, Mexico.

Historic records indicate that western snowy plovers nested in five locations on the Washington coast. Three of these sites have had

active nesting in recent years and one new site was discovered in 2006. Populations in Washington remained relatively stable and may have increased slightly in the 1990s. However, consistent, intensive surveys have only been conducted since the mid-1990s. In 2006, the maximum estimated nesting population of western snowy plovers statewide was 70 birds. Both coastal and interior populations use coastal locations in winter. The population in Washington has been declining by about 12 percent annually (eight birds per year) over the past four years and in 2009 the adult breeding population was 35 snowy plovers.

## ***Description and Life History***

The western snowy plover is a small shorebird distinguished from other plovers (*Charadriidae* sp.) by its small size, pale brown upper parts, dark patches on either side of the upper breast, and dark gray to blackish legs. Snowy plovers weigh from 34 to 58 grams (1.2 to 2 ounces) and range in length from 15 to 17 centimeters (5.9 to 6.6 inches). Individual birds 1 year or older are considered to be breeding adults and the average life span is approximately 3 years.

Some western snowy plovers remain in their coastal breeding areas year round, while others migrate south or north for the winter. On the Washington coast, most adults arrive at the nesting sites during late April, with maximum numbers present from mid-May to late June. Fledging occurs from late June through August and late-season broods may extend into the third week of September.

Plovers often return to the same breeding sites year after year. Nests typically occur in flat, open areas with sandy or saline substrates. Vegetation and driftwood are usually sparse or absent. The typical clutch size is three eggs but can range from two, and in rare cases, up to six eggs.

Snowy plover chicks leave the nest within hours after hatching to search for food. They are not able to fly for approximately four weeks after hatching, during which time they are especially vulnerable to predation. The adult male takes care of the chicks while the female may reneest with another male. The male does not feed the chicks, but leads them to suitable feeding areas. Adults use distraction displays to lure predators and people away from the nest and chicks. Adult male plovers signal the chicks to crouch, with calls, as another way to protect them. They may also lead chicks, especially larger ones, away from predators. Most chick mortality occurs within six days after hatching.

## ***Habitat***

The Pacific coast population of western snowy plovers breeds on coastal beaches from southern Washington to southern Baja California, Mexico. Breeding generally occurs above the high tide line on coastal beaches, sand spits, dune-backed beaches, sparsely-vegetated dunes, beaches at creek and river mouths, and salt pans at lagoons and estuaries. Less common nesting habitat includes bluff-backed beaches, dredged material disposal sites, salt pond levees, dry salt ponds, and river bars. In winter, western snowy plovers are found on nesting beaches, man-made salt ponds, and on estuarine sand and mud flats.

## ***Reasons for Declines***

As early as the 1970s, a decline in plover numbers had been suspected. The primary cause for their decline was and still is loss and degradation of habitat. One of the most significant causes of habitat loss for coastal breeding western snowy plovers has been the encroachment of introduced European beachgrass, *Ammophila arenaria*, and American beachgrass, *Ammophila breviligulata*. Introduced beachgrass contributes to habitat loss by reducing the amount of open, sandy habitat, steepening beaches, and increasing habitat for predators. Development has also reduced the available habitat for western snowy plovers while increasing the intensity of human use and disturbance to nesting plovers.

## ***Conservation Efforts***

In Washington, seasonal restrictions on beach use are implemented in an effort to reduce disturbance to breeding plovers. Activities that may adversely affect plovers include dune stabilization using vegetation or fencing, construction of breakwaters and jetties, sand deposition, and driving on the beach near nesting areas. Recreational activities near nests, such as dog walking, horseback riding, kite-flying, and picnicking may result in abandonment of the nest by adult plovers. Trash or food left on the beach attracts predators like crows, ravens and gulls that eat plover chicks.

The public can help to increase the chance of plover survival and breeding success by:

- staying out of the signed nesting areas
- "sharing the beach" by recreating away from plovers and using the wet sand

keeping dogs/pets on leash or leaving them at home  
removing litter from beaches to discourage predators  
flying kites, which may be mistaken for avian predators by  
plovers, on non-nesting plover beaches  
volunteering to monitor plovers or to provide educational  
material to other beach users  
leaving the area immediately and contacting the U.S. Fish and  
Wildlife Service or the Washington Department of Fish and  
Wildlife if a plover nest is found in an unprotected area

In addition to seasonal closures, other management tools including restoration and predator management are used in Washington to help recover the western snowy plover. Habitat restoration includes removal of American and European beachgrass, leveling steep dunes that formed as a result of beachgrass introduction, and placement of shell material in areas which are selected to provide high quality nesting habitat. Predator management in the form of nest enclosures (mesh fences that surround a nest and act to keep out predators) and trapping and removing predators such as ravens, crows, foxes, raccoons, and feral cats have also increased survival. Intensive population monitoring of western snowy plovers has also been implemented in Washington.

## ***References and Links***

[Listing Status 1993](#)

[Revised Critical Habitat 2011](#)

[Designation of Critical Habitat 2005](#)

[USFWS Critical Habitat Mapping](#)

[USFWS Threatened and Endangered Species Profile](#)

[Recovery Plan](#)

[Additional Photos and Information](#)

[Snowy Plover Q & A's](#)

[WDFW Snowy Plover Report](#)