

Western Snowy Plover

Sharing the Beach



Our Mission

The mission of the California Department of Parks and Recreation is to provide for the health, inspiration and education of the people of California by helping to preserve the state's extraordinary biological diversity, protecting its most valued natural and cultural resources, and creating opportunities for high-quality outdoor recreation.

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Photography by Peter Knapp, Ginny Rosenberg and Dave Dixon. Drawing by Carleton Eyster.

WHAT IS A SNOWY PLOVER?

The western snowy plover (*Charadrius alexandrinus nivosus*) is a sparrow-sized, light colored shorebird with dark patches on either side of the neck, behind the eye, and on the forehead. The Pacific coast population of the snowy plover is a threatened species.

WHERE ARE THESE PLOVERS?

Plovers can be found on flat, open coastal beaches in dunes, and near stream mouths. They are well-camouflaged and extremely hard to see, often crouching in small depressions taking shelter from the wind. California State Parks beaches provide much of the suitable habitat remaining in California for this small shorebird.



Adult and chicks

During the winter months, snowy plovers eat and rest, building up fat reserves. In the spring and summer, plovers nest in loose colonies, often coming back to the same beaches every year. The breeding season lasts from early spring to mid-fall,

and during that time the female may hatch more than one brood with different males. The nests are simple scrapes in the sand with 1-3 eggs that the male warms at night, while the female does day duty. Eggs hatch in about 27 days, and within hours the chicks are searching for their food of insects and other beach invertebrates. The chicks are on their own in 30 days. But surviving those two months is the trick.



Plover habitat at Montaña de Oro State Park



Plover eggs in nest

HOW ARE THEY THREATENED?

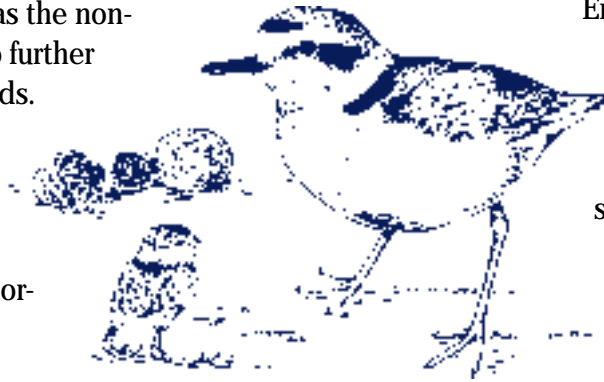
Snowy plovers are threatened due to disturbance, predation and habitat loss. Because the birds and eggs are camouflaged, beach visitors can disturb resting birds or wander right through a nesting area, never knowing the damage they have caused. Visitor use of the beach close to nests causes adult birds to stay off the nest, exposing eggs to predators and the elements. Beach fires and fireworks disturb the nesting birds, and kites flown above look like predators. During the winter, continual disturbance uses up their stored reserves and may lower their breeding success.

Predators on the beach are also threats. Dogs chase and may catch birds or destroy nests, cats prey on birds and chicks, and even leashed dogs may appear as a danger. Native predators such as skunks, crows, ravens, and shrikes are joined by exotic

predators such as the non-native red fox to further pressure the birds.

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

The snowy plover is an important part of the interconnected web of life on the shore. Plovers have lived on California beaches for thousands of years, but today human use of their remaining beach habitat seriously threatens their survival. Once numbered in the thousands, fewer than 1500 breeding plovers remain. Prior to 1970 they nested at 53 locations in California, while today they nest in only half as many sites. Since snowy plovers are listed as a threatened species and protected by the federal



Endangered Species Act, beach visitors who harm or disturb plovers or their habitat may be cited and fined. Plovers need our help if they are to survive alongside human beach recreation.

WHAT IS CALIFORNIA STATE PARKS DOING TO PROTECT PLOVERS?

California State Parks is doing a wide variety of things to help this bird in need. Plovers are monitored to determine the number of birds using parklands and the success of their breeding attempts, sometimes banding the chicks' tiny legs so that they can be identified throughout their lives. Individual nests or larger nesting areas may be fenced or delineated by signs to keep visitors away. Exotic plants that affect plover nesting habitat are removed, and if predators pose a problem, control programs are initiated. Some recreational activities are restricted, and some portions of beaches are closed to dogs to protect important nesting areas. California State Parks is working closely with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and other coastal land managers to cooperatively manage the plover on California beaches.

With California State Parks' efforts and your active cooperation, we can make a difference in the survival of the western snowy plover on California beaches.



Adult on nest

WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP?

Since snowy plover nesting coincides with the busy beach season, there are many things park visitors can do to avoid or minimize impacts on the birds.

- Do not approach birds or nests. Avoid prolonged picnicking or sunbathing near plover nesting habitat.
- Stay out of fenced or posted habitat areas, and do not approach fencing.
- Dogs are prohibited on California State Parks coastal beaches unless specifically authorized. Where authorized, dogs must be leashed.
- Do not light fires or camp on the beach except in designated areas.
- Dispose of garbage properly to avoid attracting plover predators. Do not feed any wildlife.
- Equestrians must stay out of nesting areas. Observe posted restrictions and keep to wet sand in plover habitat.
- Do not collect kelp or driftwood from the beach; it provides nesting and feeding habitat for snowy plovers.
- Do not fly kites, hang glide or toss Frisbees or balls near snowy plover nesting habitat. Fireworks are prohibited. Other activities causing disturbance may also be restricted.
- Please report to park staff any nests, threats or disturbances to plovers.