

[From Summer 1993]

## **Biology Briefs: Piping Plovers Return for Another Nesting Season**

Piping plovers will be in the limelight again this season. The time has come for piping plovers to return to Chincoteague Refuge, establish territories, go through courtship displays, and with biologist's fingers crossed, ultimately, build nests, lay eggs, and fledge chicks.

The piping plover has gained considerable attention in recent years. An apparent need for research and protection of this small inconspicuous bird became evident after the population stooped to dangerous lows following intensive hunting for the millinery trade in the nineteenth century. The Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 helped to strengthen the population in the twentieth century. However, the problems did not stop there.

Present threats and causes for the decline of piping plover populations include depredation by wildlife and pets, disturbance to nesting grounds by the ever increasing number of beach-goers, development of ocean front property, and mother nature in the form of high tides and storms. The legislative protection of piping plovers now lies in the hands of the Endangered Species Act of 1973. As of January 1986, plovers have been listed as a protected species under the Act. On Assateague and the rest of the Atlantic coast, the bird's status remains threatened, which is a crucial step above endangered. Other concentrations of this species are found in the Great Lakes region (status: endangered) and Northern Great Plains (status: threatened). Without dedicated biologists, researchers, and cooperation from the public, the population would continue to decrease at alarming rates, potentially to the point of no return: extinction.

Intensive monitoring and management of piping plovers began at Chincoteague NWR in 1987 and has continued ever since. An average of approximately 38 pairs return to the refuge to breed annually. Teams of refuge staff initiated plover population surveys in early March. Nest searches begin in early May, and nest and chick monitoring extends through August. Data are collected with the least possible amount of disturbance to the birds.

Each year presents different challenges to overcome and obstacles to hurdle in protecting the piping plover. As the refuge staff finds itself at the onset of the nesting season, hopes are high. Will this be a good year for piping plovers? If it is up to the dedication of Chincoteague NWR staff, the answer will be YES!

<b>June 10, 1993</b>	
Nests Found	23
Pairs	25
Nest Failures	6

Nests Hatched	2
Chicks Hatched	7
Surviving Chicks	7

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*Piping Plover Status Report*