

[From Summer 1999]

## **Peep Lo!!**

The ever famous piping plover has returned to Assateague Island. The first plover was sighted on the Hook on March 5th and has been a very busy little bird ever since.

The piping plover is a small, sand-colored shorebird with a very distinctive alarm call - peep lo. The male and female of the species look similar, with both species having a black ring around the neck and a small black headband above the eyes. In breeding season, they have black-tipped orange bills and orange legs. Piping plovers prefer to nest in open, flat shelly areas. Courtship behavior usually begins in April with the male flying in a figure eight design continually singing to the female.

Once courtship is over, the pair gets down to the business of nest building. Plovers have an intricate, complicated, beautifully designed nest - a small depression in the sand. Okay, so a depression is not all that complicated and definitely not intricate, but it serves the plover well. These small depressions aid in camouflaging the plovers and their eggs. Approximately 28 days after the fourth egg is laid, little feather balls on legs pop out!

As of June 1, there were 16 piping plover nests on Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge. The first chicks arrived on Sunday, May 30 from one of the five nests that are located in a closed overwash area adjacent to the Off Road Vehicle zone (ORV zone). Due to the proximity of vehicles to this closed area, some concerns have been raised about the safety of these chicks. So, the plovers in this area will get special attention this year.

To date, the plovers and their young spend most of their time foraging on the Toms Cove side of the overwash. To be on the safe side, staff will be monitoring the broods during daylight hours every day of the week. In addition to monitoring, it is hoped that our presence will be a deterrent to mammalian and avian predators.

A study conducted by refuge biologist Irv Ailes has shown that the first five days of a piping plover chick's life are the most important. Staff will be especially attentive to the plovers during this time period. We are hoping that at the end of the season all our effort will add up to many more plovers reaching flight stage.

Kendra Willett, Biological Technician