

[From Fall 2008]

Rare Birds Experience Devastating Breeding Season at Assateague Island National Seashore

Assateague Island is the last undeveloped beach along the Maryland coast, and home to many rare species that need beaches free of human development and disruptive beach uses in order to survive. One of those species is the Piping Plover, a small shorebird threatened with extinction following the loss of beach breeding habitat elsewhere along the East Coast. Plovers need beaches that experience the full effects of storms, which can cut through dune fields and create large areas of open, sparsely vegetated sand flats across the width of the island. The National Park Service limits the extent of stabilization activities such as dune building for the benefit of plovers and other species that exist only on natural barrier island beaches.

But even the best of intentions can be foiled by nature. The Assateague beaches support one of the highest densities of breeding plovers on the east coast. In the recent past, these birds have been helped by severe winter nor'easter storms that affected the Delmarva coastline in 1991, 1992 and 1998. But the peninsula has not experienced a severe winter storm in several years now, and hurricanes have missed the local beaches for decades.

While the area's developed beaches breathe a sigh of relief with lower annual maintenance costs, the lack of storms have allowed the Assateague Island beaches to mature; growing new dunes and filling formerly open sand flats with dense vegetation. This evolution reduces the available habitat for plovers. Less open habitat leads to plovers competing for limited food supplies, and makes it easier for predators like fox and crows to find eggs and young chicks.

During the 2008 breeding season, some unusual May high tides flooded and destroyed most of the first nest attempts. That was followed by a dry summer that limited the food supply for the chicks raised from later nests. With a lack of food for baby birds, and without a place to hide from predators, the plovers ended up having the worst breeding season since monitoring of the species began in 1986. This follows three previous years of poor success and now, some of the older birds appear to be dying out. The Maryland population fell 24%, down to 49 breeding pairs, and successfully raised only 19 chicks this summer.

The National Park Service will continue to manage Assateague in ways that promote natural conditions, but it is really up to nature at this point. Eventually, the island will be hit by winter storms, and the plover's habitat will again improve and expand. Until then, all that can be done is to limit human disturbance of breeding areas and control some of the predators. In this situation, every chick that fledges from Assateague and flies south in the fall is the hope for future years.

Several sections of the National Park that are usually closed to visitors all summer to protect plovers will be opened to recreational use early this year. The north six miles of island and bay shoreline opened on August 7, while the southern six miles within the over-sand vehicle recreational zone is expected to re-open around August 13.

The National Park Service works hard to maintain a balance between public use and resource protection. Superintendent Scott Bentley reminds park visitors that Assateague exists to preserve the unique coastal resources and natural ecosystem conditions and processes upon which they depend while providing high quality resource-compatible recreational opportunities. With a little patience and flexibility, visitors will always have a rewarding experience with all that Assateague Island has to offer.