

[From Fall 1998]

Piping Plover Season

The 1998 piping plover nesting season has concluded with the total number of chicks fledged on the Virginia portion of Assateague Island this season at thirty-nine -- 39% more than last year. The chick fledge rate for this year was 1.22 fledged/pair, a slight increase over last year. The lower islands fared a little worse with eight pairs of plovers on Assawoman Island producing seven fledglings (0.9 fledged/pair). Wallops Island had one pair of plovers attempt to nest, but was not successful in hatching any chicks this year. Data is still being collected for the rest of the lower islands.

Of particular interest this year were the eight pairs of plovers which nested on the overwash area adjacent to the off-road vehicle zone. This marks the first year more than three pairs of plovers have attempted to nest in this area. These eight pairs fledged a total of seven chicks. Three of the nests hatched chicks which were never seen by the biology staff. Their disappearance is suspected to be linked to predation by the large number of gulls and crows in the area. Gulls were observed harassing plovers, least terns, and common terns throughout the nesting season. One gull was observed taking a least tern chick while being mobbed by a large number of adult terns. Gulls are attracted to the area, in larger numbers than would be natural, by visitors who feed them and by fishing boats in Tom's Cove.

The best area for the plovers was the North Wash Flats portion of the Refuge where ten chicks hatched, and nine fledged! An interesting project was developed on the Flats this year, as well. Following heavy rains, the water level rose and threatened to engulf two plover nests. A decision was made to raise the nests above the water level. As the water reached the edge of the nests, a biology crew removed the eggs from the nests, and then carefully removed the nests themselves. Small mounds of sand and shell were built where the nests had been. The crew then replaced the nests on top of the mounds and replaced the eggs in the nests. The project was a resounding success. The adult plovers returned to the nests and fledged all seven of their chicks.

Tom Penn, Biological Technician