

[From Fall 1999]

Piping Plovers Successful

The piping plover nesting season has concluded for this year. The total number of chicks fledged on the Virginia portion of Assateague Island this season was forty-three, 10% more than last year. The chick fledge rate for this year was 1.72 chicks/pair, a significant increase over last year (1.22 chicks/pair). The lower islands fared almost as well with 12 pairs of plovers on Assawoman island producing 20 fledglings (1.66 fledged/pair). NASA's Wallops Island had no plovers attempt to nest again this year. Data is still being collated by the State Contract Biologists for the rest of the lower islands.

Of particular interest this year was the six pairs of plovers which nested on the overwash area adjacent to the off-road vehicle zone (ORV). Refuge staff and interns monitored these broods for approximately 18 hours per day, seven days each week for a total of 11 weeks. This experimental intense monitoring effort in this highly sensitive area, coupled with an intense effort to discourage avian and mammalian predators, accounted for one of the highest fledging rates ever recorded on the refuge. About six times during the summer, plover chicks crossed over into the ORV zone. Each time the broods entered the ORV zone, an area 200 meters north of where the chicks entered the zone and all of the zone to the south was closed to vehicles and pedestrians for a minimum of two days. The result of these efforts was six pairs of plovers which fledged a total of 11 chicks!

Even with the increased efforts of staff to discourage potential avian predators within the Overwash and Hook nesting areas, one of the biggest problems with plover production continued to be avian predators. Gulls were observed harassing plovers, least terns and common terns throughout the nesting season. A herring gull was observed taking a plover chick.

As in previous years, fishing boats in Toms Cove and visitors who feed gulls in the area attracted the gulls in larger numbers than would be natural. A red fox was also hunting in the plover areas during the nesting season. Efforts to trap and remove the fox were unsuccessful.

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