



News Release

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Critical Habitat Proposed in Coastal Counties for Migratory Piping Plovers

- Public invited to comment -

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service invites comments on its proposal to re-designate critical habitat for the wintering population of a rare bird, the piping plover, in nine counties along the Texas coast.

Critical habitat refers to specific geographic areas that contain elements essential for the conservation of a protected species. The areas may require special management considerations and protection. Approximately 150,000 acres in Cameron, Willacy, Kenedy, Kleberg, Nueces, Aransas, Calhoun, Matagorda and Brazoria counties may meet that description for the piping plover.

The piping plover is protected as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act. It is a shorebird that uses intertidal beaches and flats and associated dune systems and flats above annual high tide in coastal areas. The intertidal areas offer foraging and roosting sites. Areas above high tide provide refuge from high winds and cold weather.

“We identified the physical and biological elements required to satisfy each species’ need for food, water, shelter and space to raise young,” said Benjamin N. Tuggle, PhD, Regional Director for the Service’s Southwest Region. “Those elements form the foundation for a critical habitat designation. Our proposal highlights the importance of coastal areas for the plover.”

The Service had designated critical habitat for piping plovers from North Carolina to Texas in 2001. In 2006, the Texas General Land Office challenged 19 of the 37 wintering piping plover critical habitat units in Texas. Under a settlement order, the Service is to re-look at the designation for the affected units. Today’s proposal addresses the 19 units.

Critical habitat is a term in the Endangered Species Act that identifies geographic areas containing features essential for the conservation of a threatened or endangered species, and which may require special management considerations or protection. Designation of critical habitat does not affect land ownership, establish a refuge or preserve, and has no impact on private landowners taking actions on their land that do not require federal funding or permits. Federal agencies that undertake, fund or permit activities that may affect critical habitat are required to consult with the Service to ensure such actions do not adversely modify or destroy designated critical habitat.

In 1986, the Service listed the piping plover in the Great Lakes watershed as endangered and threatened elsewhere within its range, including Texas. The Endangered Species Act already provides protection for a species wherever it occurs. Federal agencies are required to consult on any action they take which might affect a species.

To read the proposed rule, go to <http://www.fws.gov/southwest/es/Library/> or request a copy from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Corpus Christi Ecological Services Office, 6300 Ocean Drive, TAMU-CC Unit 5837, Corpus Christi, Texas 78412-5837, telephone (361) 994-9005.

The Service will accept comments until July 21. Written comments should be submitted to Public Comments Processing, Attn: FWS-R2-ES-2008-0055; Division of Policy and Directives Management; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; 4401 N. Fairfax Drive, Suite 222; Arlington, VA 22203. Comments may also be sent electronically using the Federal eRulemaking Portal at: <http://www.regulations.gov>.

The piping plover is a small, pale-colored North American shorebird named for its melodic mating call. The species breeds in three discrete areas of North America – the Northern Great Plains, the Great Lakes, and the Atlantic Coast. Plovers from all three breeding populations winter in coastal areas of the United States from North Carolina to Texas, and along the coast of eastern Mexico and on some Caribbean islands.

Piping plovers begin arriving on the wintering grounds in Texas as early as July with some late-nesting birds arriving in September. A few can be found on the wintering grounds throughout the year, but sightings are rare in late May, June, and early July. While their migration is poorly understood, a recent study suggests that plovers use inland and coastal stopover sites when migrating from breeding areas to wintering grounds. In late February, piping plovers begin leaving the wintering grounds to migrate north to breeding sites. Northward migration peaks in late March, and by late May most birds have left the wintering grounds.

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