

by Heidi Hanlon

This Partnership is for the Birds!

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Cape May National Wildlife Refuge), U.S. Coast Guard (Loran Support Unit or LSU, not to be confused with the “Fighting Tigers” of Baton Rouge), and New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (Division of Fish and Wildlife, Endangered and Nongame Species Program) have come together for a partnership to protect the federally threatened piping plover (*Charadrius melodus*). It began when the Coast Guard transferred 490 acres (200 hectares) of its land to the Cape May NWR in 1999, establishing the new “Two Mile Beach Unit”.

Cape May NWR was established in 1989 when 90 acres (36 ha) were acquired from The Nature Conservancy. The refuge is located in Cape May County, New Jersey, and includes the Delaware Bay Division, the Great Cedar Swamp Division, and the Two Mile Beach Unit. Cape May NWR currently

consists of 10,500 acres (4,250 ha) and is growing to reach its approved acquisition boundary of 21,000 acres (8,500 ha).

The refuge is located in one of the Atlantic Flyway’s most active flight paths, which makes it an important link in the vast network of protected wildlife habitat nationwide. Its value for the protection of migrating birds and their habitat continues to increase as the southern New Jersey area becomes developed. In 1992, the Delaware Bay wetlands within the refuge were designated one of 17 sites in the United States as a Wetland of International Importance under the Ramsar Convention. The refuge is also part of the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network. Cape May Peninsula is considered by many as one of the “top 10 birding hot spots” in the country because of its migrating shorebirds, songbirds, raptors, and American woodcock (*Scolopax minor*).

The Two Mile Beach Unit is located within Lower Township, south of Wildwood Crest, where the beach is lined with condominiums and, in the summer, thousands of vacationers. To provide a feeding, resting, and nesting area for the beach-dependent birds, its beachfront is closed to all access from April 1 to September 30. Consequently, it is a haven for nesting and migrating shorebirds.

The Two Mile Beach Unit opened a series of trails on July 1, 2002, that lead visitors from the northern boundary behind the dunes and out the southern boundary to the adjacent LSU beach. The trail system also has two observation platforms to allow visitors to view shorebirds on the beach and other wildlife such as dolphins and brown pelicans (*Pelecanus occidentalis*) in the

Photo by Joe Brandt





Piping plover nests and eggs blend into the sand so well that they are vulnerable to being crushed by people using the beach during the nesting season.

Photo by John Gavin

ocean. This was done to maintain the integrity of the refuge beach for beach nesting and feeding shorebirds and to connect the public access on the Two Mile Beach Unit to the adjacent properties of Wildwood Crest and the LSU.

Since the opening of the trail system, the Cape May NWR and LSU have been working closely together to make sure symbolic fencing (posts connected by string and flagging) surrounds each nest with appropriate informative signs. This fencing is important to the survival of beach nesting bird species since these birds make depressions in the sand on the beach in which to lay their very well camouflaged, sand-colored eggs. Both agencies provided materials and manpower to put up the symbolic fencing. The partnership also enforced greater communication so that both agencies were always aware of birds using the beach and of chicks that may venture outside of the fenced areas to feed at the ocean's edge.

The Cape May NWR partners with the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection to survey, monitor, and keep accurate records of federally and state listed species. The state has also provided technical support, manpower, and materials for establishing symbolic fencing at the Two Mile Beach Unit and LSU.

The New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection also partnered with the Service to provide an informa-

tion session for LSU and Cape May NWR employees on state and federally listed species that are seen on the beaches: the piping plover, least tern (*Sterna antillarum*), and black skimmer (*Rynchops niger*). Both agencies talked about how to identify the species, what their nests look like, their threats, fines, and penalties for the take of these species, and other issues regarding shorebirds and terns.

The 2002 beach nesting bird season at the Two Mile Beach Unit was a success with nesting by two piping plover pairs, a peak of 97 least tern pairs, and two American oystercatcher (*Haematopus palliatus*) pairs. Three piping plovers, 50 least terns, and one oystercatcher were raised. Black skimmers also attempted to nest and will hopefully be successful in the future. The numbers of beach nesting birds have increased since 2000 when there was only one piping plover, one least tern, and one American oystercatcher nest observed; two piping plover, two least tern, and one American oystercatcher chick resulted. The Service, Coast Guard, and New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection are committed to continuing this partnership for even greater success in the future.

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Beach protection has already benefitted the piping plover and other beach nesting birds.

Photo by Heidi Hanlon