

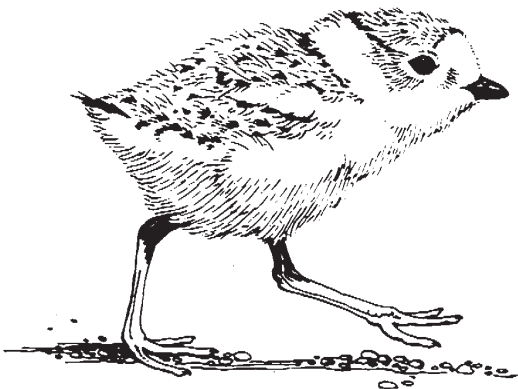
The Atlantic coast piping plover



Stocky, sand-colored birds a bit smaller than a robin, piping plovers run in short stops and starts. When foraging along the ocean's edge, they dart at the waves, as if their mothers had told them not to get their feet wet. Adult piping plovers in breeding plumage have yellow-orange legs, a black band across their foreheads from eye to eye, and a black ring around the base of their necks. When standing still on the upper beach, adults and chicks blend into the sandy background. The bird's name derives from its call – plaintive bell-like whistles often heard before the birds are seen.

Plovers in trouble

Piping plovers were common along the Atlantic coast during much of the 19th century, but commercial hunting for feathers to decorate hats nearly wiped them out. Following passage of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act in 1918, plovers recovered to a 20th century peak in the 1940s. Increased development and beach recreation after World War II caused the population decline that led to Endangered Species Act protection in 1986. Intensive protection has helped the population more than double in the last 20 years, but the most recent surveys still place the Atlantic population at fewer than 2,000 pairs.



Plover life

Atlantic coast piping plovers breed on coastal beaches from Newfoundland and southeastern Quebec to North Carolina. After they establish nesting territories and conduct courtship rituals beginning in late March or early April, pairs scrape shallow depressions - nests - in the sand on the high beach close to the dunes. They sometimes line nests with small stones or fragments of shell. Plovers typically lay four eggs that hatch in about 25 days. The downy chicks, sometimes likened to tiny wind-up toys or cotton balls with legs, are soon able to follow their parents in foraging for the marine worms, crustaceans and insects that they pluck from the sand and eat.

Both the eggs and piping plover chicks blend into the beach so thoroughly that they are almost impossible to see. When predators or intruders come close, the chicks squat motionless on the sand while the parents attempt to attract the attention of the intruders, often by feigning a broken wing. Surviving chicks are able to fly in about 30 days.

Storm tides, predators or intruding humans sometimes disrupt nests before the eggs hatch. When this happens, the plovers often lay another clutch of eggs. Chicks hatched from these late-nesting efforts may not fly until late August.

Piping plovers often gather in groups on undisturbed beaches before their southward migration. By mid-September, both adult and young plovers have departed for their wintering areas. These birds winter on the Atlantic coast from North Carolina south to Florida, along the Gulf coast, and in the Bahamas and West Indies.

Challenges

- Development – Commercial, residential and recreational development has decreased suitable coastal habitat for piping plovers to nest and feed.
- Disturbance – Human disturbance often curtails plover breeding success. Foot and vehicle traffic may crush nests or chicks. Excessive disturbance may cause plover parents to desert the nest, exposing eggs or chicks to the summer sun and predators. Interruption of feeding may stress juvenile birds during critical periods in their development.
- Predators – Pets, especially dogs and cats, may harass or kill the birds (see <http://www.fws.gov/northeast/pdf/catseat.pdf>). Animals such as raccoons, skunks and foxes, attracted by food left on the beach, are common nest and chick predators.

Protecting the plover

The piping plover is designated as threatened along the Atlantic coast, which means that the population would become endangered and face possible extinction without Endangered Species Act protection. Recovery efforts include conserving breeding and wintering habitat; and protecting breeding birds, eggs, and chicks from predators and from disturbance and death caused by human activities.

Other rare species that inhabit the beach ecosystem, including the endangered roseate tern, the threatened northeastern beach tiger beetle, the threatened seabeach amaranth, least terns, common terns, black skimmers and Wilson's plovers, benefit from piping plover protection.

For further information contact:
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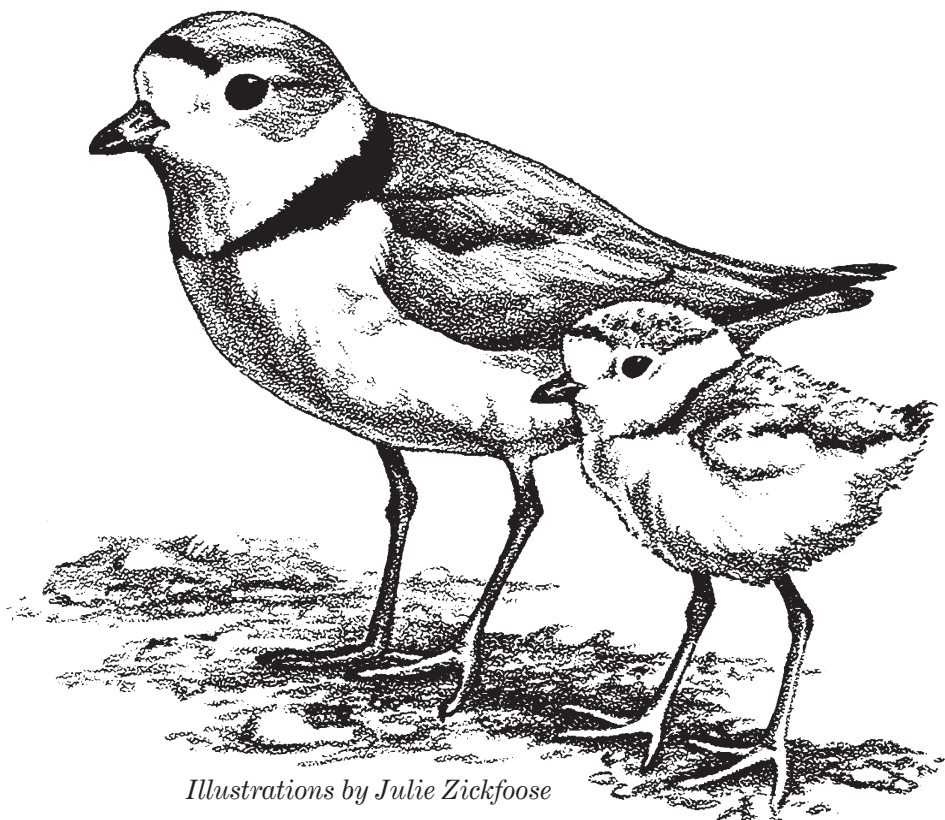


You can help protect piping plovers

The Endangered Species Act provides penalties for killing, harassing or harming piping plovers.

- Respect all areas fenced or posted for protection of wildlife.
- Do not approach or linger near piping plovers or their nests
- If pets are permitted on beaches used by plovers, keep your pets leashed.
- Do not leave or bury trash or scraps of food on beaches – food attracts plover predators.

For more information about Atlantic coast piping plovers, see <http://www.fws.gov/northeast/pipingplover>.



Illustrations by Julie Zickfoose