OVERVIEW OF BEACH-NESTING BIRDS IN NEW JERSEY

TODD POVER

The Piping Plover is certainly no stranger to controversy. There are the bumper stickers that read “Piping Plovers Taste Better than Chicken”, and endless sensational headlines that pit plovers against cat lovers, off-road vehicle users, organizers of fireworks celebrations, and officials in coastal communities. For those of us whose job it is to protect Piping Plovers, at some point it is a little hard not to feel like the fun police.

Of course, Piping Plovers are not the only endangered species to attract this sort of unwelcome attention. The battle on the West Coast over the Northern Spotted Owl is just one of the more publicized recent examples. In that case it is loggers versus environmentalists, in an argument that boils down to jobs and the economy versus species and habitat protection. To some degree it is the entire federal Endangered Species Act (and its various state equivalents) that is under attack from multiple sources—industry, private landowners, politicians, policy-makers, and special-interest groups of all sorts.

Regardless, here on the East Coast the Piping Plover is a longstanding lightning rod for a particularly intense battle that plays out over our beaches. This is probably not going to change in the foreseeable future. Socio-economic trends are such that pressures on our coastal species will only get worse. The coastal building boom and population growth that began after World War II have intensified. This demographic trend brings more people (both residents and tourists) into potential conflict with beach-nesting birds, whose breeding habitat has already been diminished in extent and quality as a result of the first wave of coastal development.

New Jersey beaches are a poster child for this phenomenon. What isn’t already built on is otherwise dramatically altered in the form of jetties, groins, bulkheads, boardwalks, and through large-scale beach “nourishment” projects. For a species like the Piping Plover that, in part, depends on dynamic natural processes to regenerate new habitat over time, these changes can be difficult to overcome. While our state’s beaches are beautiful and enjoyable to visit, with a few exceptions, most cannot be characterized as pristine and uncrowded. I have been involved in plover protection for twelve years now, and when I first started there were still some relatively undisturbed public beaches with suitable nesting habitat (Strathmere and Barnegat Light come to mind), but today, outside of our preserved federal and state lands, all our beaches are heavily used.

While the direct impacts that humans have on Piping Plovers and other beach-nesting bird species may be easy to understand, there are other less obvious consequences resulting from the increase in people in our coastal region, especially on the barrier islands. Along with flooding, predators are one of the “natural” factors influencing reproductive success of beach-nesting birds. Some non-native predators like cats are introduced into the coastal habitat by humans. Many other native species, including gulls, crows, raccoons, and skunks, can thrive in close proximity to humans—and along with humans comes a more steady supply of food in the form of garbage, restaurant scraps, handouts, and even food left behind on the beach. Populations of these predator species are, in effect, human-abetted. Red Foxes are particularly effective predators of beach-nesting bird eggs and chicks, but were rarely seen on barrier islands. Now they are common residents, and are far less subject to the natural boom/crash cycle tied to food availability that would have kept their population in check.

Looking at all the potential obstacles for survival, there are some days when I think it is a small miracle that Piping Plovers and their beach-nesting counterparts, such as the state-endangered Least Tern and Black Skimmer, and species of special concern like the Common Tern and American Oystercatcher, still nest on the beaches in New Jersey to any significant degree.

But it is no miracle; rather, it's the result of a great deal of hard work and dedication. Each spring, as the birds return to their breeding grounds, various groups and agencies throughout the state put in motion measures to help protect them—an effort that has been going on for over twenty years now.

Where Piping Plovers are concerned, the New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife—Endangered and Nongame Species Program (ENSP) is currently responsible for the monitoring and protection of about half of the state’s breeding population (129 pairs in 2007) and nearly three-fifths of its
encourage you to reread or seek out that article (N.J. Audubon magazine, Summer 2003). It would be inaccurate to call it a thankless task, as helping steer these critically imperiled species towards recovery is rewarding in and of itself, but it isn’t easy, either. There are irate beachgoers to deal with, the physical demands of the job, extreme weather to cope with, not to mention the frustration and emotional toll of seeing nests you spent weeks trying to find and then monitor washed away in a flood; or even worse, young chicks just days away from being able to fly scooped up by a Laughing Gull. (Yes, they eat things other than the French fries you just bought on the boardwalk.) In any event, it is not the “day at the beach” that some people envision.

Most of the actual strategies utilized to protect beach-nesting birds are probably familiar to anyone who has been to a beach where nesting occurs. There are the post-and-rope fences and “AREA CLOSED” signs that protect the areas where nesting occurs or could occur — this is the main tool to help minimize human disturbance. Predator exclosures (cages) are placed around individual plover nests, sometimes in conjunction with electric fences to further thwart mammalian predators. Where needed, targeted mammalian predator removal is implemented. Seasonal restrictions on public off-road vehicle usage are instituted at some sites. Intensive monitoring is conducted at every site, at least three to five times a week but daily for some sites. This entails collecting biological data to track population trends and reproductive success, but also involves keeping tabs on human activity near nesting sites. The latter is especially important on weekends and holidays when our beaches are most crowded — monitors are even out at night on the Fourth of July when fireworks are scheduled. A stewardship component includes outreach and education; everything from handing out brochures and talking one-on-one with beachgoers to strategically placed interpretive signs and public presentations for larger audiences.

Other elements of beach-nesting bird conservation are less evident to the public. Close coordination with municipalities and other agencies is necessary to ensure that their actions don’t adversely impact nesting birds, whether that is preventing municipal vehicles (i.e., beach patrol, trash collection, beach rakes) from running over nests and young chicks, or making sure the timing or location of state and federally funded beach nourishment projects don’t conflict with nesting activity. The state’s ENSP and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service work closely together to help towns and agencies that own or administer beaches develop beach management plans that address a wide range of factors that affect nesting birds at specific sites. This type of long-range planning provides the framework for the entire conservation effort.

The main thing that should be clear from this long list of manage-
saving a bird like the Piping Plover, what purpose does it really serve?
This is not a difficult question to answer. I could take the easy route and say that because as a society we have insti-
tuted laws and regulations to pro-
tect endangered species, it is the
mandate or will of the people — a shared value, so to speak (at least of enough
people to constitute a majority). As for
the common self-interest argument
some make for saving species, it is
doubtful Piping Plovers or other
beach-nesting bird species hold the
key to conquering cancer or develop-
ing drugs for other diseases, as is the
case with some plants, for instance.
Birds surely have some economic value
in the sense that bird-watching and
ecotourism is of growing importance in
generating revenue in New Jersey,
both statewide and for local commu-
nities. However, when compared to the
economy as a whole, I doubt this
makes a compelling argument for the
Piping Plover by itself.

To me, any case to be made for the
"value" of a species like the Piping
Plover ultimately comes down to defin-
ing what type of world we want to live
in. If the beach is to be more than just a
commodity (i.e., a place that generates
revenue) or simply a place to play out
our recreational whims — and I believe
for most people the beach and ocean
hold a deeper place in their psyches —
then our native wildlife and plants
must have an equal place in the equa-
tion. It may sound like a bit of a cliché,
but we have to "share the shore" with
species like the Piping Plover if our
beaches are to remain unique and
special.

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BIRDING IN
CAPE MAY:
Third Time’s the Charm

— ELIZABETH J. ROSENTHAL

If I said I spent my formative years
of the 1960s on the site of a 17th-
century farm in New York, one might
assume that wildlife was plentiful in my
childhood. Certainly I was well-ac-
quainted with fleeting chickadees and
timice; the ebony “V” on Eastern
Meadowlarks’ necks; the ringing song
of the Red-winged Blackbird; the cry of
the gravel-loving Killdeer.

No? How about the grating voice of
the Common Grackle? No, again?
Surely, I could recognize the blush
breast of the House Finch? Not quite. I
knew pigeons. And sparrows — the
“generic” kind. Also those small, greg-
arious, noisy, black birds (European
Starlings, I would later learn). I’d heard
of crows, hawks, and owls, and I saw
plenty of seagulls at Orchard Beach.
Chickadees? I thought they had some-
thing to do with W. C. Fields and Mae
West. And titmice? Weren’t they a kind
of rodent?

The site of the farm I lived on, which
once belonged to Jonas Bronck, had
long since lost the attributes of a crop-
producing tract. The closest thing to a
meadow was the weedy patch beyond
the cyclone fence that kept young
bicyclists like me from veering off the
asphalt cycling path in Van Cortlandt
Park. The nearest thing to a ramshackle
barn was a sagging structure that had