Spring 2019 brings at least 3 pairs of Piping Plovers nesting in the Northern Natural Area at Island Beach State Park (IBSP). This is only the 5th time that piping plovers have nested at the park since 2005 and the 4th consecutive year they have nested on the oceanfront beach since 1989.

What is a piping plover? The piping plover is a small sand-colored, stocky shorebird that nests and feeds along coastal sand and gravel beaches in North America.

Why are piping plovers protected? Piping Plovers are listed both as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act (federal) and as an endangered species under the New Jersey Endangered and Nongame Species Conservation Act. As a landowner, the State of New Jersey is required to follow federal guidelines for managing recreational activities in piping plover breeding habitat. Harassment of protected species can result in a fine of up to $25,000 per bird.

Where does the piping plover nest? The piping plover pair at IBSP nested on the beach just east of the dunes. Their nest consists of a small scrape of sand where they lay up to 3-4 eggs, called a full clutch. These eggs are camouflaged to look like the sand and are very difficult to notice. The nest will be incubated for 27 days. The chicks are mobile within hours of hatching and start feeding immediately.

Why is a section of beach temporarily closed to vehicles? Piping plover chicks feed mainly at the wrack line, where the tide washes up and seek cover on the higher “foreshore” in the shade of sparse vegetation. This means that they are regularly moving between the dune and tideline. Their diet consists of marine life in the wet intertidal sand and insects and their larvae found in the wrack and dunes. Chicks also respond to stress, such as vehicles and predators, by crouching in the sand to hide. Because of this instinct, and because the chicks are very small and are well camouflaged by the sand, they may not be noticed when a vehicle drives through their foraging area. Additionally, if a chick is in a tire rut, they may not be able to get out, leaving them vulnerable to predators, unable to feed and unable to move when a vehicle drives through. Areas where chicks are vulnerable to being killed by vehicles are therefore closed to recreational vehicle use.

When will the beach reopen to vehicles? It can take piping plover chicks up to 35 days to fledge, which means they are able to fly. The beach will reopen when the chicks fledge.

What other activities are not allowed in the area? Because of the sensitive nature of the birds, dog walking, digging, fires and picnicking will not be allowed in the area until the chicks are fledged.

How can you help? Follow posted signs indicating areas closed to vehicles and pets. Do not follow or otherwise harass the beach nesting birds. Let Park staff know when you see them, new sightings are always possible!

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON PIPING PLOVERS:

http://www.state.nj.us/dep/fgw/ensp/pdf/end-thrtened/plover.pdf

http://www.conservewildlifenj.org/protecting/projects/beachnestingbird/