

Earth Day speaker dedicated to the safety of our shorebirds

By Jean Bartlett Pacifica Tribune Correspondents

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Carleton Eyster is a shorebird ecologist with the Pacific Coast and Central Valley Group at Point Blue. He is also a Snowy Plover biologist. On Saturday, April 26, Eyster will be a featured speaker at the Pacifica Beach Coalition's 10th Earth Day of Action and EcoFest (other speakers include "Plastic Free" author Beth Terry and Pacifica Poet Laureate Dorsetta Hale). This year's event honors the Snowy Plover, a threatened small shorebird. Its Earth Day motto is "Little Things Matter." Eyster explained "Point Blue."

"Point Blue Conservation Science studies birds and wildlife communities in an effort to offset the impacts of habitat loss and climate change, primarily by finding ecosystem-based solutions to landscape issues that affect all of us."

Eyster, who also studies arctic-nesting shorebirds, like the sandpipers and phalaropes, and has assisted with some work on dowitchers and Dunlin (long-distance California Central Valley and Central Coast migrants), originally planned on being a science illustrator. He began drawing birds at age nine, when his grandmother gave him "A Golden Guide to the Birds of North America."

His grandmother also gave him a pair of binoculars and by sixth grade, Eyster was studying a pair of Song Sparrows nesting in the reeds of an abandoned lot in his Hayward neighborhood. (His mom spearheaded a grassroots effort which turned that lot into a park.)

Eyster said he never fancied himself as a scientist. "In fact I steered clear of chemistry and physics." He headed off to the University of California, Santa Cruz, with environmental education in mind.

"I like connecting people with nature, but I am simply not organized enough to handle a classroom," Eyster said. "The dynamic and unpredictable flow of the natural world is what draws me in and what sustains me. I enjoy sharing that with others."

Eyster studied ecology and science communication. Later he would obtain a Certificate Degree in Science Illustration at UCSC.

"I always wanted to study songbirds, the beautiful warblers, specifically, of the eastern forests," Eyster noted. "And I eventually did, spending a one-year hiatus from plovers in Maine."

For the past 20 years, Eyster has largely devoted his time to the Snowy Plover. Snowy Plovers, which move in response to predators and weather and storm surge/tidal swell, gather locally at Linda Mar Beach in late July through April. They can also be found wintering in Half Moon Bay, Stinson Beach, Dillon Beach, Point Reyes National Seashore and in "small pocket beaches" in San Mateo and Santa Cruz Counties.

"Nesting has so diminished in the past 10 years along this stretch, that finding a nest from San Francisco to Santa Cruz is an extremely noteworthy event," Eyster said. "The currently healthy population on Monterey Bay has close to 380 breeding adults."

Eyster talked plovers.

"With their big eyes, plovers love to eat kelp flies," Eyster noted. "Consequently, plovers can be found in the tidal wash zone where there is lots of kelp. They like to lay their eggs in the open, often tucking them into a

swirl of bull kelp or other driftwood debris. Some will line the nest with small shells and pebbles, but many are satisfied with just a 'scrape' or depression dug by both adults. The male will start the process and the female will pick the one she likes. Plovers are both territorial and site-faithful, meaning they will often return to their preferred nesting site first, also their natal site as well. The males raise the young and the female renests with another male immediately upon hatching chicks. It takes 28 days to incubate and another month to raise the flightless chicks to 'fledging' or flying age."

Eyster is thrilled over several recent discoveries of nesting plovers where they had been long absent.

"Last year in Stinson Beach nesting occurred for the first time in 30 years," Eyster said, "a bird that I banded as a chick on Monterey Bay. And two years ago, a male raised two chicks to flying age at Pescadero State Beach."

Eyster said the plovers know how to adapt to change as they literally face shifting sands (one year a beach is there, the next it is too small to find a place to lay eggs.) There may also be egg-eating coyotes, or crows, or predators such as Peregrine Falcons and Merlins.

"Like us, the plover needs a little help from their friends," Eyster said. "Be aware of your surroundings. Keeping dogs on a leash minimizes disturbance to shorebirds and allows them to feed or rest successfully on the beach. Respect fenced areas for wildlife and dune habitat and respect no-dog areas. Get involved with local restoration groups to plant natives. Tell your friends."

Pacifica Beach Coalition's Earth Day Action & EcoFest, Saturday, April 26. Action through cleanups, habitat restoration and gardening, 9 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. EcoFest at Linda Mar Beach, 11:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. Visit <http://www.pacificabeachcoalition.org/> to find out how you can participate.

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