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Western Snowy Plovers have returned to Pacifica State Beach in Linda Mar

By Paul Donahue
Special to the Pacifica Tribune
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Western Snowy Plovers are small sand-colored shorebirds that reside on sandy beaches along the Pacific coast of North America. Unfortunately, the population of this species has been in decline due to a loss of habitat and disturbances from development, recreation, and other human pressures. In 1993 the West Coast population of the species was listed as threatened by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service under the federal Endangered Species Act. It was also listed as a "species of special concern" by the State of California.

Up until the early 1970s, Western Snowy Plovers nested in Pacifica, but now the species is only found here during the non-breeding season, approximately from mid-August to May. There are three beaches in Pacifica that are host to wintering Western Snowy Plovers. However, while Sharp Park Beach and Rockaway Beach are used by the plovers in small numbers or only occasionally, only Pacifica State Beach (formerly Linda Mar Beach) supports significant numbers of wintering Western Snowy Plovers.

For the past six years, regular counts by observers document that Pacifica State Beach has provided wintering habitat for at least 20 to 24 Western Snowy Plovers, or about 1 percent of the total West Coast breeding population of the species. In previous years the counts of wintering birds on the beach were even higher, with up to 33 individuals recorded on the beach during the 2000-2005 period.

Many of the Western Snowy Plovers seen on Pacifica State Beach have been color-banded as part of a research project to learn more about the movements and requirements of the species. The records of color-banded birds from Pacifica State Beach show that the majority of the color-banded Western Snowy Plovers wintering on the beach are originating from the important nesting areas for the species in northern Monterey County, California, approximately 70 miles to the south. In particular, the color-banded plovers are coming from Salinas National Wildlife Refuge, Salinas State Park, and the Moss Landing salt ponds.



As of Aug. 12, the Western Snowy Plovers began returning to Pacifica State Beach for the non-breeding season. Five individuals were seen on that date including a color-banded bird known as Lime-Green:Yellow-Orange (LG:YO). This bird was hatched this summer at a site called Reservation Road, just north of Fort Ord in Monterey County. By Aug. 13 the count was up to eight individuals.

Unfortunately, demonstrating the plight of the species, in the few minutes we were watching the five plovers on Aug. 12, they were disturbed by two running off-leash dogs, and two people flying kites right over the plover resting area. Western Snowy Plovers require the same sorts of sandy beaches that us humans prefer for our recreation, and that has been one of the principal reasons for the decline in their numbers.



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People walking down the beach disturb the plovers a little; people with dogs on leash disturb them a lot more; off-leash dogs running through the plover area are a disaster. The real threat to the plovers from dogs is not that the dogs are going to catch and kill them. Dogs are way too slow to capture anything other than sick or injured plovers. The danger is in how the dogs affect the energy balance of the birds.

Western Snowy Plovers, like most wild creatures, exist on a fairly tight energy budget. There is a small amount of slack built into the system, but not a lot. Anything that negatively impacts that energy balance threatens their physiological well-being. Constantly flying around to avoid dogs certainly qualifies as a negative impact on that balance. It disrupts their feeding, and it disrupts their rest time; rest that is as important to them as it is to us.

If the physiological well-being of the plovers is diminished, it affects their over-winter survival rate. More importantly, it affects their reproductive success in the next breeding season.

If you care about protecting Western Snowy Plovers on Pacifica State Beach, there are several things you can do:

- Avoid walking through or picnicking in the area most heavily used by the plovers. The plovers are largely restricted to an area of dry sand on the northern half of the beach. Along this stretch of beach, stick closer to the water.
- Be sure to keep your dog on a leash. If you are with your dog, you might even consider keeping to the stretch of beach south of Crespi Drive.
- Keep activities like kite-flying to the south of Crespi Drive. Kites might seem harmless enough to us, but to the plovers they can look like aerial predators.
- Properly dispose of any food scraps from your visit to the beach. The food attracts scavengers like crows and ravens that then turn to plover eggs and chicks when food scraps are not available.

The plovers do not presently nest on Pacifica State Beach, but it's not a good idea to encourage these scavengers in the event that nesting plovers some day return.

Source: http://www.mercurynews.com/ci_18790904?IADID=Search-www.mercurynews.com-www.mercurynews.com

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