

Plight of the snowy plover

Resource Managers Close Public Beaches to Stem Further Losses

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A tiny shore bird is starting to cast a very long shadow along beaches of the Central Coast. The western snowy plover, already listed as threatened on the federal endangered species list, suffered a significant population drop during the 1997 El Niño weather event and its populations have not recovered.

"The plovers are clearly in trouble," said Mark Massara with the Sierra Club's coastal program. "Without immediate and dramatic measures, the bird may be extinct within a few years."

In response, the Air Force recently announced that more than 11 miles of beaches at Vandenberg Air force Base would be closed during spring and summer, including Ocean Beach, which is popular with Lompoc residents. The base had an estimated 220 adult birds before El Niño, but only 78 were counted last year, said Lee Ann Naue, a biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Ventura. "If we are going to help these species recover, we are going to have to have some beaches that are completely closed," she said. The agency says that further beach closures are unlikely, but other resources managers are taking some unusual steps to protect the bird and help it recover.

The state parks department is drawing up a habitat conservation plan to outline ways to manage the plovers and other endangered species on park land in the county, said Joe Mette, parks superintendent.

"We don't have any plans for beach closures, but we've got some tough sledding ahead to get the plovers back to the numbers they once were," he said. At the Guadalupe oil field, independent researchers are experimenting with creating habitat that is beneficial to the plovers. The program has met with some success, said Tom Jordan, the project's ecological coordinator.

Artificial sand dunes have been created and driftwood and other beach debris has been scattered over a stretch of beach that was cleaned up for oil pollution over the winter. Ten nesting pairs of the birds are active at the oil field and two have already laid eggs. "At least we are sure they are coming back," Jordan said.

The snowy plover is a tiny bird that could fit in the palm of a person's hand. They are found along beaches and the shores of coastal lakes and nest from March through September.

Their nesting and rearing habits make them particularly vulnerable to human disturbance. They lay their eggs in tiny depressions scraped in the sand near the beach vegetation line. They are easily driven off of their nests by people or pets walking by or vehicles driven on the beach.

A variety of wild animals and pets kill the birds and eat their eggs. Additionally, hatchlings the size of a quarter must scurry to the edge of the surf to feed within hours of being born.

"You could step on one and not even know it," Naue said.

The beaches at Vandenberg were targeted for closure because they are federal property where the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has greater authority. Also, the Air Force Base contains the largest block of plover habitat and is the most likely place the bird could stage a comeback, Naue said.

San Luis Obispo County has six beaches that are considered crucial plover habitat. Pismo Beach, Guadalupe Dunes and the sand spit at Morro Bay are considered the best habitat with San Carpoforo Creek near Ragged Point and Toro Creek and Morro Strand Beach north of Morro Bay having lesser quality habitat.

Most of these beaches are managed by the State Parks Department. Rangers have developed a system for protecting the plovers, Mette said.

During the nesting season spotters are sent out to find nesting birds. Once a nest is discovered, an orange enclosure fence is erected around it.

This is effective at keeping humans and pets out but can alert wild predators, such as coyotes, fox and raccoons, that the nests are there, Mette said.

"Everybody is sort of wading into this without knowing exactly how it's going to turn out," he said.