

Get to Know the Western Snowy Plover

Saving Species Together ~ *Everyone can help protect species!*



WESTERN SNOWY PLOVER

The Western Snowy Plover is a small (5-7"), rare shorebird, listed as threatened by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services (USFWS). It nests on certain beaches along the Pacific coast, where its light-colored feathers are a perfect camouflage against the sandy open habitat where they selectively breed and raise their young. Even their tiny speckled eggs blend in with the sand to match its background, making it difficult for potential predators to discern its presence among the many sticks and pebbles. Between March and September, western snowy plovers naturally select flat, sparsely vegetated open areas to nest so they can easily spot the approach of predators. They're creative nest-builders, using nearly anything they can find, including driftwood, kelp, shells and rocks.

Beneficial Bird

Plovers eat insects and mollusks on the beach along the shoreline. It's an important beach cleaning service that benefits the beach ecosystem and visitors alike. Plovers are also an indicator species that helps scientists assess the health of beach ecosystems. Tourists sometime visit beaches where snowy plovers at known to live, just to watch them run up and down the beach and attend to their nesting duties.

Threats

Plovers' natural predators include falcons and owls, coyotes and raccoons. Other predators include ravens, crows, red fox and domestic dogs. These predators were either introduced by humans, or our activities that led to increased numbers.

Some of our activities on beaches make us predators, too. Shoreline construction destroys the plovers' and other shorebirds' habitat. Family dogs seem innocent to their owners, but their curiosity and often rambunctious behavior is terrifying to a tiny bird. Plovers often fly away from nests at just the sight of a dog, whether it is on a leash or not. We should never let our dogs run loose on any beach. Beaches are home to many creatures—some we may never see—that, like plovers, are frightened away by dogs.

When we drive vehicles or ride bikes on beaches, we damage habitat and often run over nests and birds. Flying a kite may seem harmless enough to us, but wildlife whose predators include large soaring birds see a kite overhead as a threat. When a disturbance causes plovers to fly or run away, they lose the energy needed to maintain their nests and the eggs can die from exposure—to either nearby predators or to the cold air. They need a parent's constant vigilance to sit on the nest and keep them warm.

We have also introduced invasive species such as European beach grass, which spreads quickly, making sand dunes less desirable as a place for snowy plovers to nest because predators can hide in the dunes close to nests.