

The Snowy Plover is Endangered in California

Description – The Western Snowy Plover is a small shorebird distinguished from other plovers by its small size, pale brown upper parts, dark patches on either side of the upper breast, and dark gray to blackish legs. Snowy Plovers are about 5.9 to 6.6 inches long.



Snowy plovers are primarily visual foragers, using the run-stop-peck method of feeding typical on invertebrates in the wet sand and amongst surf-cast kelp within the intertidal zone, in dry, sandy areas above the high tide, on salt pans, on spoil sites, and along the edges of salt marshes, salt ponds, and lagoons. They sometimes probe for prey in the sand and pick insects from low-growing plants.

Range and Nesting – The Pacific coast population of the Western Snowy Plover breeds primarily on coastal beaches from southern Washington to southern Baja California, Mexico.

The Snowy Plover's patchy distribution, not only in North America but elsewhere in the world, is due to its specialized habitat requirements. Keeping to large, flat expanses of sand, it avoids competition for food in a habitat in which few other birds can exist. Here these plovers, with their pale coloration, are difficult to see even when they run. As soon as the plover stops running, it seems to disappear, blending into its surroundings. The eggs also blend with dry sand or salty barren soil and are almost impossible to find once the incubating bird slips off them. Inland, these birds feed mainly on insects but along the coast, they also take crustaceans, worms, and other small marine creatures.



The nesting season extends from early March through late September. Nests are simple depressions in the sand started by male during courtship. During incubation, both sexes will add material (such as pebbles, pieces of seaweed and etc.) to the nest scrape, and will dig out any sand that may accumulate in it.



During the breeding season, male Snowy Plovers will defend a territory and will vocalize and begin to build nest scrapes in order to attract a mate. Along the West Coast of the U.S. (where there is a relatively long breeding season) female Snowy Plovers will often leave to nest with a new partner shortly after their first brood has hatched. Males will generally brood the chicks, but will then attempt to find a new breeding partner.

Nests are often located near a conspicuous landmark, such as a piece of driftwood, a shell, or vegetation. In areas where there is little sand to dig in, Snowy Plovers often rely on pre-formed depressions, even nesting in animal/human footprints in dried mud. The typical clutch size is three eggs but it can range from two to six. The eggs and the birds can



be hard to see, even when close-up. Sandy camouflage colors helps hide the eggs and young from predators—but it also makes them easy to trample.

Snowy Plover chicks leave the nest within hours after hatching to search for food. They are not able to fly for approximately 4 weeks after hatching. Adult plovers do not feed their chicks, but lead them to suitable feeding areas. Adults use distraction displays to lure predators and people away from chicks. Adult plovers signal the chicks to crouch, with calls, as another way to protect them. They may also lead chicks, especially larger ones, away from predators. Most chick mortality occurs within 6 days after hatching.



Endangered Status – The greatest threat to Snowy Plovers is habitat alteration. Increased development and recreational use along coastal beaches has probably led to decreases in breeding populations along the Gulf Coast and Pacific Coast. These changes include construction projects along the coast, as well as more subtle changes such as beach raking and increased recreational use of these areas, such as horseback riding, camping, and off-road vehicle use. These activities can lead to loss of suitable nesting habitat, loss of eggs from trampling, or simple disturbance of Snowy Plovers incubating eggs at their nest. In the interior, dams have altered the hydrology of some rivers, salt flats have been flooded for water impoundments and other similar changes have decreased the availability of suitable Snowy Plover nesting habitat.

Since 1993, Snowy Plovers breeding in along the Pacific Coast of the U.S. (Washington, Oregon, California, and birds found within 50 miles of the Pacific Coast in Mexico) have been listed as a "Threatened" species under the Endangered Species Act



Management and Research Needs – Steps are being taken to reduce the impact of humans on the plovers. These include educating the public and warning them not to approach the off-limits nesting areas, fencing these areas, and providing access ways to beaches that detour the public around the plover colonies, as well as restricting vehicle access on beaches during the nesting season.