

Bandon biologists dedicate themselves to snowy plover recovery

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Snowy plovers are a rare shorebird species that live on Oregon beaches. These fluffy little birds blend in with their surroundings and can be hard to spot. Just few decades ago these birds almost disappeared for good.

The populations of the Western Snowy Plover have made a comeback thanks to a coordinated effort by biologists, volunteers and educated beachgoers up and down the Oregon Coast.

Dave Lauten and Kathy Castelein have been on the forefront of this effort. The Bandon-based biologists came to Oregon to study plovers 26-years-ago.

“We were hired to do the job the first year, and then we liked it so much it turned into another year... and then it turned into 26 years,” Lauten said.

The biologists study the birds by finding their nests – which consist of just a few tiny eggs laid right in the sand. They monitor the nests along with the mating pairs of birds. When the baby birds hatch, the biologists put small colored bands on their legs in order to track them.

“It’s interesting to study the individual birds at each beach and see the dynamics of population – and what is working and what isn’t working,” Castelein said.

Lauten and Castelein have worked with the Nature Conservancy and Oregon State University, and they now work with Portland State University’s Oregon Biodiversity Information Center.

Their dedication to birds and to wildlife is what keeps them motivated.

“We work 7-days a week all summer long. You have to have the passion to get up out of bed at 5 a.m. every morning day after day and you have to have a passion for the birds – and find it interesting,” Lauten said.

“It’s a little bit like a game because you are getting clues all the time about where the birds might be nesting and where to find the birds - and whether or not the brood is still active. So for me I look at as a little bit of a challenge to make it fun,” he said.

Bringing the birds back

Not everyone knows there are endangered-species right here on the Oregon Coast, the biologists said.

“There are a lot of people that don’t understand what is going on, or don’t even know that these birds exist,” said Lauten. “But it’s happening right here.”

Snowy Plovers were listed as an endangered species in 1993. At that time, there were only about 70 snowy plovers left on Oregon Coast beaches.

The United States Fish and Wildlife Service designed a recovery plan for snowy plovers with a goal to grow the population to 250 plovers on the Oregon Coast and the southern tip of Washington.

The population of snowy plovers has exceeded that goal since 2015 – and the highest estimate of breeding birds recorded was 613 birds in 2021, according to Cheryl Strong, a fish and wildlife biologist based in Newport.

“We definitely have years when they do better than others – but in the big picture of things they are doing really well,” Strong said.

A number of different agencies have been involved in snowy plover recovery – from federal and state agencies, to nonprofits such as Audubon.

“It’s a very cohesive group. It’s been a very collaborative effort that has been going on to help recover this species in Oregon,” Strong reported.

Biologists Lauten and Castelein said when they originally started working with plovers, their habitat was limited to only certain beaches on the south end of the state.

Now, they nest in every county on the Oregon Coast – which is really a success for the state, they said.

Plovers in peril

Snowy Plovers have been in trouble for a few different, but inter-related, reasons. This includes habitat loss, an increase in predators and human disturbance.

Snowy Plovers rely on camouflage and early detection of predators to survive. They like to be in wide open places where they can see threats coming from far away.

Invasive grasses have made it easier for different kinds of predators to prey on snowy plovers.

“The grass can bring in predators like raccoons, skunks, foxes and weasels. They can hide out in that habitat where they couldn’t 100 years ago,” Castelein said.

Another main predator is ravens and crows.

“There are a lot more of them now than ever because of the human resources that they exploit like dumps and dumpsters and even farms,” said Lauten.

Ravens are extremely intelligent animals and they are broad omnivores, so they can eat a lot of different things, he said. Unfortunately this includes snowy plover eggs.

“They are really smart and really efficient at finding plover nests – and as Kathy and I say the ‘incredible edible egg.’ It’s a lot of protein and it doesn’t fight back or bite,” Lauten said.

Also, because plovers live on the beach and lay eggs right on the beach, their nests are at risk of inadvertently being stepped on or trampled over by beach-goers, dogs, horses and ATVs.

Human interaction can also make snowy plovers leave their nests – and wind can blow sand over their nests or predators can swoop in while they are away.

Pay attention to signs

State and Federal agencies have placed signs to alert beachgoers of the presence of plovers, and sometimes rope off certain areas of beaches where plovers nest.

“The signs are here for a reason. It helps people to be aware,” Castelein said. “When you get to the parking lot, take the five minutes to read the signs so you can understand what the rules and regulations are. Because we do try to provide space for humans to recreate even where there are snowy plovers.”

The 30 seconds of attention it takes to become aware of the snowy plovers can make the difference between a positive or negative human interaction. Snowy plovers can co-habitate with humans if the humans just give them a little space – the biologists said.

“Generally speaking, we do get cooperation from the public. The ones who don’t usually follow the rules usually fall into two categories: They are just new to the beach or don’t pay attention, or you get serious violations from people who are repeat offenders and there’s just not much you can do except bring in law enforcement,” Lauten said.

“We would rather just educate people though,” Castelein added. “Sometimes we ask people to stay on the wet sand and they have trouble understanding what that means.”

“I also think people sometimes assume plovers are nesting in the grass and not just right on the beach and that’s a tough one to get across. Literally their nest is just three “rocks” on the sand and it’s so easy to step on it – or a dog or horse to walk on it, or also an ATV or a bike,” Lauten said.

Because they dedicate so much of their time an effort to snowy plover recovery, the biologists said it is disappointing to they see plover eggs or a nest destroyed by human causes.

“It’s a little rough because we have hosts designated at the state parks – people who are out here often and moving ropes around and trying to educate people – so it is avoidable,” Castelein said.

People should be able to recreate on the beaches and there should be room for plovers to nest too, she said. The idea is to "Share the Shore." This means having fun while protecting the natural environment at the same time.