

Managing beaches for piping plovers in New England

What landowners need to know

We use our coastal beaches for recreation, they protect adjacent land from storms, and they provide habitat for wildlife. Coastal beaches from North Carolina to Newfoundland are the summer home for the uncommon piping plover, a small shorebird protected as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

To balance the continued survival of the piping plover with the enjoyment of coastal beaches, special management practices are required.

Piping plover basics

These small, sand-colored shorebirds arrive on our beaches in late March to early April. The males establish territories and begin courting the females. The males make several scrapes – small, shallow depressions in the sand. The females choose which scrape to use and usually lay four eggs. The eggs hatch in about 25 days.

The tiny, down-covered chicks are quickly able to follow their parents and learn where to find marine worms, beetles, crustaceans, mollusks and other invertebrates. The plover's richest food sources are located in the ocean and bayside intertidal zone, ephemeral pools, the wrack line and sparse vegetation.



Heidi Hanlon/USFWS

Piping plover chicks in nest

Piping plovers and disturbance

The small size of piping plover chicks, their camouflage coloring, and their habit to remain motionless when a threat approaches put them at high risk from human disturbance. When people, pets, kites and fireworks come too close to a nest, they may flush the incubating parents. When the parents leave the nest, the eggs can become overheated or cool down, damaging the developing chicks. Hand-held kites, kite-buggies, and surfkites are especially alarming to plovers; scientists believe plovers see kites as threatening predatory birds.

Very young chicks can also be trapped in the ruts left by vehicles. Beach raking machines can scoop up and kill chicks and remove a vital food source for chicks and adults. Pets, especially dogs off-leash, can harass and kill chicks too.

The intertidal zone is the sand area exposed during low tide and underwater during high tide.

The wrack line is the beach area where organic material accumulates, including seaweed, seashells, driftwood and other natural materials.

A symbolic fence consists of one or two strands of string tied between posts to delineate areas where beach users should not enter.

Special management for piping plovers

Beach management practices can help or harm the survival of piping plovers on our coastal beaches. Below is a partial list of special management practices that will help piping plovers.

To best determine which of these management practices to follow on your property, you will want to meet with a piping plover biologist or monitor. Beach managers and landowners are urged to implement these recommendations to lessen the chance of violating the Endangered Species Act.



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Piping plover parent with chick

In New England, we highly recommend the following management practices from April 1 through Aug. 31:

1. Install a symbolic fence around plover courtship habitat and at least 50 meters (55 yards) from plover nests. This will prevent disturbance to nesting adults, protect eggs and provide a safe place for newly hatched chicks.
2. Ensure all human activities are outside the fenced area.
3. Post warning signs along the fence.
4. Require dogs to be on leashes. We recommend short leashes.
5. Prohibit feral cats and keep pet cats indoors.
6. Do not leave or bury trash on beaches (trash attracts predators).
7. Work with a plover monitor or biologist to identify what areas of the beach should not be raked.
8. Prohibit kite flying within 200 meters (219 yards) of fenced areas.
9. Prohibit fireworks on beaches with plovers.
10. Implement motor vehicle management recommendations in the recreational activities guidelines (see Web page).

The complete "Guidelines for Managing Recreational Activities in Piping Plover Breeding Habitat on the U.S. Atlantic Coast to Avoid Take Under Section 9 of the Endangered Species Act" can be found at <http://www.fws.gov/northeast/pipingplover/recguide.html>.

Endangered Species Act responsibilities

Under the Endangered Species Act, any person may be held responsible for the take of a threatened species.

Endangered Species Act definitions

Threatened species are plants and animals likely to become endangered within the foreseeable future throughout all or a significant portion of their ranges.

Person refers to any individual, corporation, partnership, trust, association, or any other private entity; or any officer, employee, agent, department, or instrumentality of the federal government, or of any state, municipality, or political subdivision of a state.

Take means to harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture, or collect, or to attempt to engage in any such conduct.

Harass means an intentional or negligent act or omission which creates the likelihood of injury to wildlife by annoying it to such an extent as to significantly disrupt normal behavioral patterns which include, but are not limited to, breeding, feeding or sheltering.

Harm means an act that actually kills or injures wildlife. Such act may include significant habitat modification or degradation where it actually kills or injures wildlife by significantly impairing essential behavioral patterns, including breeding, feeding or sheltering.

Federal penalties for the take of a piping plover adult, chick or egg under the Endangered Species Act

Criminal

- Up to 6 months imprisonment and/or
- Up to a \$25,000 fine

Civil

- \$12,000 – for a knowing violation
- \$500 – for a strict liability violation



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Piping plover

For more information about piping plovers, see http://www.fws.gov/northeast/piping_plover

Contact us

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