This year, Maine’s 98 pairs of plovers fledged 199 chicks, giving us a productivity of 2.03 chicks fledged per nesting pair. We have only had productivity over 2 chicks fledged per pair once in the last 25 years, and that was in 2011 when we only had 33 nesting pairs. Reaching high productivity rates is one thing when we have a small population, but fledging so many chicks with a record high number of pairs is an astonishing success.

The list of beach records is long this year, but a few stand out from the rest. We had more plovers nesting on Popham Beach than we have ever had at one beach, with a total of 14 pairs. Ogunquit Beach fledged an incredible 30 chicks in 2020, which is more than any Maine beach has fledged since monitoring began in 1981. We had a record high of four beaches fledge over 20 chicks, at Ogunquit (30), Western (21), Seawall (21), and Popham (25). Many beaches had the largest number of chicks fledged in over a decade—in some instances largest counts ever or in nearly 30 years. Ogunquit, Laudholm, Scarborough, Higgins, and Seawall had high counts that have not been matched in 15 years or more. Parsons Beach, Goose Rocks, and Ram Island Farm reached fledgling numbers they have not seen in a decade. Some of our triumphs were small; although no plovers ultimately nested on Hunnewell Beach in Phippsburg, we were encouraged to see a scraping pair when we have not had a nest there since 2001.

Some luck played a role in our success. In spite of some strange weather, we only lost one nest to overwash this year, while in some years like 2017 we lost as many as 26 nests to storm tides. Still, our cumulative 14 abandoned nests and 14 predated nests meant many pairs had to renest, but fortunately many of these second attempts were successful.

See our table and read other stories inside to learn more about this remarkable nesting season.
Francesca Gundrum

Plovers in a Pandemic

The COVID-19 global pandemic brought its own unique suite of challenges to the Coastal Birds Program this season. From carpooling restrictions to atypical nest locations, this season pushed us to engage with some of our most creative conservation strategies yet.

Each biologist was assigned their own work vehicle and was encouraged to limit interactions with people on the beach—unlike the usual requirements of this position. Whenever possible, we met with our volunteers from a safe distance and delegated many of our vital lifeguard and public works trainings to volunteer coordinators and community leaders. At the end of each field day, rather than congregate in the office, we would either connect over the phone from our homes or spread out amongst the shade of the trees at Gilsland Farm. Our field crew quickly adapted to the conditions and so did the birds... for the most part.

Every season there are hiccups, incidents, and plover nests in unexpected locations, and this season proved to have more of those than ever. Many folks we met and spoke with assumed that fewer people on the beaches surely must have helped the birds thrive this season. While the plovers did in fact do well this year, we had anticipated a record year after 2019’s outstanding numbers. Any success in productivity can only be attributed to the partnerships between Maine Audubon, MDIFW, USFWS, municipalities, landowners, and our extraordinary volunteers.

The early closing of some beaches meant that birds were often able to select nesting sites unhindered, but at times that translated to nests in areas where foot traffic is high during prime beach season. The most challenging nest location goes to the “Jetty Nest” at Wells Beach: a nest in the middle of the cobble pathway along the jetty that leads to the main parking lot. The town, landowners, and volunteers worked tirelessly with us to keep the path fully closed until the eggs hatched. Protected by town staff and several layers of fluorescent orange stake and twine, this nest successfully fledged one of the two eggs that hatched.

COVID-19 certainly had us all on edge, and the wide open spaces and fresh salty air of Maine’s beaches inevitably became a haven for many. We strove to educate residents and visitors alike while giving space to both the birds and people, and developed new ways to connect with beachgoers (see page 5). Still, we had many instances of disruption and destruction during the nesting season; children entered restricted nesting areas and picked up eggs and even chicks, and sites were vandalized, resulting in lost chicks and nests. To tackle these many issues, we reached out to birding communities for support, developed new educational materials, and connected with the public via TV interviews and news articles.

Despite the challenges, with the help of those dedicated to their survival, the birds persevered and boasted record highs. From funky nests to face coverings, the 2020 season was a whirlwind of creative conservation strategies celebrated with plenty of “air fives” and lots of homemade sourdough.
Rehab Success Stories

While wildlife belongs in the wild and we do all we can to ensure our birds thrive on the beaches, sometimes they require help from a rehabilitator. Thanks to everyone who had a hand in giving these birds a second chance at life.

In June, a three-week-old plover chick from Old Orchard Beach was found with fishing thread wrapped around its wings, legs, and beak. Constrained by the thread, it was partially immobile and required immediate attention. Our biologists managed to get much of the tangled thread off the chick while on the beach, but it was clear we needed professional help to remove the remaining thread and repair some of the leg damage; rehabilitation was the only way we could potentially get this bird back to where it belonged. Wildlife rehabilitator Kappy Sprenger has worked with plovers in the past, and she successfully helped this bird recover from what was significant leg damage. Her hard efforts paid off, and after two weeks she reported that the chick was running, and looked ready to be reunited with the beach. To our surprise, the bird flew effortlessly upon its release and joined other foraging fledglings shortly afterwards.

In early September one of our super volunteers on Old Orchard Beach, Missy Mans, shared her concerns about a fledgling that was still on site weeks after its siblings had left. She watched this bird closely and never saw it fly, and one day also noticed an eye injury. We were able to successfully capture the fledgling and deliver it to Avian Haven, a wildlife bird rehabilitation center in Freedom. After conducting a series of exams, the rehabilitators told us that the fledgling’s eye would recover, but that it had suffered a break in its right wing that would make it impossible for the bird to fly again. Knowing it could not survive in the wild, we reached out to the New England Aquarium in Boston. Unable to take the bird, they reached out to the Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago, who were looking for such an opportunity. Thanks to the hard work of these partners, this bird will be an ambassador for beach-nesting birds everywhere.
Least Terns Year in Maine

After several challenging years, Maine’s Least Terns were finally awarded a successful nesting season this year with three Least Tern colonies present. In past years, there have been two large nesting sites, one in Kennebunk and another on Stratton Island, with smaller sites on mainland beaches. This year no Least Terns nested on Stratton Island, but we saw the largest nesting colony on Higgins Beach since observations began there in 1977. The large colony at Kennebunk continued, and a small colony also appeared at Seawall Beach in Phippsburg. Maine saw a higher productivity than it has in many years with at least 258 pairs (this does not include late nesting attempts) fledging a minimum of 116 chicks for an estimated 0.45 fledglings per nesting pair.

The Least Tern colony managed by Rachel Carson National Wildlife Refuge (RCNWF) saw a better productivity rate than in recent years. This season, 65 chicks fledged from 130 nests for a productivity rate of 0.5 fledglings per nesting pair. The greatest challenge facing the colony this summer was storm-related overwash that removed nests with both eggs and chicks. Due to these events, a large portion of the colony had to renest multiple times throughout the season. Predation was not as significant an issue compared to previous years; however Great-horned Owls were present and preyed upon several fledglings and at least one adult. The colony had mostly dispersed by August 3 and was completely gone by August 7.

Managed by Maine Audubon, Higgins Beach hosted at least 128 pairs, significantly larger than our previous record of 45 nesting pairs. This colony absorbed many of those that typically nest on Stratton Island. This season, 50 chicks fledged, giving us a productivity of 0.39 fledglings per nesting pair. Both predators and heavy beach use by the public make Higgins a challenging place for terns, but thanks to an electric net fence and dedicated volunteers, the terns at Higgins were successful. Fledglings lingered in the area through mid-August making final numbers difficult to assess, and our estimate is a conservative one.

Least Terns continued to keep us on our toes, but for the time being we are reveling in a successful season.

SPECIAL ALERT

Piping Plover chicks are running around Maine’s beaches. Help them by keeping your distance and encouraging others to do the same. With too much attention, the adults will feel threatened and abandon their broods (families), and the chicks will not survive. It’s the right thing to do. It’s also the law.

These chicks need your help.

Do look from a distance
Do give them privacy
Do walk at the water’s edge
Do bring your dog to the beach!

If the beach allows dogs...
Don’t keep your dog leashed
Do look from a distance
Do give them privacy
Do walk at the water’s edge
Do bring your dog to the beach!
Outreach from a [Social] Distance

Francesca Gundrum

In a typical season, our crew’s outreach efforts include setting up tables at beach entrances to educate beachgoers about Maine’s coastal shorebirds, handing out educational pamphlets, and giving out temporary plover tattoos to enthusiastic children. With COVID-19 restrictions, we knew we had to engage with the public more creatively this season. We boosted our social media efforts and worked closely with Maine Audubon’s Communications Department to craft messaging, set up TV interviews, and connect with local writers. The most novel and effective outreach tool we created this season: a beach walk, an interactive outreach activity that helped us connect with beachgoers as soon as they set foot on the sand.

We developed a series of signs that include basic information about plovers, where they nest, and what the public can do to help protect Maine’s endangered shorebirds. As an incentive, we directed those that read our signs to take a short online quiz to test their plover knowledge for a chance to win prizes! We collaborated with companies that sell ocean-friendly products who kindly donated their recycled and/or plastic replacement products. The prizes included sunglasses created from recycled ocean plastic, bamboo cutlery with the #sharetheshore hashtag engraved on the handles, shampoo and conditioner bars from a Maine-based local shop, handmade plover pins and patches, and more!

Outreach this season was a challenge that our crew took in stride. Hundreds of people participated in our beach walk activity this season and we plan on incorporating this successful activity into our outreach efforts next season and beyond.

Sargent Tim Spahr and Warden Eric Blanchard have always been quick to respond to our calls and make sure things were followed up on. Their dedication to plovers and to Maine wildlife will be missed as they both retired this year. Their support and guidance have been invaluable to the success of this project and we sincerely thank them both for their dedication to Maine’s endangered coastal birds.

Thank you, Eric and Tim, you will be missed!
Volunteer Shout Out!

Missy Mans

Old Orchard Beach is not an easy place for nesting plovers or plover lovers. The mass of people and plovers can coexist, but it takes a lot of communication and work. Missy tirelessly surveys this often-crowded beach multiple times each day and keeps in close contact with the town and the plover crew. She is an avid wildlife photographer who fully captures the growth of OOB’s new plovers each season. Thank you for your dedication to this project, Missy.

Volunteer Coordinator Shout Out!

Suzanne Craig

Suzanne Craig was our new Volunteer Coordinator for the Town of Wells this year, but you certainly could not tell it was her first year in this position. Managing one of our largest plover monitoring volunteer programs, Suzanne handled endless challenges with grace and the support of outgoing coordinator Gary Sheehan. Wells proved one of our most challenging beaches to manage this year from quirky nest locations (see page 2) to frequent disturbances to repeated vandalism of our fencing. Suzanne rose to the occasion and dedicated countless hours to this community, along with a strong crew of Wells volunteers. Thank you, Suzanne and all of Wells—we look forward to working with you for many years to come!

Coastal Birds Project:

The Piping Plover and Least Tern Project newsletter is published annually by Maine Audubon in partnership with the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries & Wildlife and Rachel Carson National Wildlife Refuge. Maine Audubon has worked for more than 35 years to restore Maine’s Piping Plover and Least Tern populations with help from our partners, Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife (MDIFW) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS); populations have increased substantially in that time. The project is funded by MDIFW, USFWS, with additional funding from the Phineas W. Sprague Memorial Foundation.

Director: Laura Minich Zitske
Biologists: Monica Johnson and Laura Williams
Outreach Specialist & Biologist: Francesca Gundrum
Biotechnician: Olivia Davies
Intern: Lily Johnston

Left to right: Laura Minich Zitske, Laura Williams, Olivia Davies, Monica Johnson, & Francesca Gundrum
An Intern’s Perspective: Communities and Conservation

On my first day working with Maine Audubon’s Coastal Birds Program, I was amazed by how easily the biologists could pick out Piping Plovers from what appeared to be a lifeless expanse of sand. Even with landmarks and binoculars, I would often scan hopelessly up and down the beach before one of the small gray birds and its distinctive form would detach itself from the landscape.

In time, plover spotting became easier. While my initial amazement at the crew’s bird-finding talents diminished slightly, it was quickly replaced by new awe for the additional aspects of the job—working with beachgoers, landowners, and stakeholders on the beach. Learning about the integral role people play protecting plovers quickly became the most striking aspect of each day. Seeing firsthand the necessity of building strong communities around bird conservation was an experience that I will carry with me.

The plovers may remain hidden among the sand and dunes, but each of us who share the beach with them can play a part in ensuring their well-being—both the sharp-eyed and the less observant among us.

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2020 Piping Plover Nesting Data

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Totals: 98 pairs, 120 nest attempts, 199 fledglings

* Activity  ** Pair renested here from Goose Rocks, pair included in GRB total.
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