

Coastal Birds 2021



Newsletter



Another Record-Breaking Year

2021 has been yet another record-breaking year for Piping Plovers in Maine. An incredible 125 pairs nested on Maine beaches and fledged 213 chicks—both numbers easily surpassing 2020's record 98 pairs fledging 199 chicks. The productivity of 1.7 chicks fledged per pair surpasses recovery goals and is particularly impressive when considering how many plovers nested on Maine beaches this year. These incredible numbers are thanks to the hard work of countless biologists, landowners, volunteers, town employees, and beachgoers.

In taking a closer look at our numbers we can see that patterns emerge and much of our success is due to some sites that did exceptionally well, while other beaches fared poorly. Popham Beach and Seawall Beach in Phippsburg lie on opposite banks of the Morse River—and these two sites combined fledged a whopping 55 chicks alone. Farther up the coast, beyond the Kennebec River at Reid State Park in Georgetown, Mile and Half-Mile beaches hosted four pairs that fledged a total of 12 chicks, for an impressive three chicks fledged per pair.

It would be easy to assume that these State Parks and park-like beaches fared well because they are parks; however some of the lowest productivity in the state occurred at Scarborough Beach State Park, with six pairs successfully fledging only two chicks.

If we group beaches together into regions, more trends emerge. At the Saco Bay beaches (Ferry Beach in Saco, through the beaches in Old Orchard, up to Pine Point in Scarborough), plovers did not do well. Looking at those beaches all together, this year the average productivity was less than one chick fledged per pair. Our “northern” beaches, in Phippsburg and Georgetown, on the other hand, were exceptionally successful with the 29 pairs on these beaches fledging 67 chicks to flying. The resulting 2.3 chicks per pair productivity is well beyond our recovery goal of 1.5 chicks fledged per pair.

What does all this mean for plovers in Maine? Our results show that every site can be important; as even one chick fledged per pair contributes to the overall success of this endangered population. But it also is essential that we don't have all our

People ask:

**The birds are doing well, so are we ‘done’?
When are plovers no longer ‘endangered’?**

The fact is we will always need to manage beaches for plovers as long as people use the beach. Also, the success so far is short-lived. Who knows what the next few years will bring? The good news is that results at busy beaches like Ogunquit show that people and plovers can share the beach successfully. Although plovers have done very well in Maine and Massachusetts over the past few years, other areas are not faring so well. Challenges in the mid-Atlantic, Canadian, and southern parts of the range mean that our success in Maine is more important than ever to help boost the entire Atlantic population.

Piping Plovers

'Another Record-Breaking Year' continued.

eggs in one basket, especially as the suitability of a site can change dramatically from one year to the next. Any site can be a “plover factory” and contribute to our success, or any site can fail completely. Some beaches can be hit hard by predators, storms, or other issues at any time, making it essential that we properly manage and monitor all potential plover beaches.



*Laura Minich Zitske
Director, Coastal Birds Program*

**“Plovers?
Oh, I know ALL
about those
birds!”**

These are words we hear sometimes on the beach from a beachgoer, typically spoken as we try to point out the birds to that person. It can be a struggle to know how to respond, because even though I have been doing this work for more than a decade, I constantly learn something new about plovers. One of my favorite things about being a wildlife biologist is that the learning and exploration is never-ending; I simply love that there is no way to know everything about plovers and I love that every year something new surprises me.

After last year's record numbers of 98 nesting pairs fledging 199 chicks, I thought we certainly had reached the limit of Maine's beaches for numbers of birds, but I also knew that last year's success meant we would see a lot of birds this year. I never could have imagined that Maine could host 125 nesting plover pairs, and even less could I have imagined that these birds would successfully fledge 213 chicks. The most incredible thing to me is knowing that some beaches still have more open potential nesting habitat that could host plovers in the future, which leaves me wondering: what will we see next?



An Intern's Perspective:



Conservation Enthusiasm

By Sarah Geisler

As someone who grew up in coastal South Carolina, I have always been interested in beach conservation efforts. However, I have noticed that few members of my community seem to share my enthusiasm. When I accepted an internship position with Maine Audubon's Coastal Bird Crew and moved to Maine for the summer, I assumed this level of interest (or lack thereof) would be common amongst the beachgoers and landowners I encountered. I was pleasantly surprised to find that the locals were very invested in our conservation efforts. In fact, I couldn't believe the number of people who would approach us and ask how the plovers were doing, or even give a report on the plovers that they had been seeing.

It amazes me to see that so many people care about the environment and our wildlife the way I do. I love that I was able to interact with enthusiastic, curious, and kind beachgoers while sharing my passion for endangered shorebirds. My hope is that when I return home, I will be able to bring just a bit of that curiosity and caring with me to teach my local community about the importance of conservation projects, such as the Piping Plover and Least Tern Recovery Project. Conservation work can be strenuous, stressful, and demanding at times, but the payoff of seeing successful nests and chicks practicing flight and preparing for their migration is worth every minute.

IN MEMORIAM ROGER STEVENS



*Photo courtesy of Town of
Old Orchard Beach*

Piping Plovers in Maine have had many advocates over the years, but Roger Stevens of Old Orchard Beach stands out as an atypical, charismatic, and charming plover lover. Born and raised in Old Orchard, Roger came to know the plovers well through his 37 years raking the beach for the town's Public Works department. For years he was an asset to Maine Audubon, state and federal biologists, the Town of Old Orchard, and others with his knowledge and awareness of the birds. Roger was often the first to find nests during his early mornings on the beach, and his outside-the-box thinking developed creative problem solving, like raking a seaweed berm around nest sites so birds could forage without traversing to the water. Roger was always keen to engage new people with the birds he loved—he would be thrilled that his work connecting local middle school students with plovers finally came to fruition this season. We loved his help on the beach not just for his work but for the sharp wit, quirky jokes, and epic tales that he brought with him. His passing just a couple of weeks after Maine's first plovers nested left a hole in our hearts and the project. He left an indelible positive mark on Old Orchard and Maine's plover project. His obituary put it best: Roger was an original.

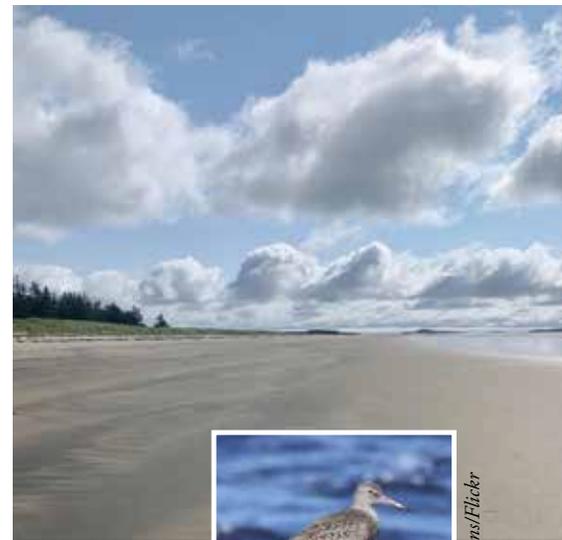
Spotlight: Seawall Beach

A Thriving Ecosystem

At the spit of the Morse River in Phippsburg, Maine, a third of a mile of extensive sandy dunes has turned Seawall Beach into a robust haven for coastal wildlife, including endangered Piping Plovers and Least Terns. As in any healthy beach habitat, we often see high predation of plover and tern nests by foxes, crows, and many other avian and mammalian predators. However, sometimes these dynamic ecosystems strike the perfect balance for endangered shorebirds to breed and raise their young, and it is during these rare times that we have the remarkable opportunity to watch endangered shorebirds thrive!

This was one of those exceptional years on Seawall Beach, with 15 pairs of plovers nesting between the Sprague and Morse rivers, fledging a record number of 33 chicks from one beach. At the Morse River end alone, the estimated 9,750 square feet of sandy dune hosted nine breeding pairs and a successful Least Tern colony. This is a huge improvement from last year's total of eight breeding pairs fledging 23 chicks, with four of those pairs nesting on the Morse end of the beach. In addition to these two endangered species, Willets and Spotted Sandpipers were also observed taking advantage of the ample nesting habitat with limited human disturbance.

While it is always a complicated suite of factors that leads to success for beach-nesting birds, the natural isolation from human foot traffic at the end of the Morse River definitely plays a role in the high concentration of shorebirds observed there over the past season. More importantly, ample dune vegetation throughout this beach helps to retain sand during extreme storms and weather events. We can only hope that this vast dune ecosystem will remain intact for many summers to come as prime breeding habitat for endangered shorebirds, and be a model for healthy beaches in Maine.



Caleb Stemmoms/Flicker



Fyn Kymal/Flicker

(Top) Willet;
(Bottom) Spotted Sandpiper

Least Terns

A Successful Year for Least Terns in Maine

Least Terns benefited from conserved lands this year, with five out of the six nesting beaches under conservation ownership or easement. The six beaches that hosted nesting colonies of Least Terns in Maine this year included Laudholm Beach, a beach in Kennebunk, Goose Rocks Beach, Stratton Island, Higgins Beach, and Seawall Beach. During the nest census window in early June, 281 nests were counted across the state, which is the second highest count recorded behind the 296 nests in 2019. While the Least Terns did face multiple challenges throughout the season, the state productivity rate was still relatively high with 281 pairs fledging a minimum of 137 chicks for an estimated 0.49 fledglings per nesting pair.

The Least Tern colony managed by Rachel Carson National Wildlife Refuge has historically been the largest colony in the state and was again this year. The colony looked a little bit different this year however, with a portion choosing to nest on Laudholm Beach, across the Little River from the main colony. During the census, 18 nests were counted on Laudholm and 116 nests were at the usual site for a combined 134 nests. Between the two sites, a minimum of 81 chicks fledged from 134 nests for a productivity rate of 0.60 fledglings per nesting pair. The biggest challenges the colony faced this summer were tidal washovers and significant weather events that caused both nest and chick loss. Predation wasn't as much of an issue as it has been in previous years. The only confirmed predations were a Great-horned Owl taking at least one adult and two fledglings, and a Peregrine Falcon taking at least two adults.

Goose Rocks Beach had a small colony of 10 pairs show up at the end of June outside of the census window. Unfortunately, this colony did not produce any fledglings as the colony abandoned the site in late





“... we continue to be pleasantly surprised by their perseverance and resilience.”

July. The Least Tern colony on Stratton Island had a minimum of 63 pairs return to the island after being completely absent in 2020. This season, predation by Black-crowned Night Herons in early July caused the abandonment of the bulk of the colony. About a dozen nests were left after the predation events, and those nests were then lost to tropical storm Elsa. No Least Tern chicks fledged from Stratton Island this year.

Higgins Beach hosted 71 nesting pairs that produced a minimum of 17 fledglings for an estimated productivity of 0.24 fledglings per pair. While there was little evidence of predator issues, the largest challenge stemmed from human disturbance. Higgins Beach is very popular for tourists with a significant number of

beachgoers wandering close to the colony, disrupting roosting birds, and making it difficult to count fledglings. We believe that our methods for estimating fledgling numbers dramatically underestimated the number of fledglings on Higgins, and the actual number of chicks fledged is probably closer to 30.

Seawall Beach had a successful year for Least Terns. This year at least 13 pairs were nesting during the census, but the colony grew throughout a month-long period, bringing that estimate to over 60 nesting pairs later on. At least 39 chicks fledged from Seawall Beach, the most that has ever been produced from there for as long as the beach has been monitored.

Least Terns continue to provide biologists and managers with challenges as we try to protect the birds' foraging and nesting areas, but we continue to be pleasantly surprised by their perseverance and resilience.



A Tip for Beachgoers

Stuck in a Hole

This day-old Piping Plover chick found itself at the bottom of a large hole left on the beach. Luckily it was rescued by a Piping Plover monitor on Ogunquit Beach. Holes left in the sand can pose risks to both people and wildlife! Remembering to fill in any holes on the beach is just one of the many things that beachgoers can do to support shorebirds.

Photos by Suzanne Nobile

Piping Plover
**NESTING
 DATA
 2021**



| Town | Beach | Pairs | Nest Attempts | Fledglings |
|-------------------|------------------|------------|---------------|------------|
| Ogunquit | Ogunquit | 17 | 27 | 28 |
| Wells | Moody | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| | Wells | 8 | 9 | 13 |
| | Drakes Island | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| | Laudholm Farm | 4 | 4 | 7 |
| Kennebunk | All Beaches | 9 | 10 | 8 |
| Kennebunkpt. | Marshall Point | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| | Goose Rocks | 9 | 12 | 22 |
| Biddeford | Fortunes Rocks | 5 | 7 | 7 |
| | Hills | 2* | 2 | 3 |
| Saco | Ferry | 4 | 4 | 5 |
| | Goosefare Brook | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Old Orchard Beach | Ocean Park | 1* | 1 | |
| | Old Orchard | 8 | 12 | 5 |
| Scarborough | Pine Point | 2 | 2 | 1 |
| | Western/Ferry | 9 | 11 | 16 |
| | Scarborough SP | 6 | 7 | 2 |
| | Higgins | 5 | 6 | 11 |
| Cape Eliz. | Ram Island | 3 | 4 | 7 |
| | Crescent SP | 2 | 3 | 3 |
| Phippsburg | Seawall | 15 | 13 | 33 |
| | Popham SP | 10 | 13 | 25 |
| | Hunnell | 0 | | |
| Georgetown | Reid - Mile | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| | Reid - Half Mile | 2 | 2 | 8 |
| Totals | | 125 | 165 | 213 |

* Activity



Our Team



(Left to right)
Sarah Geisler, Cheverus High School,
volunteer Nicholas Bither, Jo Sehon,
Emma Palmer, Laura Williams, Samantha Smith

The Coastal Birds Project

The Coastal Birds 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.

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