

# Beaches get a little more crowded as piping plover activity picks up

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By Gillian Graham

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Missy Mans scans the beach at Old Orchard Beach looking for piping plovers on Friday. Mans is the piping plover monitor for Old Orchard Beach and checks on the birds and their eggs every morning.

*Gregory Rec/Staff Photographer*

OLD ORCHARD BEACH — Two women walked down the nearly empty beach one recent morning, oblivious to the tiny bird that darted across the sand in front of them.

The piping plover, nearly invisible in the sand and dried seaweed, was on its way back to the nest where its partner sat on four eggs. Those eggs will hatch in three weeks or so, an annual occurrence that is both exciting and nerve-wracking for the people who monitor the birds on some of the busiest stretches of sandy beach in southern Maine.

“Once they hatch, they can go anywhere,” said Missy Mans, the piping plover monitor for Old Orchard Beach.

The delicate balance between protecting piping plovers and allowing people to enjoy the beaches is familiar to many local beachgoers, but it requires vigilance nonetheless. Most people are respectful of the birds, which are endangered in Maine, but others disregard the stakes and twine around nesting areas and walk past warning signs without a second glance.

“It’s a challenge when we have so many visitors,” Mans said. The population of Old Orchard Beach swells to 75,000 in the summer, with people flocking to the 7-mile beach from across the U.S. and Canada.

Last year, 125 pairs of piping plovers nested on Maine beaches, a record high since monitoring of the tiny shorebirds began in 1981, when just 10 pairs were found. This year looks like it will yield another record high, but the numbers are still small, said Laura Minich Zitske, coastal bird program director for Maine Audubon.

Roughly 2,000 piping plover pairs nest on beaches from North Carolina to Newfoundland. They are listed as endangered in Maine and are considered threatened along the Atlantic coast by the federal government.

The tiny birds can be spotted skittering at the ocean's edge or on mudflats, searching for worms, bugs and other invertebrates. When they aren't foraging, plovers can be found nesting in the transition area between dunes and sandy beach. Plover chicks are so small, they are often described as cotton balls on toothpick legs.

So far this year, there has been more piping plover activity at many Maine sites than normal, Zitske said. As of last week, 141 breeding pairs had been spotted by biologists and volunteers who monitor the birds daily. They have documented 78 active nests and more are expected as breeding continues.

On Wednesday, the first chicks of the year hatched on Higgins Beach in Scarborough.



A piping plover stands on the sand on Old Orchard Beach on Friday. Last year broke the record for the number of pairs of piping plovers that mated on Maine beaches, and Maine Audubon says this year could break last year's record. *Gregory Rec/Staff Photographer*



A sign warns beachgoers that piping plovers are nesting nearby on Old Orchard Beach. *Gregory Rec/Staff Photographer*

While the number of piping plovers in Maine has risen in recent years, other areas outside of New England have not seen that same success. In some parts of the birds' range from Canada to the Carolinas, numbers have been declining, making it all the more important to protect piping plovers here, Zitske said.

Zitzke credits much of the success in Maine to a collaborative program that allows Maine Audubon to work closely with the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, landowners, volunteers and municipalities to create safe nesting conditions and educate the public about the endangered birds.

"In Maine, our success comes from a lot of hard work, collaboration and a bit of luck," she said.

## **ARRIVING IN MAINE**

Piping plovers – around 7 inches long with white bellies and black bands on the necks – spend their winters in the Bahamas. They migrate north to breed, arriving on Maine beaches in March, around the beginning of spring. Zitske, who has seen their tiny prints in snow, said they're surprisingly tough little birds.

Nesting activity begins shortly after they arrive. Their nests, or scrapes, are small indentations in dry sand, not unlike a footprint left by someone walking on the beach.

“Once upon a time, when there weren’t a million people on the beach, they would lay their eggs right out on the sand,” Mans said.

Over time, the birds have adapted and now are much more likely to make their nests in the sand on the edge of the dune grass. But those areas can still be dangerous, especially when they’re right next to a path or beach entrance with foot traffic.



Missy Mans checks Friday to see if piping plover eggs are still in their nest inside an enclosure put up to protect the birds and their eggs from predators. Mans is the piping plover monitor for Old Orchard Beach and checks on the birds and their eggs every morning. *Gregory Rec/Staff Photographer*

In those areas, Maine Audubon will sometimes put up an enclosure – an enclosed area to keep unwanted animals out – around the nesting area, made of metal fencing, blueberry netting and stakes. The birds can easily move in and out, but foxes, skunks, crows, gulls and other predators can’t get in.

In areas that need slightly less protection, Maine Audubon uses stakes and twine to let people know spots they and their dogs need to avoid. Warning signs are often posted near those protected areas and at beach entrances. Most of the time, they’re effective.

Zitske said 2020 was an especially challenging year, with unusually destructive behavior. That July 4, two separate acts of vandalism in Saco and Old Orchard Beach resulted in the death of a chick and the abandonment of a nest.

“Everybody was at their wit’s end with the onslaught of the pandemic,” she said. “There will always be some people who don’t have the best interest of the birds at heart. For the most part, people really do want to do the right thing.”

Incidents like the 2020 ones are investigated by federal and state authorities. Anyone who harasses, harms, kills or captures a piping plover risks federal criminal charges and can be fined up to \$25,000 and face up to six months in prison.

The busiest time for piping plovers on Maine beaches is in June and July. Eggs that are laid now will hatch in about 25 days. The chicks won’t fly for another 25 days or so after that. Chicks are especially vulnerable during the time before they start flying because they run around the beach to find their own food.

“If all goes well, those birds will be fledged and flying before the Fourth of July,” Zitske said. “Once they start flying, the birds can better avoid both predators and humans.”



A piping plover stands on the sand Friday on Old Orchard Beach. Last year broke the record for the number of pairs of piping plovers that mated on Maine beaches and Maine Audubon says this year could break last year’s record. *Gregory Rec/Staff Photographer*

By August, most of the piping plovers will start migrating south, but it's not unusual to see some on the beaches later, depending on when the chicks hatched.

"It's a privilege to have an endangered species we can watch while being on the beach and enjoying ourselves," Zitske said.

### **A 'CIRCUS' ON OLD ORCHARD BEACH**

Mans, the piping plover monitor, lives next to Old Orchard Beach and has long walked it every day. She often used to bring along her camera to photograph the shorebirds, including small ones she thought were piping plovers. There seemed to be so many, she said, so she went to Maine Audubon to learn more.

It was there that she found out the birds she was seeing all over the beach were actually semipalmated plovers, far more plentiful and darker in color than the sandy piping plovers. Mans is now an expert at finding piping plovers, often spotting them before visitors do as they move along the beaches.

"They are really stealth," she said.



A piping plover sits on eggs in a nest Friday on Old Orchard Beach surrounded by an enclosure put up by Maine Audubon to protect the birds and their eggs from predators. *Gregory Rec/Staff Photographer*

When she realized how few piping plovers there actually were, Mans started volunteering as a plover monitor. Two years ago, she took a seasonal job as the town's official monitor and now coordinates six volunteers who help keep an eye on the nesting areas. She also talks to people on the beach and hands out cards with information about piping plovers.

Like other coastal towns, Old Orchard Beach has a plan in place to protect piping plovers that includes having a monitor, protecting nesting areas, educating visitors and taking steps to minimize disruption to nesting activity. When Mans is out on the beach to check on the plovers each morning, she often stops to talk to dog owners she sees near nests to make sure they are aware of the piping plover activity.

Over the winter, the town tightened up its rules for dogs on the beach to match regulations in neighboring Scarborough. Starting May 15, dogs are allowed on the beach only before 9 a.m. and after 5 p.m. In the evening, all dogs must be leashed.

On Thursday, Mans was on the beach by 6 a.m. to start her daily work. She walked in front of the equipment that public works crews use to clean the beach, looking for piping plovers. She said the town tries to limit how much cleaning is done to minimize disruption.

"They're pretty resilient, but we don't want to overstress them. They could abandon their nests and eggs," she said.

Last year, 20 pairs nested on Old Orchard Beach, but only five chicks survived. One day, Mans watched a crow pick up a chick and fly off, the parent frantically chasing after it. The scene was heartbreaking, she said.

She's also seen protective and territorial piping plover parents chase people away if they come too close to chicks.

"Sometimes I'll come in the morning and see four chicks, but by the evening it's three," she said. "There's just so much traffic."

During a break in beach cleaning last week, Mans walked to the areas where the birds have already settled on nests and others where they're still mating. At the one enclosure set up on the beach so far this year, she watched as a pair of plovers switched places on their nest. The scrape, barely visible, was nestled against a tuft of dune grass.



Two piping plover eggs sit in a nest Friday on Old Orchard Beach. Piping plover nests are small depressions in the sand that a mating pair dig out. *Gregory Rec/Staff Photographer*





Missy Mans scans the shoreline of Old Orchard Beach with binoculars, looking for piping plovers on Friday. Mans is the piping plover monitor for Old Orchard Beach and checks on the birds and their eggs every morning. *Gregory Rec/Staff Photographer*

The first egg appeared in that nest May 1, the fourth on May 6. Those chicks could hatch next week.

Farther up the beach, a twine boundary marked an area dotted with scrapes from pairs apparently still deciding on the perfect spot. Mans believes they will lay eggs soon.

Inside the protected area, very close to a footpath through the dunes, a male piping plover scraped at the sand, creating the indent where he intended to breed with his mate. He fanned his feathers and his mate came over to check the nest but then wandered a few feet away.

He followed, kicking his feet in a little dance. Mans described the process as he kicked her in the back, then got on top of her. A minute later, they separated and headed in opposite directions. If all goes well, there should be another set of chicks in a little more than a month.

Seeing those new chicks on the beach is always entertaining, Mans said. They stumble off the nest like drunken sailors, wobbly on their legs. And then they take off in different directions, their parents chasing after them.

“It’s like a circus,” she said.

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