

Piping Plover

*Charadrius
melodus*



Family: Charadriidae
Order: Charadriiformes

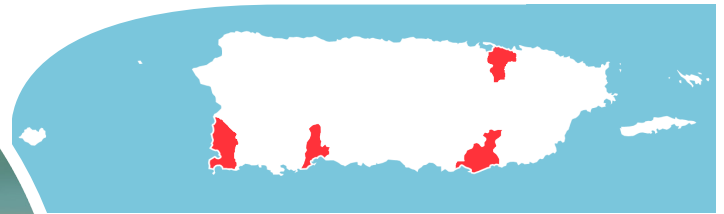
Description

The piping plover is a small bird, with a length of approximately 6 to 7.5 inches (15 to 17 centimeters). It is of a light, grayish, sand-like color. During breeding season, the adult has orange-yellow legs, a black stripe across its forehead (from eye to eye), and a black band around its neck. Juvenile birds have gray legs and lack the characteristic black markings. These plovers are swift runners, and have the peculiar habit of running for short distances and stopping abruptly. When it remains still, the piping plover easily blends in with the pale sandy background.

Biological Information

Reproduction

The piping plovers nest in the beaches along the Atlantic coast of North America, below the high-tide line, in sandy flats, below dunes or in areas between dunes that is washed by the water. Breeding season usually goes from February through August.



Distribution

Habitat

The piping plover inhabits great sandy zones on beaches with little vegetation, close to dunes. It is a migratory bird which, before initiating its autumn migration, usually congregates in groups on solitary beaches, from which they begin their journey to the southern United States. Some individuals reach the Bahamas and the Antilles. The southward migration has the purpose of spending winter in a warm climate, feeding well so they have a successful breeding season when they return to their usual nesting areas.

Diet

This species primarily feeds on small crustaceans, mollusks, worms and insects it finds on the beach or on nearby salt flats.

Distribution

The piping plover nests along the east coast of the United States and Canada. It is present year-round, from the coasts of North Carolina through Florida. Its winter distribution takes them to northern Mexico and the Greater Antilles. It is considered a rare visitor in Puerto Rico, although it has been observed in the southwestern coast of the island, in San Juan's Caño Martín Peña, in Jobos Bay, in Guayama and in San Jacinto, in Guayanilla.

Threats

The piping plover was an abundant species along the Atlantic coast of North America during the 19th century. However, they almost vanished as a result of indiscriminate hunting for their feathers, used to stuff cushions. After the Migratory Bird Treaty of 1918 was established, their numbers increased and reached its maximum in the 1940s. The current reduction in their population stems from projects and developments that affect the coastline, as well as the increase in

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recreational use of beaches, which creates disturbances in the beaches where the plovers nest. Because these birds build their nests directly on the sand, the eggs and hatchlings are particularly vulnerable to being destroyed by uncontrolled human activity, unrestrained house pets, and all-terrain vehicles used on these beaches.

Conservation Measures

The piping plover was included in the Endangered Species list in 1986. In Puerto Rico, we must preserve the coastal salt and mud flats, such as the ones near the Cabo Rojo lighthouse, which are essential habitats not only for the piping plover, but for numerous other migratory and permanent bird species.

The Endangered Species Act, amended in 1973, prohibits the killing, harassing, trapping, purchasing or selling any species, as well as parts and products derived from the species, which is listed as endangered.

References

Cairns, W.E. and I.A. McLaren. 1980. Status of the piping plover (*Charadrius melodus*) on the East Coast of North America. *Am. Birds* 34:206-208.

Niemi, G. and T. Davis. 1979. Notes on the nesting ecology of the piping plover. *Loon* 51: 74-79.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 1985. Endangered and threatened wildlife and plants: determination of endangered and threatened status for the piping plover. *Federal Register* 50. (238):50726-50734.

Additional Information

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