



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

All About Piping Plovers

Piping plovers (*Charadrius melodus*) are small shorebirds approximately seven inches long with sand-colored plumage on their backs and crown and white underparts. Breeding birds have a single black breastband, a black bar across the forehead, bright orange legs and bill, and a black tip on the bill. During winter, the birds lose the black bands, the legs fade to pale yellow, and the bill becomes mostly black.

For more information:

[The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has designated certain areas as "critical habitat" for the piping plover.](#)

[Questions and answers about piping plovers](#)

[Go to the Endangered Species Home Page](#)

[Go to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Home Page](#)

Piping plovers breed only in North America in three geographic regions: the Atlantic Coast, the Northern Great Plains, and the Great Lakes. Atlantic Coast plovers nest on coastal beaches, sandflats at the ends of sand spits and barrier islands, gently sloped foredunes, sparsely vegetated dunes, and washover areas cut into or between dunes. Plovers in the Great Plains make their nests on open, sparsely vegetated sand or gravel beaches adjacent to alkali wetlands, and on beaches, sand bars, and dredged material islands of major river systems. Great Lakes piping plovers breed on sparsely vegetated beaches, cobble pans, or sand spits of sand dune ecosystems along the Great Lakes shorelines. Piping plovers from all three breeding populations winter along South Atlantic, Gulf Coast, and Caribbean beaches and barrier islands, primarily on intertidal beaches with sand and/or mud flats with no or very sparse vegetation.

Piping Plover Range



- Northern Great Plains Population
- Great Lakes Population
- Atlantic Coast Population
- Wintering Range (all populations)

[\(click here for larger image\)](#)

Piping plover populations were federally listed as threatened and endangered in 1986. The Northern Great Plains and Atlantic Coast populations are threatened, and the Great Lakes population is endangered. Piping plovers are considered threatened throughout their wintering range. According to the last breeding census in 1996, the Northern Great Plains population is the largest of the three breeding populations, numbering approximately 1398 breeding pairs. The Atlantic Coast population consists of 1372 breeding pairs, and the Great Lakes population has only 32 breeding pairs. The highest concentration of birds reported in winter censuses are found in Texas, Louisiana, and Florida. However, only 63 percent of the breeding birds counted in 1991 were reported during the winter census, suggesting that important wintering areas are still unknown.

Plovers arrive on the breeding grounds during mid-March through mid-May and remain for 3 to 4 months per year. They lay 3 to 4 eggs in shallow scraped depressions lined with light colored pebbles and shell fragments. The eggs are well camouflaged and blend extremely well with their surroundings. Both sexes incubate the eggs which hatch within 30 days, and both sexes feed the young until they can fly, about 30 days after hatching. Plovers depart for the wintering grounds from mid-July through late October. Breeding and wintering plovers feed on exposed wet sand in wash zones; intertidal ocean beach; wrack lines; washover passes; mud-, sand-, and algal flats; and shorelines of streams, ephemeral ponds, lagoons, and

salt marshes by probing for invertebrates at or just below the surface. They use beaches adjacent to foraging areas for roosting and preening. Small sand dunes, debris, and sparse vegetation within adjacent beaches provides shelter from wind and extreme temperatures.

In recent decades, piping plover populations have drastically declined, especially in the Great Lakes. Breeding habitat has been replaced with shoreline development and recreation. Availability of quality foraging and roosting habitat in the wintering grounds is necessary in order to ensure that an adequate number of adults survive to migrate back to breeding sites and successfully nest.

For more information, visit our web sites at: plover.fws.gov. You may also telephone: Division of Endangered Species for the breeding habitat area - 612-713-5350; for the wintering habitat area, telephone 361-994-9005.

[Go to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Division of Endangered Species home page.](#)

