

UC SANTA BARBARA

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BREEDING SEASON FOR THREATENED SNOWY PLOVER STARTS EARLY; UCSB's COAL OIL POINT RESERVE NEEDS MORE VOLUNTEER DOCENTS

Snowy plovers at UC Santa Barbara's Coal Oil Point Reserve are getting an early start on their breeding season, already pairing, mating, nesting and laying eggs near the mouth of Devereux Slough.

"We were surprised last month to see so much activity in an area that only a short while ago was an inhospitable expanse of human footprints," says Cristina Sandoval, director of Coal Oil Point Reserve. The plover's breeding season runs from March through September. Sandoval says that efforts by the reserve's management team to protect critical habitat for the snowy plover seem to be paying off, and she gives special credit for that to the volunteer docents. But more docents, she notes, are needed.

The docents guide people around the protected area, offering them views of the plovers through a spotting scope and explaining the goals of the protection program.

Their activities are coordinated by the Santa Barbara Audubon Society. (A training session for prospective volunteer docents at Coal Oil Point Reserve will be held Saturday, April 6, at UCSB's Marine Science Institute. For information, contact

Jennifer Stroh at 880-1195, or Kendy Radasky at 961-9378.)

The western snowy plover is a tan and white shorebird the size of a tennis ball.

Unlike similar sanderlings that cavort along the shore, snowy plovers are shy and rely on stealth and cryptic coloration to hide in the dry sand.

The U.S. Pacific population of snowy plovers has declined to between 1000 and 2000 birds; in 1993, the plover was listed as threatened under the endangered species act.

Nesting on the beach in the summer makes plovers particularly vulnerable.

Most breeding areas have been lost to volleyball courts, picnic tables, and other types of development.

Former breeding areas in Santa Barbara include Carpinteria State Beach, the Santa Barbara Harbor, Goleta Beach, Coal Oil Point, and Jalama Beach.

All except Coal Oil Point have been developed for recreation.

Before last June, no successful breeding had been recorded at Coal Oil Point since UCSB opened the area to public recreation three decades ago. "Most biologists thought that the area would never support breeding again," says Mark Holmgren, a bird expert with the UCSB Museum of Ecology and Systematics. Nearly two miles of beach between Isla Vista and Ellwood were listed in 1999 as Snowy Plover Critical Habitat by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Biologists were taken by surprise last June when they observed two recently hatched plover chicks. The first was taken by a crow that same day.

The Fish and Wildlife Service requested that the remaining chick be actively protected, and volunteers staffed the area from dawn to dusk, scaring off crows and asking people to walk around the plovers and to leash their pets.

The effort succeeded, and the chick survived to fly away.

Last year, UCSB implemented a snowy plover management plan to protect the most important 10% of the critical habitat at Coal Oil Point Reserve. The university sought to avoid total beach closure -- an option chosen by many management agencies -- in complying with the provisions of the endangered species act.

Rope fences now help protect a 400-yard stretch of dry sand near the mouth of Devereux Slough, and a secondary trail has been closed because it led people through the heart of the plover area.

Under the management plan, people can still surf, walk along the shore in front of the plover area, and use the main sunbathing area at Sands Beach. Dog owners were granted a trial period for walking leashed dogs.

The California Coastal Commission has praised the reserve's approach as a model for protecting sensitive resources while still allowing appropriate beach access.

The key interaction is between the docents and the public. Docent coordinators Jennifer Stroh and Kendy Radasky report that the vast majority of the beach users are willing to share the beach and leash their pets.

"We show people a flock of plovers and they become proud to have such a threatened treasure in their back yard," says Radasky. "With the fencing and the docent program, people can enjoy watching the plovers without disturbing them."

Docents emphasize that public participation is important to help the plovers breed successfully and to avoid additional restrictions imposed by the Fish and Wildlife Service. Beach goers are asked to simply become familiar with the boundaries of the protected area.

"Now that plovers are breeding, they are more sensitive to disturbance," notes Kevin Lafferty, a UCSB-based marine ecologist with the U.S. Geological Survey who coordinates plover research at the reserve. "People entering the protected area can accidentally crush the camouflaged eggs or scare adults off the nest, leaving the eggs exposed to heat and predators."

Crows scavenge the trash people leave behind.

Remembering to pack out trash is particularly important now because it will help keep crows away from eggs and nestlings."

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