

THE **Current**

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Gail Gallessich

Snowy Plover "Nursery" Success Earns Resource Stewardship Award

A single strand of rope separates threatened western snowy plovers from people recreating on the public beach of Coal Oil Point Reserve, at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Although these small, 6-inch shorebirds had seemingly abandoned this site for breeding, after the 400-yard nursery was protected, it fledged 39 young snowy plovers this summer. The success of this combined effort of researchers, managers and volunteers has earned national recognition for three groups: U. S. Geological Survey, the Santa Barbara Audubon Society, and the University of California Natural Reserve System.

On Sept. 26, The Natural Areas Association, meeting in Madison, Wis., will present its 2003 Resource Stewardship award to these three groups for balancing beach recreation and protection of snowy plovers.

The Resource Stewardship Award recognizes this partnership for demonstrating excellence in the stewardship of natural areas through creative and innovative strategies to resolve issues and advance the preservation of natural resources.

"The research predicted that disturbance rates would drop from their previous high levels, but I had no idea that the plovers would respond as dramatically as they did," said Dr. Kevin Lafferty, a USGS marine ecologist and adjunct professor at UC Santa

Barbara whose research helped plan and evaluate the conservation effort. "This is the first evidence that a reduction in disturbance can lead to the recovery of a formerly abandoned snowy plover breeding site."

On the Pacific Coast, North American snowy plovers, named for their pale plumage, breed from Washington to Baja California.

Although plovers historically bred at Coal Oil Point, from the time it opened to the public in 1970 until the summer of 2001, the site produced no snowy plover chicks.

In a USGS study, Lafferty assessed the rate of different kinds of human disturbance, and found that human use of parts of the beach shared by the plovers interfered with the shorebird's ability to find a predictable place to rest and nest undisturbed. He then determined the smallest portion of the beach that could be closed to maximize protection of plovers with minimal inconvenience to beach users.

The proposed enclosure would stretch from wet sand to dry areas above the tidal zone, but allowed people to walk at the water's edge along the beach.

The University of California protects 34 natural reserves in California for its research, education and public service missions. Coal Oil Point Reserve has a beach area that is popular with students and local residents for its good surfing and unspoiled landscapes. In the summer of 2001, a single snowy plover chick was seen near a recent dune restoration project, prompting the UC Coal Oil Point Reserve director, Dr. Cristina Sandoval, to install a rope fence that denoted the boundaries of the core plover habitat, thereby buffering the chick and its father from disturbance. After the chick fledged, she left the fence in place to reduce disturbance to the 120 plovers that winter at the site.

The fence helped people to walk around the plover habitat instead of through it and disturbance rates plummeted.

Sandoval, who oversees the plover project, implemented a comprehensive Snowy Plover Management Program in 2001 based on the USGS research and the experience of the previous breeding season.

The plan included roping off 400 yards of dry sandy beach, closing a trail that directed people through the plover habitat, installing educational and regulatory signs and beginning an education program led by volunteers.

The plan worked quickly and with unprecedented success. In 2002, 10 plovers chose to breed in the protected area. They made 9 nests with 21 eggs, of which 16 hatched, and 14 chicks fledged. In 2003, this increased to 24 breeders, 24 snowy plover nests, 63 eggs, 45 hatched eggs, and 39 fledglings. "We are encouraged by how fast the plovers responded to active management and how the community collaborated with the plan," Sandoval said. "I think the secret of this success was the dedication of the various individuals to plover conservation and their openness to go beyond traditional thinking. Partnerships and creative solutions were the key." Sandoval will present these findings at the 2003 Natural Areas Conference.

A volunteer docent program was designed and founded by Kendy Radasky, chair of Santa Barbara Audubon's Science Committee in 2001, and is coordinated by Jennifer Stroh, also with the Santa Barbara Audubon Society. The docent program has played a vital role in gaining beach-goers' compliance, providing education, discouraging off-leash dog walking, and scaring away crows trying to steal eggs from the nests to eat.

On a beach where only a few years ago almost no beach-goers could identify a snowy plover, almost everyone walking the beach can now recognize the shorebird.

According to Stroh, "The program helped beach goers understand about snowy plovers and how to share the beach with them.

The community is now incredibly supportive and more than 100 individuals have volunteered. It is an amazing place to come to the beach and watch plover chicks literally run around your legs. When they have a refuge to retreat to, they no longer see humans as such a threat."

Sandoval plans to maintain the fence and volunteer program, which is hailed as a model system by the California Coastal Commission and now being emulated at other areas in the state.

NOTE TO NEWS EDITORS: Reproducible photos for this release can be found at:

<http://www.werc.usgs.gov/news/2003-09-25a.jpg>

(Before the rope fence was installed, western snowy plovers vacated their preferred roosting areas on the beach when disturbed, as on this particularly busy day at the Coal Oil Point Reserve in February 2001. Courtesy of Cristina Sandoval, University of

California, Santa Barbara)

<http://www.werc.usgs.gov/news/2003-09-25b.jpg>

(On an inclement day with low visitation, the rope fence guides a visitor and delineates the area set aside for resting shorebirds. Courtesy of Kendy Radasky, Santa Barbara Audubon Society)

<http://www.werc.usgs.gov/news/2003-09-25c.jpg>

(Educational signs mark the entrances to the Coal Oil Point Reserve beach.

Courtesy of Kendy Radasky, Santa Barbara Audubon Society)

<http://www.werc.usgs.gov/news/2003-09-25d.jpg>

(Adult western snowy plover. Courtesy of Morgan Ball)

<http://www.werc.usgs.gov/news/2003-09-25e.jpg>

(Resting western snowy plovers. Courtesy of Morgan Ball)

<http://www.werc.usgs.gov/news/2003-09-25f.jpg>

(Western snowy plover chick. Courtesy of Morgan Ball)

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Biologists in the U.S. Geological Survey regularly provide science support for conserving federally protected species such as the snowy plover.

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Contact info for western snowy plover story:

From Tues. Sept. 23 to Sun. Sept. 28, Kevin Lafferty and Cristina Sandoval are reachable at their hotel in Madison: 608-255-5700

Jennifer Stroh is at another hotel in Madison through Sept. 30: 608-257-8811

Can contact Kendy Radasky (see below) from SB Audubon Society for interviews; she'll be available throughout this and next week.

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