

WESTERN SNOWY PLOVER**Donald Shephard**

Western Snowy Plover chicks and egg
photo courtesy Kerry Ross

Once upon a time, Western Snowy Plovers nested at MacKerricher State Park and Manchester State Park. Alas, no more. In 2005, before the start of the Mendocino Coast Audubon Society's Save Our Shorebirds (SOS) program, volunteers monitored the last nesting site of the Western Snowy Plover on Virgin Creek within MacKerricher State Park. Dorothy Tobkin found the nest. The pair may just as well have laid their eggs in Grand Central Station. Beachgoers surrounded it every day, including one family of seven, who set up their picnic lunch right next to the nest-- and then pulled out a giant frisbee for a toss-around. The male plover remained sitting on the nest and never left, even though plovers usually react to kites and

frisbees as predators.

According to Becky Bowen's notes, June 28, 2005, was a foggy day with partial sun on Virgin Creek. No bird sat on the nest when she arrived at 10 a.m. At 10:30 a.m., Pink Lady and an unbanded female plover flew in from the north and foraged near the nest. At 11:35 a.m., the unbanded female sat on the nest briefly. Nine people walked or jogged near the nest. At 11:55 a.m., a female Northern Harrier flew about ten feet above the nest. The two plovers, who were feeding near the nest, "made an alarm sound" and flew south together. That was the last time Becky saw a plover near the nest. These are Becky's personal observations of the last nest on Virgin Creek Beach.

The Snowy Plovers abandoned that nest and the eggs never hatched. Tragically, the eggs were just hours away from hatching, according to Ron LeValley. That year also saw the last Snowy Plover nest in Manchester State Park.

The news is not all bad. The number of Western Snowy Plovers observed at Ten Mile and Virgin Creek in the non-breeding season has increased in the last few years. Migratory birds, they visit us almost year round, coming and going during breeding season, and returning for the winter. Ten Mile Beach in particular attracts a number of plovers every winter. In 2011 we had the highest winter number since 2004: we logged fifty-five in December.

As State Park crews eradicate the European beach grass at Ten Mile and Virgin Creek beaches, the Western Snowy Plover winter population increases. We work hard to educate people about sharing the beach with plovers. State Park rangers have cited people with dogs in the Ten Mile preserve. Even leashed dogs will stress the plovers unduly.

WESTERN SNOWY PLOVER **continued**

Becky hopes to find plovers nesting here again. For now, they return in good numbers in the winter. Angela Liebenberg tells me, these plovers evolved to leave and return to areas that changed due to natural fluctuations in coastal habitats, such as tidal inundation. So populations have likely used and then abandoned certain areas over time.

Right now, SOS volunteers monitor a few banded birds that have returned to Ten Mile Beach every winter since 2007, several of them from Coos County, Oregon. Becky contacts the researchers at Coos County and applauds their excellent program. Because of strict oversight and aggressive protection, they have had success in the nesting and chick department.

People on the beach often ask Becky, "Why should we care about these birds? What's the point?" Plovers lived along this beautiful coast long before man arrived, but we think them less important than ourselves on the beaches. Man introduced invasive plants and animals. Falcons, raccoons, coyotes, ravens, owls, fox and dogs all prey on shorebirds. Humans can be thought of as predators too, because people drive vehicles, ride bikes, fly kites and bring their dogs to beaches where the Western Snowy Plover lives and breeds.

Nature has many lessons we should carefully heed. Bird behavior, including their absence, indicates the wisdom or otherwise of man's stewardship of the earth. Shorebirds, because they live on the long, narrow littoral zone, are a particularly sensitive indicator. The mean annual life span of snowy plovers is only three years.

About two thousand snowy plovers may breed along the U.S. Pacific coast and at least a similar number breed on the west coast of Baja California. So what is it about our coast that attracts these birds? Nests typically occur in dune-backed flat, open areas with sandy or saline substrates; vegetation and driftwood are usually sparse or absent. Nests consist of a shallow scrape or depression lined with beach debris such as small pebbles, shell fragments, plant debris, and mud chips. Nest lining increases as incubation progresses. Driftwood, kelp, and dune plants provide cover for chicks that crouch near objects to hide from predators. Invertebrates are often found near debris, so driftwood and kelp are also important for harboring plover food sources.

continued

Banded Western Snowy plover photo Becky Bowen

