



TERN AND PLOVER CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIP NEWSLETTER

AS THE PLOVER TERNS

Volume 1, Issue 1

Fall 2003

A Newsletter for and by Volunteers and Partners

Welcome to the first issue of "As the Plover Terns", a newsletter for volunteers and partners of the Tern and Plover Conservation Partnership. This newsletter will offer up-to-date information about the Partnership and will provide a link to additional information about Interior Least Terns and Piping Plovers.

We have completed our fifth field season. As in previous years, the information that volunteers gather for us is indispensable. We appreciate all the help, and

your responses to the surveys at the end of the season have resulted in what we think are very positive changes and improvements to the program.

We would like to thank all of the hard working volunteers, and invite new volunteers for the 2004 season. We can always use more volunteers to help boost conservation for terns and plovers. Our address, phone numbers, and e-mails are listed on the back. Pass them along!

Chris Thody, Outreach Coordi-

nator

Pictured above L to R: Justin Stolen, Nelli Falzgraff, Carole



Rasmussen, Dick Rasmussen, Jim Kovanda, and Renae Held, Program Coordinator.

Features

- Winter Wonderland by Kathryn Wells
- A Plover's Paradise by Jennifer Malfait
- Nebraska Summer by Dana Manske
- 2002 Nesting results

Winter Wonderland

Interior least terns (*Sterna antillarum athalassos*) and piping plovers (*Charadrius melodus*) grace Nebraska with their presence each year from late spring through mid to late summer. Much is known about their habits during that time, their breeding season, but where do they spend the other two-thirds of the year? Ironically, compared to what we know about their breeding colony locations and habits, knowledge of their behavior outside of the breeding season is somewhat vague. Though details are lacking, particularly with reference to interior least terns, it is possible to sketch an outline of the terns' and

plovers' lives away from their nesting grounds, information that is vital to their conservation.

Piping plovers generally leave Nebraska by mid-August. They fly along the Mississippi River drainage to the Gulf Coast from northeastern Mexico to southern Florida. The Atlantic coast population winters from Virginia to southern Florida, occasionally in the Bahamas, Cuba, and Jamaica, east to the Virgin Islands. Which birds or which populations make the extra trip into the Caribbean is not known.

A wider variety of habitats provide homes for piping plovers during winter than during the breeding season. The

Kathryn Wells, volunteer

plovers may be found at wet fields, mudflats, lakeshores and coastal beaches, where they forage for invertebrates at the ground surface or just underneath. Although still not gregarious on their wintering grounds, piping plovers become a little more social than they are when nesting. They forage separately, but fly together to and from the feeding, and presumably, roosting sites.

While the exact locations of some of these sites is not well-known, most do remain in the U.S., making protection if not easy, at least simpler than with international migrants such as the least tern.

(Continued, page 3)

TECHNICIAN'S CORNER

*A Plover's Paradise**Jennifer Malfait, Conservation Technician 2002*

As the technicians began to set up their spotting scopes, they couldn't help but notice the sandy beaches that surrounded them. The sky blue water sparkled in the sunlight while the waves cast shadows that danced over the shoreline. They could see shorebirds racing along the water, a hawk circling overhead, and a group of great blue herons standing on the beach preparing to take flight. Suddenly, the rumble of the sand loader shattered their thoughts and they were reminded that they had a job to do.

Jennifer had surveyed the area twice and decided to give it one more look. As she began to survey again she stopped her scope and exclaimed, "I think I see one!" Dana went over to see what Jennifer had in her scope. Through the scope, Dana saw a sandy-brown colored bird with a wide black neckband. "I see it too!" pronounced Dana as she enthusiastically went back to find it in her scope as well. They had just seen their very first piping plover



nest.

The plover was facing them and appeared to be snuggled deep into the sand. The technicians inched a little closer, hoping to sneak a better look at the pair of plovers. Suddenly, two plovers began their melodic "peep-lo" and flew off, disturbed by the technicians' presence. Dana inspected the rest of the area, eager to find where the plovers flew to. She and Jennifer began to erect a predator enclosure around the nest. Hearing a faint "peep-lo", suggested the birds would be back soon.

First, the technicians "floated" the plover eggs to determine the date of the eggs. If the eggs were near hatching, putting up an enclosure could be risky. The technicians filled a plastic container with lukewarm water and headed to the nest. While Dana protected the eggs from the sun, Jennifer picked an egg up and placed it gently in the water. Looking at the float chart, the egg appeared to be 5-7 days old. Jennifer took the egg out of the water and carefully put it back in the same position. She did this to the other three eggs and came to the same conclusion. With the nest being in the early stages of incuba-

tion, they were ready to erect the predator enclosure stored away since last summer. Equipped with shovels, four steel stakes, a rake, and the enclosure, they went back to the nest and started working. Dana checked her watch to see how much time they had left. The goal was to erect the enclosure in ten minutes and so far they were at eight. They quickly finished up and headed back to their scopes.

Anxiously, Dana and Jennifer began observing the nest again. They both saw a plover land near the enclosure. It circled the area awhile but then swiftly walked through the enclosure and plopped down on its nest. Dana and Jennifer smiled at one another and both took one more look. They knew they had other sites to visit that day and had better get going. As they drove away, they couldn't help but think what else this sand pit would bring as the summer went by.



***Jennifer is currently working in Outdoor Education at Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.*

Nebraska Summer Dana Manske, Conservation Technician 2002

A lot of people don't realize it, but Nebraska has more to offer than good football teams and corn! Nebraska's rainwater basins host over 257 species of birds a year.

Forty species of shorebirds stop at basins and the Platte River as they migrate through each

spring and fall. Some shorebirds, like the piping plover, make Nebraska their summer home.

When I accepted my position with the Tern and Plover Conservation Partnership, I was going into it with a blind

eye. I did not know much about Nebraska; I had never been to Lincoln either! My only visit through Nebraska was on I-80 heading towards Utah.

The only things I recall were that the speed limit was 75 mph and the only car that passed me had an Illinois license plate!

I was very excited to work on a bird project. I have done a lot of fieldwork, but never extensively with birds. I did not know much about least terns and piping plovers, but that changed

"The hustle and bustle of everyday life soon became a distant memory, and I began to immerse myself in the lives of the birds."

quickly! I soon came to recognize and admire these two birds. I always got excited when we saw birds and located nests. When we would step out of the vehicle and terns would swarm around us, I knew it was going to be an exciting day!

My first month in Nebraska was a whirlwind. I started to become acquainted with the highways, sand mines, and endless fields of corn! Landmarks and towns started to stick out, but sand mines left more of an impression on me. At first they all looked alike, but each started to become distinct. *(Continued page 3)*

Winter Wonderland *(Continued from 1)*



Interior least terns spend a little more time at their breeding grounds, leaving gradually over a period of several weeks from late July to early September, depending on nesting site, timing of nesting and the year. In coastal populations from California (*Sterna antillarum brownii*) and Massachusetts (*Sterna a. antillarum*), family units were observed migrating together, and it is possible that the interior subspecies travels in the same way. Interior least terns seem to follow a migration route similar to the piping plovers, and although they have been spotted throughout the Caribbean during fall migration, their specific route beyond the Gulf of Mexico is unknown. Along the way they seek out the same kinds of food as they do during the breeding season, diving into shallow bodies of water for small fish. When resting, least terns may be found on beaches, sandbars and docks. Where exactly the interior subspecies winters is not well known, but other populations have been tracked. The California subspecies winters in southern Mexico, and at least some of the Atlantic coast birds have been found wintering along the northern coast of South America. Least terns

have also been observed in Guatemala, El Salvador and Guyana. With these observations, it appears that least terns winter along the coasts of Central America, the northern coast of South America from Colombia to eastern Brazil, and the Pacific coast of Mexico, with the interior subspecies probably wintering on the coastal beaches of Central and South America. The lack of information available regarding the interior least tern's wintering habits challenges our ability to conserve this endangered subspecies, and Whitman (1988) had recommended detailed surveys and studies to determine what might be negatively affecting the birds at their wintering grounds. Why more detailed knowledge of the tern's wintering grounds is still not available may be due to many factors, possibly including the large number of international relationships needed in order to conduct surveys and the extensive area over which to track the birds. Whatever the reasons for the knowledge gap for both the terns and plovers, knowing where they go and what they do outside of their breeding grounds is important so that we may do all we can to ensure that they return to us each year.

***Kathryn Wells has been a volunteer for the Tern and Plover Conservation Partnership since 2000. In 2002, she received the Volunteer of the Year Award for her dedication to the project.*

Sources

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Stout, G.A., ed. 1967. The Shorebirds of North America. Viking Press. New York, NY. 270 p.

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Eelink.net
Birdsofna.org

- Notes from the 2003 field technicians.
- A note from our sand and gravel partners.
- 2003 field season

Congratulations and many thanks to Jolene Silverstrini for volunteering the most hours (29.5) during the 2003 field season. Also of note, Tammy Snyder and Kathryn Wells each volunteered over 15 hours.



(Dana, cont. from page 2)

At certain sites I was able to enjoy the serenity of being alone and having nature surround me. I am grateful for having this opportunity in Nebraska; I have learned a lot. Nebraska offers plenty of opportunities to enjoy the outdoors; you just have to make them happen! I saw a lot of my first birds here; I will always remember seeing over 60 pelicans hanging out on the Lower Platte River. I will also remember my first sightings of plover and tern chicks and the excitement I was feeling! Last but not least, it still remains true that the people of the Midwest are still the friendliest.

***Dana is currently attending graduate classes at the University of Wisconsin-LaCrosse and has been accepted into the Professional Development Program..*

Tern Tidbit: In hot weather, nesting terns (and plovers) wet their belly feathers to cool the eggs.

Plover Point: Plovers will use their foot on the water-soaked sand at the water's edge to create a vibration. This vibration causes invertebrates to rise to the surface.



2002 Nesting season results

Pit Name/Colony	# visits	Adults		Nests		Fledglings		Fledglings/nest	
		LT	PP	LT	PP	LT	PP	LT	PP
Gretna #49	19	14	4	9	2	15	4	2.14	2.00
Big Sandy	36	18	10	13	6	15	3	1.67	0.60
Venice #48	20	10	3	4	1	1	0	0.20	0.00
Waterloo #40	29	26	4	14	1	22	3	1.69	1.50
Valley #11	22	16	4	7	2	19	6	2.38	3.00
Fremont #47	17	30	2	14	1	13	1	0.86	1.00
Arps East	18	8	2	4	1	9	4	2.25	4.00
Bellwood #73	21	12	2	8	1	12	1	<u>2.00</u>	<u>1.00</u>
Overall average (including those pits monitored without volunteers)								1.81	2.27

*The desired fledgling rates for recovery are: least terns; 0.71 fledglings per nesting pair, and piping plovers; 1.13 fledglings per nesting pair. **We had a great year, exceeding the recovery rates for both terns and plovers!**

Thanks to all of you who filled out surveys in the past. Please fill your 2003 survey out and send it in. We value your input, and want to continue to improve the program.



Girl Scout Troop 2121 from Bellevue with mylar flagging they helped make.

Upcoming Presentation:
Tern and Plovers in Nebraska
Omaha Audubon Society
February 12, 2004, 7:30 p.m.
4444 Frances Street, Omaha

****Volunteer opportunity: We have a large amount of slides that need to be cataloged and put into our slide viewing box. If you are interested in this project, please contact Chris at 402-472-8741. Thanks!*



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Partners: Overland Sand and Gravel Company, Western Sand and Gravel Company, United States Fish and Wildlife Service, Girl Scouts-Great Plains Council, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, Nebraska Environmental Trust, University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension, Arps Gravel and Concrete, Lyman-Richey Corporation, and Mallard Sand and Gravel.

<http://ternandplover.unl.edu>