

Spring 2012

# The Plight of the Piping Plover: My Summer of Shorebird Conservation and Public Outreach at Cape Cod National Seashore

Theresa L. Conn  
*University of New Hampshire*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholars.unh.edu/inquiry\\_2012](https://scholars.unh.edu/inquiry_2012)



Part of the [Environmental Sciences Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Conn, Theresa L., "The Plight of the Piping Plover: My Summer of Shorebird Conservation and Public Outreach at Cape Cod National Seashore" (2012). *Inquiry Journal*. 10.  
[https://scholars.unh.edu/inquiry\\_2012/10](https://scholars.unh.edu/inquiry_2012/10)

This Commentary is brought to you for free and open access by the Inquiry Journal at University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Inquiry Journal 2012 by an authorized administrator of University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. For more information, please contact [nicole.hentz@unh.edu](mailto:nicole.hentz@unh.edu).



**commentary**

## **The Plight of the Piping Plover: My Summer of Shorebird Conservation and Public Outreach at Cape Cod National Seashore**

—Theresa L. Conn (Editor: Clia Goodwin)

It was early morning on Cape Cod National Seashore. I was walking very cautiously along the beach with three shorebird biologists trained in avian behaviors. We were looking for signs of Piping plovers, which are federally threatened shorebirds that nest all over Cape Cod. Each step that I took was considered, calculated, and executed. It was my ninth day at work as a Shorebird Conservation Intern, and already I felt like I knew what I was doing. However, it was early, and I felt my mind drifting. “Theresa, freeze! Do you see it?” Dennis, a supervisor, yelled out. Like a child playing a game, I froze without even a thought. My right foot was raised in the air, only inches above the ground.

“You’re pretty close to a scrape,” said Dennis, both chastising and understanding. I looked around, seeing nothing. After a few minutes of searching, I saw the small, sand-colored Piping Plover egg lying in a hidden nest in the ground, about five feet away. At that point, I realized how easy it would be for someone to step on a nearly invisible nest by accident. After all, Piping plovers, shorebirds that are fighting extinction, have a hard enough time staying alive without me crushing their eggs.

### **A Bird in Danger**

The Piping Plover is a threatened shorebird with just under 2000 nesting pairs left along the North Atlantic coast. As of the summer of 2011, 82 pairs of plovers were nesting on Cape Cod National Seashore (CCNS). Piping plovers nest in the upper beach and feed in the intertidal zone, which are the parts of the beach that are most popular for recreation. Plovers lay up to four brown speckled eggs in nests called scrapes that blend in perfectly with rocks and sand.

The underlying reason for the decline of the Piping Plover on the East Coast has been the increase in numbers of people visiting the coastline. On Cape Cod, habitat loss has been a primary problem, with both an increase in shoreline development and a rise in tourism. The presence of people near Plover nesting areas may cause the birds to abandon their nests, exposing their eggs to the hot sun and predators. Many populations of predators have increased because of their ability to take advantage of human-provided foods. The more people that go to the beach, the more trash there is; the more trash there is, the more crows and coyotes there are. This has resulted in unnaturally high predation pressure to nests, chicks, and adults.



*A Piping Plover near its nest with eggs in the sand. (Courtesy National Park Service)*

Beginning in May, field technicians all over the East Coast go out to the beach daily looking for tracks, birds, and scrapes. Once a scrape is found, the shorebird team erects fencing to warn the public that they are near a nesting area. To protect the Plovers from predation, exclosures are put up around nests. Exclosures are essentially flexible cages that allow Plovers to come and go from their nests as they please but keep out predators. Crows, coyotes, and gulls all eat Plover eggs.

Although humans may have created the Piping Plover problem, they can also help solve it. That is where I came in: as a Shorebird Interpretive Intern, I taught the public about shorebird conservation to increase awareness.

## How I Found Myself as a Piping Plover Protector

By chance, I spotted a Student Conservation Association poster during my second semester at UNH in spring 2011. I had recently declared a major in Environmental Conservation Studies, and was looking for something more than just a summer job. The Student Conservation Association (SCA) provides hands-on conservation service for high school and college students. SCA partners up with national and state parks, allowing interns to do everything from tracking black bears in Yosemite to restoring ecosystems in urban areas. I found a listing for an internship as a Shorebird Interpretive Intern at Cape Cod National Seashore. The job was not strictly physically working with the birds; it was more focused on outreach and education, which is what I envision myself doing after college.



*The author and her colleague at their shorebird information booth at Coast Guard Beach in Eastham, Massachusetts. (Photo by Mary Hake)*

conservation practices to save the Plover. From early March to mid August, areas of the beach are closed off for recreation to accommodate shorebird nesting. This can be very frustrating for beachgoers. To combat the issues spurred by lack of knowledge, my fellow intern Mike and I manned an information booth on Coast Guard Beach in Eastham, Massachusetts. Every day, Mike and I lugged out our informational table and super-sized Plover model on to one of the most highly rated beaches in America. Sadly, Piping Plovers don't care about beach ratings, and this summer one pair laid a nest right near the beach entrance. Every day we had to stop hundreds of people from entering the restricted conservation area. It was only Mike and I between the birds and the general populace, armed with Plover facts and plenty of "I'm a Plover Protector" temporary tattoos to hand out.

This summer, my primary duty as a Shorebird Interpreter was to teach the public about endangered birds that inhabit the National Seashore's beaches. My first month on the Cape was essentially Piping Plover Boot Camp. I knew next to nothing about the birds before I arrived on the Cape, and I was thrown headfirst into the challenges of conservation. For a few weeks, I shadowed shorebird techs as they traveled up and down Cape Cod looking for birds, eggs, and nests. I found scrapes on my own, watched adorable chicks stumble around the beach, and sledge-hammered six-foot fencing posts into the sand.

Piping Plovers face many natural and human-caused challenges, but one of their biggest problems has been general public outrage about

Interacting with the public was interesting, fun, rewarding, and occasionally challenging. A majority of people simply didn't know about the Plovers, but after hearing their story, left our tables as Plover Protectors. Kids were fun and receptive, easily drawn in by the cute appeal of the Plover. Adults were not always as easy: many people were not interested in conservation issues and did not want their fun days at the beach dampened by the sad story of the Plover. Some people would disregard the fencing and continue walking, which put eggs and Plover chicks in danger. For extreme circumstances and repeat offenders, we would get help from the CCNS park rangers. However, it rarely got to that point. My job at the Seashore was to defuse tensions through education.



*Beachgoers surround a shorebird nesting area at Cape Cod National Seashore. (Photo by Mary Hake)*

## **Little Birds, Big Problem**

One of the most common questions I was asked this summer was, “What do the Piping Plovers do for me?” In abstract, it would appear that the answer is nothing. The disappearance of the little birds on Cape Cod beaches would go unnoticed by the average beachgoer. However, in reality, Piping Plovers are canaries in the coal mine. The gradual disappearance of the Piping Plover population is an indication that our human presence on Cape Cod National Seashore has had a negative impact on the environment. At what point do we intervene and right our wrongs? If we let the Plovers go extinct, what species is next?

My time with SCA on Cape Cod has redirected and shaped my future career goals. I grew up with a desire to be a teacher, but I didn't want to live my entire life in a classroom. This summer I learned that teachers come in all different forms, and that nature is one of the best classrooms to learn in. I think that the conservation of the environment is going to become increasingly more important in years to come, and I hope that I can be a lifelong learner and teacher.

*I wouldn't have had anything to write about if it wasn't for Mary Hake, who has taught me everything I know about shorebird conservation. I'd also like to thank both the Student Conservation Association and Cape Cod National Seashore for making my internship possible. Finally, I'd like to acknowledge my Dad for his constant support in everything I do. Thank you!*

Copyright 2012, Theresa Conn

### **Author Bio**

*Theresa L. Conn, a sophomore University Honors Student from Billerica, Massachusetts, is pursuing a bachelor of science degree in environmental conservation studies. An outdoorswoman by inclination, she is an active hiker and runner but also likes the quiet activity of crafts. Her internship on Cape Cod National Seashore came about through a visit to the Hamel Center for Undergraduate Research where she saw a poster from the Student Conservation Association and applied. On campus, she works at the Office of Student Involvement and Leadership at the MUB, and she has an internship with the New Hampshire State Parks, where she is their Parks Blogger ([blog.nhstateparks.org](http://blog.nhstateparks.org)). Even though her sights are on New Hampshire this year, she says that every day on the Cape in the summer of 2011 was an inspiring learning experience for her.*