



Piping plovers begin to hatch

By Natalie Miller/ natalie.miller@cnc.com

Thursday, June 22, 2006

Two piping plover eggs that survived a vandal attack on Crane Beach have hatched and the chicks are doing well.

Two other eggs in the batch were destroyed over Memorial Day weekend when a nest of piping plover eggs in Essex Point was vandalized. Two of the eggs being housed in a metal enclosure were taken out and smashed.

This has been a slower than normal season for breeding piping plovers because of the weather and the activity of animal and human predators, but Ipswich resident and ecologist Franz Ingelfinger is still hopeful and said a number of nests are expected to hatch by the Fourth of July.

Ingelfinger said the "exclosures," built like metal cages, are buried in the ground to keep the eggs safe from predators such as skunks, coyotes, raccoons, and cats and dogs. The birds can pass through the enclosure, but predators cannot.

"(The exclosures) have worked well," said Ingelfinger, but he wasn't expecting a human predator to be roaming the beach.

Ingelfinger said vandalism is a concern because the numbers of plovers are down. This year there are 20 pairs, down from 30 last season, making this a low-average production season.

"We are keeping fingers crossed," he said.

And as far as the vandals, Ingelfinger said he hopes some good will come out of the incident.

"Hopefully people will be more aware," he said. "We need folks' help. We need visitors to be stewards of the property."

The Trustees of the Reservation have been managing Crane Beach for 21 years, documenting endangered bird nestings. Piping plovers, which are only found in North America, have been endangered since 1986. They are found along the Atlantic Coast, Great Plains and the Great Lakes region.

During the plover season, which runs from mid-April to September, local ecologists monitor the nests at Crane Beach on a daily basis, counting eggs and chicks. Plovers are threatened because of the increase in land development and recreation on barrier beaches causing a loss in habitat, the increase in the number of predators such as skunks, coyotes, raccoons, and cats and dogs, and lastly, the vehicles on the beaches.

Ingelfinger said this year has been more challenging.

"We are still in the thick of the breeding season, but it looks to be less productive breeding season than average," he said. "A lot of eggs haven't made it."

Other bird species monitored by the group at Crane Beach are Willets and Bank Swallows, which also both nest in sand dunes.

Only 15 percent of nests without exclosures hatch, said Ingelfinger, but the cages have been losing effectiveness and in 2002, the trustees began to use electric fencing to protect them.

Ingelfinger said he is cautiously optimistic. There was success early on at Crane Beach, but over time the exclosures have become less effective. Coyotes are kept out, but in addition to humans, crows and gulls can also penetrate the cages. The electric fences also only keep out land predators, not crows and gulls.

"We need to think holistically," he said

Least terns are also protected electric fencing. Ingelfinger said there are over 100 pairs so far this year nesting at Crane Beach from end to end and are doing well.

"We are trying different things constantly to try to help these birds increase productivity," said Ingelfinger.

The next step against the animal predators is lethal control, he said, but the Trustees are reluctant to have to use that method of control. The Beach Management Program includes a daily ecology staff during the breeding season, which runs from April 1 to Oct. 1. The team walks the four-mile stretch of beach each morning, watching, listening and observing.

"We bring a lot of sand home in our shoes," said Ingelfinger, who

supervises the team of wildlife technicians and rangers. There are also hundreds of volunteers who help with the Trustees efforts.

Ingelfinger asks anyone who sees reckless endangerment of wildlife going on at the beaches to call the Trustees' beach office at 978-412-2587.

[Naturalists on Crane Beach use 'exclosures' like this one to protect piping plover eggs. (Courtesy Photo)]

© Copyright of CNC and Herald Interactive Advertising Systems, Inc.  
<http://www2.townonline.com/ipswich/localRegional/view.bg?articleid=521706&format=&page=1>