



PICOIDES

Bulletin of the Society of Canadian Ornithologists
Bulletin de la Société des Ornithologistes du Canada

Picoides, July 2007
Volume 20, Number 2



Piping Plover pair at nest on Miscou Island, Northeast New Brunswick. Photo by Bob Belliveau-Ferrin Lemieux

PICOIDES July 2007



A Piping Plover Lover's Journal

By Bob Belliveau-Ferrin Lemieux

JULY, DAY 21: I was awakened by the Nor'easter pounding the seaward side of my motor home. It was resting precariously on the edge of Lighthouse Point, on Miscou Island. Miscou is the most northerly point of land in Northeast New Brunswick.

My eyes tried to adjust to the pitch black darkness of the night. Only the occasional passing beam of light from the century-old beacon above me allowed me to see my hand before my face. My eyes searched for the illuminated face of the silent timepiece on the countertop. Finally, the bluish firefly of the beacon rested long enough for me to recognize the 2:00 on the digital face.

I stumbled from my bed, bracing myself against the wall to counteract the rocking-and-rolling motion of my home-away-from-home. I called out to my loyal travelling companion Jack to see if he was safe. My right foot crashed into the wooden leg of my office chair, which had shifted during the tempest. Not only was the night black, but the air had also now turned blue, matching the color of my toes.

Finally the dim glow of the flickering night light outlined my friend sleeping on the front dash. He had pushed his nose against the screen-covered open window on the leeward side of the vehicle.

In my time of need Jack had ditched me. I stared at my friend who, with one eye opened, was admiring my agility to navigate the narrow passageway in this unexpected July storm. After my mild scolding he simply replaced his head on his pillow, closed his eye and covered his nose with his paw.

When Jack and I began our travelling adventures two years earlier, we had come to an understanding: he agreed to remain in the truck or motor home while I explored sites and photographic opportunities. I, on the other hand, was obliged to provide an ample supply of fresh water, a few tasty treats, his chewy-squeaky rabbit, and open windows so he could sniff the fresh air of nature while lying upon his tattered "blankey".

However, whenever we found ourselves on an extended field trip in the "outback," Jack had a way of letting me know it was time to return to civilization. Whenever Jack refused to climb into the truck bed and sleep with me, I knew it was time to hit the nearest shower in a friendly RV park.

However, on this occasion, my two-year-old Chihuahua had made his point; 21 days was far too long to be away from a hot shower, even in the "expansive" confines of our motor home.

Apparently, my evening dips in the frigid waters of the Gulf of St. Lawrence had failed me. I had simply lost track of time. I had spent the past three weeks observing, through the 1,000mm lens of my camera, two dedicated Piping Plovers incubate their eggs, oversee their hatch and nurture their offspring as they foraged for the first time in a cruel and sometimes inhospitable world. I had been captivated by this miracle of life.

My commitment and dedication to this event had provided me with critical awareness and a valuable experience of the perils faced by many species in the wild. I realized for the first time how precarious and fragile the balance between survival and death is in the migratory shorebird community.

The Piping Plover is a small, stocky shorebird that weighs in at about 43-63g and has a body length of approximately 17-18 cm. Its primary nesting sites are located within the boundaries of Atlantic Canada. Miscou Island and the entire Acadian Peninsula region in Northern New Brunswick are two of the primary nesting and chick raising areas in North America.

The Piping Plover occupy these critical areas between May and August; unfortunately, they are not alone. Tourists, dogs, uncontrolled 4 x 4 and off-road vehicle traffic, natural predators and freak storms all contribute to the growing fight for survival of these endangered birds.



In 1985 and again in 2001, the Piping Plover (sub-species *melodus*) was designated Endangered. Mammals, plants and birds considered Endangered or on the “Species at Risk” list are effectively on the verge of extinction if immediate efforts are not implemented to reverse the trend.

Fortunately for the Piping Plover, a plan to be implemented beginning this year (2007) may be at hand to help with their rejuvenation. Diane Amirault-Langlais, Acting Head of Population Assessment at the Canadian Wildlife Service, Environment Canada, has written a masterful report called **Recovery Strategy for Piping Plovers in Canada**. The recovery strategy is an appeal to you and me as well as provincial, federal and local authorities to embark on a worthwhile plan to save these threatened migratory shorebirds.

The International Census (Ferland and Haig 2002) estimated that the global breeding population of Piping Plovers was 5,945 in 2001. The Atlantic Canada population in 2001 was a meagre 481 adults or 33% of the total Canadian nesting population (1,454) and 8% of the North American population (Amirault 2005). However, by 2005 that number had declined to an estimated 444 individuals, including 213 breeding pairs.

In many situations, Piping Plovers have created their own problems; they sometimes nest below the high tide line where they subject themselves to “wash-outs” as a result of freak storms. Their primary camouflage against predation – their color and the speckled color of their eggs – work so well at hiding their nests that driftwood collectors, 4 x 4’s and the unleashed dogs of beach walkers frequently destroy their nests.



Piping Plover hatchling and 3 eggs, Miscou Island, New Brunswick. Photo by Bob Belliveau-Ferrin Lemieux

Piping Plover chicks are flightless for the first 25 days and are almost invisible to the human eye. The tiny downy creatures forage in wrack (stacked seaweed along the shore), search for insects on the warm sand and between the pebbles, and peck for invertebrates along the tide-washed sand. Juvenile survival rates range from 34% (southern Gulf of St. Lawrence) to 53% (southern Nova Scotia), and a dismal 48% in Massachusetts.

The question is, how can the human race live in unison with nature’s creatures, and specifically the Piping Plover?

- My first recommendation is for naturalists and conservationists across Atlantic Canada to obtain a copy of “Recovery Strategy for Piping Plovers in Canada” (November 2006, Environment Canada, author Diane Amirault-Langlais, P.O. Box 6227, Sackville, N.B. E4L 1G6; (506) 649-6864;

diane.amirault@ec.gc.ca). Knowledge is power, and the Amirault report is filled with ammunition.

- Step two is the strict enforcement of existing laws and regulations regarding the use of beaches and habitats where Species at Risk or migratory shorebirds inhabit. Article 1 of the Migratory Birds Convention Act, 1994, has specific guidelines for enforcement but not the adequate funding reserves to implement them effectively.
- Step three, therefore, requires that the federal government and our elected public servants provide the funding for the effective enforcement of these laws and regulations. Parliament should either provide the funds to all research projects and enforcement agencies or it should **STOP** making a mockery of the Species at Risk Act (SARA) and the Migratory Shorebird Convention (MSC) and withdraw from all further participation in both.
- Step four is the implementation of extensive educational training and awareness programs intended for committed volunteers who are willing to become an extension of the enforcement and research arms of the governing bodies. A well trained and educated team of government-sponsored volunteers can, in a non-threatening way (to themselves and the birds), provide educational programs, distribute educational materials to beach enthusiasts, guarantee on-site protection of vulnerable nesting sites and chicks, and when necessary report violators.



- Step five must be the aggressive prosecution of SARA and MSC violators by the appropriate enforcement agencies. The establishment of special units within each branch of government, working in unison with one another, will work if they are appropriately staffed and funded. Drastic penalties will bring a halt to the majority of the violations presently occurring.
- Step six is the expansion of the guardian program and landowner involvement programs to insure that adequate information is provided to researchers who, with the help of property owners and the trained guardians, can expand the number of protected areas where nesting birds find a home.
- Step seven requires that funding support from these governmental agencies is a must to insure total cooperation between Ottawa and each province and community.
- Step eight must involve the provincial departments of education and all educational establishments within each province (kindergarten through college) who will mandate the use of a comprehensive curriculum in “earth management sciences.”
- Step nine would immediately identify all SARA and MSC habitats, make them off limits for an indefinite period of time, and restrict all access to these areas until the endangered inhabitants have returned to a satisfactory level.
- Step ten is the involvement of corporate Canada in a significant way. Identified polluters would be mandated to stop and clean up their pollution as well as significant financial penalties for their lack of stewardship. Non-polluters would be encouraged to designate a significant percentage of their annual budget for environmental programs in exchange for tax abatements.

The Acadian Peninsula is one of the most significant nesting, re-fuelling and residence areas in North America for migratory, threatened and endangered migratory bird species.

I believe there are immediate options for the region: (1) Immediately designate the region a sanctuary under SARA and MSC; (2) once sanctuary status has been implemented, the area should be developed as a National Park; and (3) once these steps are in place, a concerted effort must be made to develop a controlled eco-tourism industry for the region. This is the pearl in the oyster for the future of this part of New Brunswick. A prosperous eco-tourism industry is the only answer for this declining area.



Piping Plover nestling at Miscou Island, Northeast New Brunswick. Photo by Bob Belliveau-Ferrin Lemieux

I caution my sceptics. Business is business, and it is only a matter of time before real estate developers descend upon the area with grandiose plans to buy up the dirt cheap land, convert it into seasonal condos, golf courses, and beachfront hideaways. The affluent part-time residents will have little consideration for the region’s culture, its history or the natural beauty that is critical to so many wildlife species.

The Acadian Peninsula National Wildlife Sanctuary or The Acadian Peninsula National Park has a nice ring to it.

I believe that working together can bring about a rejuvenation of our endangered birds and threatened habitats, and an economic boom to a depressed area and struggling province.

As for Jack and me...we’ll continue to hang out on the beaches, in the marshes and in the woods where we belong. We’ll continue to investigate and write about our travels and share them with you. We’ll continue to exhibit our photographs and give lectures on what we see, and suggestions we feel need to be acted upon.

Image Descriptions

Cover Image

Although an endangered species, this pair of loving piping plover parents are committed and diligent when it comes to protecting their nest on the shores of Miscou Island, in Northern New Brunswick, Canada.

This exchange of egg sitting is a regular feature in the brooding stage. However, once the chicks hatch, dad is the primary care giver until the brood fledge and head south to the warmer coast lines of the Carolina's in the U.S.A.

Summer on the beaches of Miscou Island are filled with the heart warming sounds of piping plovers, but, caution must be taken to stay clear of these extremely sensitive nesting areas.

Image Two: Hatching Chicks

It was three in the morning, the wind was at gale force and the tide was rising toward the nest. Praying helps. As I watched helplessly, Mother Nature raised her almighty hand and held the breaking waves at bay. By the time the sun's warming rays began surrounding the nest, three of the four chicks had made the transition from eggs to toddlers (see note below). God Bless Mother Nature!

Image Three: Squatting Piping Plover Chick

I have no idea why this little chick (the first born of the clutch) was named Gus, but that is what I christened him when he broke through the shell at 10 PM as the tide rolled closer to the skimpy sand and shell nest on the beach of Miscou Island in Northern New Brunswick, Canada. Gus made it and was on his way to a healthy childhood after spending a month eating his fill of the abundant food along the shores of the Gulf of Saint Lawrence. Caution must be taken to remain away from these vital nesting and rearing sites along the Atlantic Coastline.