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Laura Zitske, Coastal Birds Project Director

2019: A Year of Records and Firsts

Sitting at my desk and looking at the numbers of Piping Plovers that nested in Maine this year and how many chicks were raised to the point where they can fly, I am still in a state of disbelief. During my first season in 2011 as Coastal Birds Project Director, Maine hosted 33 pairs of plovers. This year, 89 pairs nested and fledged young, which seems impossible. I think of how hard we worked to protect those 33 pairs eight years ago. Then I think of the tremendous effort the plover crew made this year, and how diligent and efficient the crew was in juggling more plover pairs than we have ever seen at our beaches, including at Ogunquit, Wells, Western, and Popham.

We had a number of highlights for plovers this year on various beaches. Not only did four beaches host record numbers for that particular beach, but Ogunquit's 12 nesting pairs is an all-time record for nesting plovers on one beach in Maine. In the 38 years of monitoring, only twice has a Maine beach hosted 10 or more pairs of plovers, and one of those was at Ogunquit last year. This year, Ogunquit had 12 and Popham had 10 pairs.

Only three times since 1981 has a beach fledged more than 20 chicks; that includes 26 from Ogunquit in 2017 and 24 from Ogunquit in 2018. This year alone, three separate beaches had more than 20 fledglings produced: Wells (24), Western (26), and Popham (26). Even our beaches that did not set records had more than their typical number of pairs. Reid State Park had more than two pairs for the first time since 2007, and Seawall beach fledged more chicks than it has since 1986.

One remarkable thing that happened in 2019 is that none of our 107 nest attempts (the first time more than 100 plover nests have been established in one year since

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1981) were washed away by storm or tide. This good luck certainly helped boost productivity this year, but I still think much of the credit goes to the hard work of our countless volunteers, landowners, lifeguards, municipal workers, State Park staff, and others who help spread the word about these remarkable birds.

Thank you to all of you that work hard to protect these birds and spread the word. Please keep it up, as 2020 is likely to be busier and birdier than ever!

Seeking a new Wells Plover Coordinator



When Gary Sheehan came on board to lead the Wells Plover Project in 2014, he was filling some big shoes, as the project had been led, for years, by the very capable Virginia Calvo. Gary jumped right in and helped shepherd the town's volunteer monitoring

program as plovers on Wells Beach swelled from three to eight pairs. Not only did Wells see record town high numbers of nesting plovers under Gary's watch, but those eight pairs fledged a whopping 24 chicks—another town record (and only two away from the state record). Wells has a long and sometimes complicated relationship with Piping Plovers, and Gary's quiet but determined nature helped mobilize volunteers and win over landowners and beach-goers alike. Gary is ready to pass the baton to the next Wells Plover Coordinator, though he assures us that he will still be walking the beach as a volunteer and will do what he can to support a new coordinator.

If you would like to help plovers in Wells by being a coordinator, please contact Cindy Adamsky at 207-361-8130.



The Coastal Birds crew says: “Thank you, volunteers!”

Communities and plovers in Ogunquit, Wells, Kennebunkport, and Scarborough all benefit from the hard work of plover volunteer coordinators who ensure that volunteers are trained and that the beaches are well-monitored on a regular basis. Volunteer coordinators are an essential part of the recent nesting success of plovers on Maine's beaches. They make important connections between biologists, volunteers, municipal officials, and landowners, sharing information so that everyone can respond quickly to find and enclose new nests and help vulnerable chicks.

In 2019, we were grateful for the efforts of Bobby Morse (Ogunquit), Gary Sheehan (Wells), Racheal Sylvester (Goose Rocks Beach), and Jami Fitch (Scarborough).



(Left to right):- Biologist Ashley Price, Intern Isaac Merson, Biologist Monica Johnson, and Biologist Laura Williams

The Coastal Birds crew truly could not have done its work without you!

If you like talking to people, sharing your passion for plovers, making a difference in your community, and working with an enthusiastic team, please consider becoming either a volunteer or a volunteer coordinator! If you are interested, please contact Laura Minich Zitske to discuss future openings at lzitske@maineaudubon.org or 207.781.2330 x226.

2019 Piping Plover Nesting Data

TOWN	Beach	Pairs	Nest Attempts	Fledglings
Ogunquit	Ogunquit	12	19	14
Wells	Moody Wells	1	1	0
	Drakes Island	8	9	24
	Laudholm Farm	1	2	4
		2	2	6
Kennebunk	All Beaches	7	7	8
Kennebunkpt.	Marshall Point	*	0	0
	Goose Rocks	6	7	11
Biddeford	Fortunes Rocks	4	6	3
	Hattie's Hills	0	0	0
		2	2	4
Saco	Ferry	**	0	**
	Goosefare Brook	**	1	**
Old Orchard Beach	Ocean Park	3	4	1
	Old Orchard	4	4	9
Scarborough	Pine Point	2	2	2
	Western/Ferry	8	8	26
	Scarborough SP	2	2	4
	Higgins	5	6	7
Cape Eliz.	Ram Island	1	1	0
	Crescent SP	1	1	2
Phippsburg	Seawall	7	8	18
	Popham SP	10	13	26
	Hunnewell	0	0	0
Georgetown	Reid SP	3	3	6
Totals		89	108	175

* Activity observed, but no nesting

** No nests, however chick from adjacent Old Orchard Beach moved here.

Least Terns 2019

Despite hard work by everyone involved, Least Terns had another challenging summer in Maine.

We had a promising start to the season with a record high of 296 pairs in the state! However, predation was a significant problem this year and we fledged 61 new birds, or 0.21 fledglings per pair. Least Terns are long-lived birds, and may persist over time with low annual nesting success rates. However, this year's productivity is below what we believe is needed for a healthy population. Large colonies formed at the usual sites in Kennebunk and Stratton Island, while other colonies were established on Western and Higgins beaches in Scarborough.

Maine's largest Least Tern colony, managed by Rachel Carson National Wildlife Refuge, struggled with predation again this year. Thirty-one chicks fledged from 156 nests for a productivity rate of 0.2 chicks per nesting pair. Great-horned Owl predation was a problem throughout the season, for the third year in a row, with owls preying on chicks and causing nocturnal abandonment of the colony. This continued disturbance caused many of the terns to abandon the colony towards the end of the season.

A feral cat's visit to the colony on the night of August 1 proved to be the final straw. Unfortunately, the tide



Photo Luke Seitz

had knocked over our electric net fence and the cat entered the colony. Our game camera photographed an animal with a tipped ear (which indicates it was part of a trap, neuter, and release program). Cat tracks were found throughout the colony, wandering from empty nest to empty nest where just the day before we had documented newly-hatched chicks. The few remaining terns abandoned the colony fully on August 2.

In Scarborough, Western Beach, managed by Maine Audubon, hosted 35 pairs. This colony appeared to be off to a good start but the colony was abandoned in mid-June after a fox got in through the electric fencing. These adults moved to Stratton Island and enhanced a growing colony on Higgins Beach, with a high of approximately 55 nests by mid-July. At least 16 chicks fledged for a productivity of 0.29 chicks per pair.

Stratton Island, managed by National Audubon's Seabird Restoration program, fledged at least 14 chicks from 84 nests.

It has been a tough few years for Maine's Least Tern population, with low productivity since 2016. Thankfully, adults are long-lived, so they will return next year and, hopefully, 2020 will be more successful!

Plover People: An Intern's Perspective

By Isaac Merson and Emily Maynard

In addition to creating a space for the Piping Plovers on our beaches, one fantastic aspect of our project is that we are carving out a space for plovers in the hearts and minds of the people who are on the beach with the birds. Rather than further separate the human world from the natural world that supports it, we're hoping to create a future where people can more positively interact with wild species and the natural spaces we inhabit.



As interns, we've seen firsthand some of the challenges that cohabitation presents. People can get upset when they don't understand why their activities might be restricted. But we've also seen firsthand the joy that comes to a person seeing a camouflaged plover emerge from the background for the first time. Imagine watching a tiny toddler discover for the first time that the beach isn't just a place with sand and waves, but a place where things are ALIVE.

One of the most rewarding aspects of our job, besides of course the heart-melting chicks, is when a person sees our binoculars and Maine Audubon hats, and strides up to tell us all about what they have seen. Emily and I feel lucky to have grown up in a state like Maine, where people are sharp-eyed and open-hearted to the natural world. We have been extremely proud to work here, protecting a natural heritage that we are grateful to inherit.

At the end of a long hot day of straining our eyes against the sand, our arms weary from hammering stakes, we go home knowing that we've been working alongside terns and plovers, clams and people, to ensure a vibrant living future for Maine's beaches. And it doesn't hurt when we stop for ice cream.



Popham's Canadians

As plovers move from wintering grounds in the south to breeding beaches in the northeast during spring migration, we sometimes observe birds that were banded in Canada during prior nesting seasons, fueling up on Maine beaches before heading to nesting sites. We always enjoy seeing these birds and get excited to track their stories, such as the plover we observed this spring that was moving from its wintering site in Georgia to its breeding grounds in Newfoundland.

In May, we noticed a banded bird with a white flag marked “JP” at Popham Beach State Park. We assumed it was another migrant until we noticed it was ‘scraping’ or making a practice nest—a classic mating behavior. After reaching out to our Canadian colleagues, we learned that white flag JP was banded as a chick last June at Kejimikujik National Park in

DID YOU KNOW?

Biologists who band shorebirds sometimes will put special bands with a tab (or flag) that has a bird-specific alphanumeric (numbers and letters) code. These flagged birds give us lots of information about where the birds breed, migrate, and spend the winter.



Photo: Anna Hodgkins

southern Nova Scotia, and this was the first sighting of it since. We observed the bird on our next couple of visits to Popham, and by June 23 he had found a mate and established a nest. The pair incubated diligently, and four chicks hatched. Unfortunately, our flagged bird started limping shortly after the hatching of the chicks and appeared to have a leg injury or band problem. JP was observed with his leg tucked and hopping around defending his small chicks one day but was not seen on any subsequent visit; his fate is unknown. Despite this challenge, his mate successfully raised all four chicks to fledging.

When we saw a male scraping and trying to impress a plover with black flag band marked “4M” on neighboring Seawall Beach on May 23, we wondered if she was a migrant or another breeder. It turned out that 4M was banded as a chick last July in Pointe-à-Bouveau, New Brunswick. When we did not see 4M on any subsequent visits to Seawall Beach, we assumed that she had returned to her natal Canada.

But a visit to Popham Beach in mid-June revealed 4M with a mate scraping only meters away from JP’s nest—what a surprise! Four chicks hatched successfully from their nest on July 22. 4M was observed tending her chicks for the next week. Then, as many females do, she left early before her chicks fledged, leaving the male to take over parenting the chicks. One chick from her nest survived to fledge.

Having two Canadian birds breed in Maine, after colleagues up north have been banding them since 2013, demonstrates the high quality of Maine’s plover nesting habitat in 2019 and the importance of international efforts in the recovery of these rare birds.



Five chicks seek shade on the busy Fourth of July.



Yet Another Old Orchard Beach Tale

Like clockwork, the project's cell phone rings every morning and we pick it up to hear: "Good mornin', Roger Stevens, Old Orchard Public Works!" We always find joy and gratitude in his reports on the birds, clever new ideas on how to improve our management, or an anecdote from his morning walk. Roger Stevens, a lifelong Old Orchard Beach resident and retiree of the Public Works department, came out of a short retirement this season to help protect the Piping Plovers on one of our busiest beaches. Thank goodness he did, as one family of plovers on Old Orchard really benefitted from his keen eyes and hard work.

The spring of 2019 was long, wet, and cold, which meant the beaches remained relatively people-free much later into the breeding season than usual. Typically, crowds on the beaches in May will indicate to nesting plovers that the stretch of sand by the pier is *not* a good place to lay eggs. However, this cool spring drove people away and led a pair of plovers to nest directly in front of the roller coaster of Palace Playland in May. As summer weather finally arrived and the beach got busy, this pair remained very attentive to their nest.

Four chicks hatched on June 28 and immediately began their journey south in search of a quieter section of beach. By a very hot Fourth of July, the family had joined together, in the Ocean Park area, with two other broods forming a 'super brood' of six chicks. Only four days after that, the three remaining chicks from Palace Playland and their parents continued south, and the chicks were observed swimming across Goosefare Brook. By the time the brood fledged, two chicks flew off of Ferry Beach in Saco, over two miles away from where they hatched.

Roger Stevens kept everyone in the loop as this plover family traveled south, informing the town and biologists alike as the birds weaved in and out of sections of the beach with fencing. His observation and outreach skills helped all seven pairs of plovers that nested on the three miles of Old Orchard (plus one brood that hatched in Pine Point and moved south to OOB). Thanks to Roger and Old Orchard!

Coastal Birds Project: Behind the Scenes

The Piping Plover and Least Tern Project newsletter is published annually by Maine Audubon in partnership with the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries & Wildlife, and Rachel Carson National Wildlife Refuge.

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Biologists: Monica Johnson, Ashley Price, and Laura Williams

Interns: Emily Maynard and Isaac Merson

Maine Audubon has worked for more than 35 years to restore Maine's Piping Plover and Least Tern populations with help from our partners, Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife (MDIFW) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS); populations have increased substantially in that time. The project is funded by MDIFW, USFWS, with additional funding from the Phineas W. Sprague Memorial Foundation



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PIPING PLOVER PARTY

Saturday, March 14, 4 to 7 pm

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maineaudubon.org/ploverparty

Benefiting Maine Audubon's shorebird conservation work.



Food and Drinks
Guided Beach Walks
Games and Activities
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and more!