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For the Birds

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FOR THE BIRDS

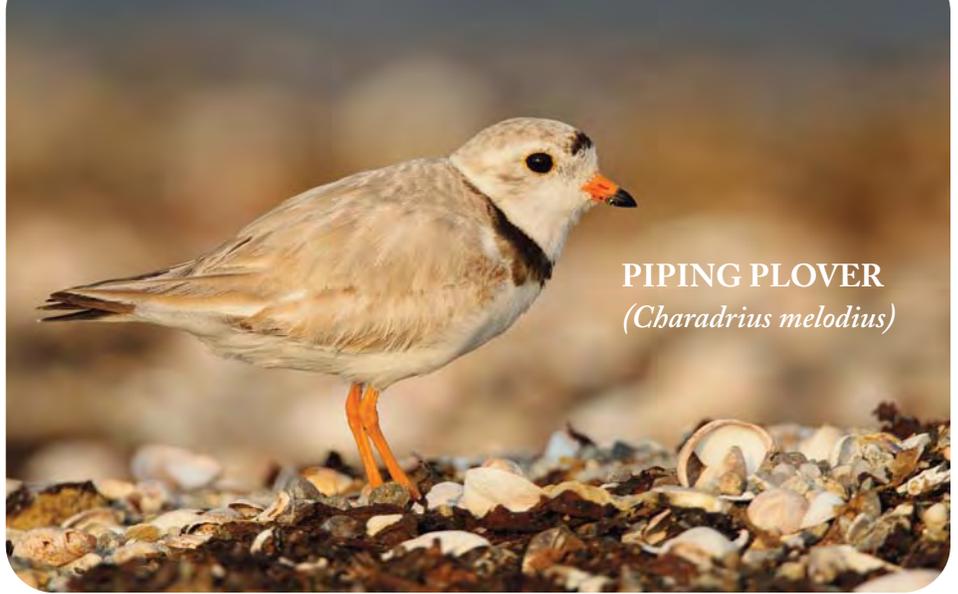
a column for avian aficionados

PIPING PLOVER

by Milan Bull

Small, pocket-sized little shorebirds, piping plovers nest along our sandy beaches and outer sand bars. Their pale colors and solitary habits make them the most difficult to see of our small plovers. They patter over the sand like spirit birds and disappear the moment they stop. Their clear, liquid *peep-lo!* has a true piping quality and is sometimes the only indication that the bird is nearby. As one of Connecticut's breeding birds, the piping plover is a rare and Federally Threatened species. It is easy to see why, as they nest only along our beaches and are increasingly encroached upon by development and summer beachgoers.

Piping plovers arrive along our shores about the end of March but serious nesting doesn't occur until late April or early May when the birds make a small depression or "scrape" in the sand just above the high tide line. No nesting material is added to the scrape, but sometimes small shell fragments or pebbles are placed in and around the depression. Like all plovers, the piping plover lays four small eggs so perfectly camouflaged with sand-colored speckles and dots



PIPING PLOVER
(*Charadrius melodius*)

that they are nearly impossible to see, even when only inches away! The nesting pair is very shy, and will creep away from the nest long before the approach of a potential predator, or beach walker, totally depending upon the successful concealment of their eggs. Once the eggs hatch in about 25 days, or are very near to hatching, the birds may attempt to draw predators away by feigning a broken wing and flopping down the beach, keeping just out of reach until all danger of the nest being discovered is gone, then with a clear *peep!*, off she flies. Like little cotton balls on stilts, the downy chicks are precocious and follow their parents down the beach, stopping to squat and hide in depressions when danger threatens.

Like many of our shorebirds, the piping plover feeds on small invertebrates such as insects, crustaceans and annelid worms that it picks from the sand and mud flats.

Piping plovers were fairly common along our beaches up until the 1940's, however increased development and beach recreation after World War II led to a population decline that finally led to Endangered Species Act protection in 1986.

With intensive protection and recovery efforts, the population is recovering but there are still fewer than 2,000 pairs of the Atlantic population.

Actually, the plovers and beachgoers can exist quite well side by side on our beaches if the birds are given a little room to nest and people are aware and informed. Roaming dogs and cats, and skunks and raccoons, attracted to the beaches by leftover food from beachgoers are a continuing problem.

In coastal Connecticut, dozens of volunteers, organized by the Audubon Societies assist the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection by monitoring all the known nesting locations, erecting wire nest enclosures that help keep the predators out but allow access by the adults, and providing the public with information about these rare shorebirds.

So if you are on the beach this summer and observe one of the enclosures, or see piping plover signs, you may also encounter a person monitoring the birds. If you do see a monitor, they'd be happy to share their binoculars or spotting scope to allow for a closer look at one of our most rare wildlife species.

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