

## **Saskatchewan Vital Part of International Piping Plover Census**

Submitted by Leanne Thompson for SK PCAP

In early June, 2011, the Saskatchewan portion of the International Piping Plover Census will take place. The International Census was established in 1991 and occurs every five years to assess the status, distribution and population trends of the Piping Plover across North America. Coordinated in this province by Nature Saskatchewan, the census will employ agency staff and biologists as well as approximately 60 volunteers to carry out the ambitious task of surveying the Saskatchewan breeding range of this migratory species.

The Piping Plover is a small shore bird that relies on sparsely vegetated sandy and gravelly beaches and alkali mud flats of fresh water and alkali lakes as habitat. This smaller cousin of the killdeer feeds along the shoreline eating freshwater invertebrates and creates a nest by scraping out a shallow bowl in the sand/gravel and lining it with pebbles.

The Saskatchewan portion of this survey is critical to the overall success of the international census as previous censuses have determined that Saskatchewan supports a significant portion of the prairie Canada, Piping Plover population. During the 2006 census, 299 basins representing 1808km of shoreline were surveyed across Saskatchewan. Given this vast area and due to the fact that surveys must be completed in a two week window, cooperation from landowners and volunteer surveyors is integral to the success of the census. Landowners with recognized habitat on their land will be contacted in early spring for permission to access land(s).

Why all the fuss over this little bird? The Piping Plover has experienced a sharp decline in population since 1945 and is currently designated as an endangered species by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) and as such it is protected under the *Species at Risk Act* (SARA). Some of the contributing factors to the decline in population include fluctuation in water levels, disturbance along shorelines caused by humans and livestock, and predation (by crows, gulls, hawks, skunks, raccoons, foxes, and coyotes).

So what can landowners do to protect the habitat of the Piping Plover? If you have suitable habitat on your land (sand and pebble beaches or saline wetlands) some small changes in management can have a dramatic effect on nest survival and subsequent breeding success of this species. Here is a list of tips and considerations for conservation of Piping Plover habitat (courtesy of Nature Saskatchewan):

- Keep livestock away from plover nesting sites during the breeding season (May and June). This may include fencing to keep cattle out of habitat areas, or deferred grazing in habitat areas. For example, graze shorelines during late summer or fall, or possibly early spring before plovers are nesting as long as the shoreline is dry.
- Keep in mind that if fences are used, they should be placed at a safe distance, beyond the high watermark, to decrease the effect of predators perching on the posts.

- Prescribed burning of shorelines should be done in very early spring or in the fall when plovers are not nesting. Shorelines which support shrubby vegetation should be burned to provide more suitable cover for plovers. Note: Piping Plovers can tolerate up to 50% vegetation cover.
- Avoid draining wetlands.
- Avoid constructing dams or dugouts that divert water away from natural water bodies or that result in complete flooding of shorelines during the plover breeding season.
- Providing off site watering facilities for livestock so that plover habitat is not disturbed.
- Drawdown water as slowly as possible in spring and summer (2-3 cm/week) to minimize shoreline fluctuations. If water is being used from more than one water body, stagger their use to prevent rapid changes in shoreline levels.
- Likewise, if a water body goes dry during the summer, slowly re-flood the area (rate of 2-3 cm/week). To prepare for the following year, re-flood an area at any rate, one month prior to freeze up.
- A conservation easement may be signed to ensure long-term protection of the area.

Landowners interested in constructing fences or developing alternative watering sites in effort to conserve Piping Plover habitat may be eligible for partial funding of these projects. Contact Nature Saskatchewan at 1-800-667-4668 **prior** to beginning your project to inquire about their Stewardship programs.

For more information on the Piping Plover, visit the Nature Saskatchewan website at [www.naturesask.ca](http://www.naturesask.ca). Those interested in volunteering for the census are encouraged to contact Jennifer Rumancik with Nature Saskatchewan (deadline for volunteers is May 3, 2011) at 1-800-667-4668 (SK only) or (306) 780-9417 [j.rumancik@naturesask.ca](mailto:j.rumancik@naturesask.ca).

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