



Piping Plovers

# living

with Beach Nesting Birds

Least Terns

*American Oystercatchers*



# introduction

Each spring, piping plovers, American oystercatchers, and least terns return to Martha's Vineyard's beaches to nest and raise their young. Because they are rare in Massachusetts, piping plovers and least terns are protected by state endangered species laws, and the plovers are also federally protected.

American oystercatchers are monitored closely as a vulnerable species.

BiodiversityWorks, Mass Audubon's Coastal Waterbird Program, the Massachusetts Natural Heritage Program and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service work in partnership with private landowners and others to protect these birds.

Over 50% of Martha's Vineyard piping plovers nest on privately owned beaches. Your cooperation and support are essential to their recovery.



# why are they so rare?



Loss and degradation of sandy beach habitat, from development and beach stabilization projects, is the primary reason for their decline.

Development and recreational activity on and near beach habitat increases food and shelter resources for crow, skunk, raccoon, and gulls, which increases their activity and densities on the beach. These numerous predators eat the eggs and chicks of beach nesting birds.



Crow with piping plover chick.

Pets, such as unleashed dogs and outdoor cats, have caused nest failures and even killed adults, as well as newly hatched chicks, and fledglings.

Before nesting areas were protected with signs and rope, people disturbed incubating adults and inadvertently stepped on eggs or chicks because they did not see them.

# management

## Protection Methods

### Piping Plover Nest Enclosures:

In the right conditions, wire cages that are 10 feet in diameter can be placed around each nest by biologists to protect the eggs from predators.

### Signs and Fencing:

"Area Closed" signs, along with posts and twine, prevent the eggs of beach nesting birds from being inadvertently crushed under-foot. They also create undisturbed foraging and resting areas.

### Predator Control:

Targeted removal of problem predators by professionals has increased hatching and fledging success in many areas.

### Landowner Involvement:

You can help by allowing monitoring and protection on your beach. Learn about these birds. Help maintain fencing. Keep dogs leashed and away from nesting areas. Educate your friends and renters by sharing this booklet with them.



# Piping Plovers



## **Feeding Habits:**

The plover's diet primarily consists of marine worms, crustaceans, and insects.

Foraging occurs along the sandy beach, intertidal zone, mud flats, estuaries, and where seaweed washes up.



## **Nesting Habits:**

In early spring, pairs establish and defend breeding territories.

Nests consist of a shallow scrape above the high tide line on sandy beaches and in areas of sparse vegetation.

Females lay 1- 4 eggs and both parents incubate for ~26 days.



## **Defense of Nest and Chicks:**

When an intruder gets close to a nest or chick, the parent will peep and drag one wing on the ground.

This draws attention away from the nest and chicks.

A predator may follow the injured-looking parent, in search of an easy meal.



## Chicks and Fledglings

Piping plover chicks hatch with the ability to run and to find their own food. They are less than 3 inches tall. Broods of chicks often forage together and their parents protect them from bad weather and predators.

- During a plover chick's first week of life, its best defense against predators is to remain motionless.
- The chicks' sand-colored down helps them blend in with the beach, but also makes them vulnerable to being crushed by people, dogs or vehicles.

At around 26-35 days of age plover chicks are adult size and able to fly. By mid-August they begin their first migration along the Atlantic coast to winter on beaches from North Carolina to Florida, the Gulf coast and the Bahamas.



Plover Fledgling

# Least Terns



## Feeding Habits:

Least terns forage near shore in our coastal ponds, bays and estuaries.

They catch small fish by diving headfirst into the water.

Courtship involves males offering fish to potential mates.



## Nesting Habits:

Terns nest in colonies. On the Vineyard, terns nest in colonies of 5 to 600 pairs at multiple sites.

Nests consist of a shallow scrape in the sand above the high tide line.

Females lay 1- 3 eggs and both parents incubate for 21 days.



## Defense of Nest and Chicks:

Colony-nesting allows terns to work together to spot predators.

When a colony is disturbed, adults take to the air and chicks may scatter or hide.

Adults vocalize, dive-bomb, and defecate on potential predators to drive them away.



## Chicks and Fledglings

Least tern chicks remain near their nest for several days after hatching. As they get older they hide in the wrackline (washed-up seaweed) or in the vegetation. Tern chicks depend on their parents to feed them fish.

Tern chicks are able to fly at 21 days, but still need to learn how to capture their own fish. Fledglings can be seen by the waterline waiting for parents to feed them. After they learn to fish on their own, they disperse from Atlantic coast beaches, migrating over 2,000 miles to South America!



Tern Fledgling

# American Oystercatchers



## **Feeding Habits:**

Oystercatchers forage for bivalves, molluscs, worms and marine invertebrates that inhabit intertidal areas.

They use both stabbing and hammering techniques to open bivalves and eat the soft meat inside.



## **Nesting Habits:**

Nests consist of a scrape in sandy or rocky substrate on the open beach, small islands, estuaries, and salt marshes.

Pairs display loudly while bowing during courtship.

Females lay 1- 3 eggs and both parents incubate for 26 days.

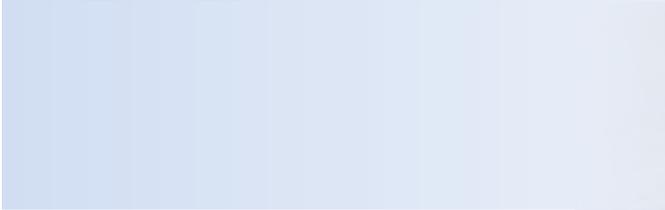


## **Defense of Nest and Chicks:**

Oystercatchers call and move away from their eggs and chicks to deter predators.

They typically move off their nest long before a predator or human notices them.

Adults often hide their chicks in thick vegetation until they are almost fledged.



## Chicks and Fledglings

A couple days after hatching, oystercatcher chicks move away from their nest scrape but stay within the nesting territory. The adults will give an alarm call when predators are near. Chicks will respond by running for cover and will lay immobile until the coast is clear.

Chicks are dependent on their parents for food until they are at least 60 days old. However, they are usually able to fly at 35 days. Juveniles migrate south with their family group. Birds in Massachusetts winter from New Jersey and to the south.

Range-wide banding and re-sight surveys initiated by the American Oystercatcher Working Group (<http://amoywg.org/>) revealed the American oystercatcher's migration patterns, and continue to provide natural history information.

All oystercatchers banded in Massachusetts receive a yellow engraved color band. Other states have different colors.



Oystercatcher Fledgling

# Other Species

The protection of beach nesting birds and their habitat also benefits many other species.



Seabeach knotweed is a special concern in Massachusetts and is only found at the beach. Like the eggs and chicks of beach nesting birds, this plant is vulnerable to being trampled by vehicles and people.



Dune grass and other plants stabilize dunes and reduce erosion during storms. This helps minimize flooding in upland areas.



In the early spring and late summer many shorebirds use our beaches as a stopover point to fuel up before heading north to nest in the arctic or south to their wintering grounds in South America. Fenced areas give these shorebirds a place to rest and avoid disturbance during their journey north and south.



The northeastern tiger beetle is an endangered species in Massachusetts. Its population has declined due to off-road vehicles, which crush adults, larvae, and burrows.



April 1st to August 15th:

- Keep cats indoors
- Keep dogs leashed and away from nesting areas
- Stay out of fenced areas marked with "Area Closed" signs
- Never chase or pick up chicks
- Refrain from feeding gulls or crows; they may become predators of young chicks
- Fly kites away from nesting areas. Birds often mistake kites for predators
- Leave no trace: Take food and trash with you; garbage attracts predators
- Fill holes in the sand; they trap flightless chicks
- If you see any disturbances to nesting areas, call your beach monitor or call the number on your signs
- Make a donation to support beach-nesting bird protection efforts in your area

**Volunteer!** Call or email BiodiversityWorks for more details (800) 690-0993 or [info@BiodiversityWorks.org](mailto:info@BiodiversityWorks.org)



# questions?



## Frequently Asked Questions

**What should I do if I see an unprotected nest or someone harassing the birds?**

Call BiodiversityWorks at (800) 690-0993 and let us know! We appreciate hearing from you.

**If I see an abandoned chick what should I do with it?**

Do not pick up the chick or go near it. Parents are seldom far from their chicks. Please leave the area and the parents will return.



**How long will the exclosures and fencing stay up?**

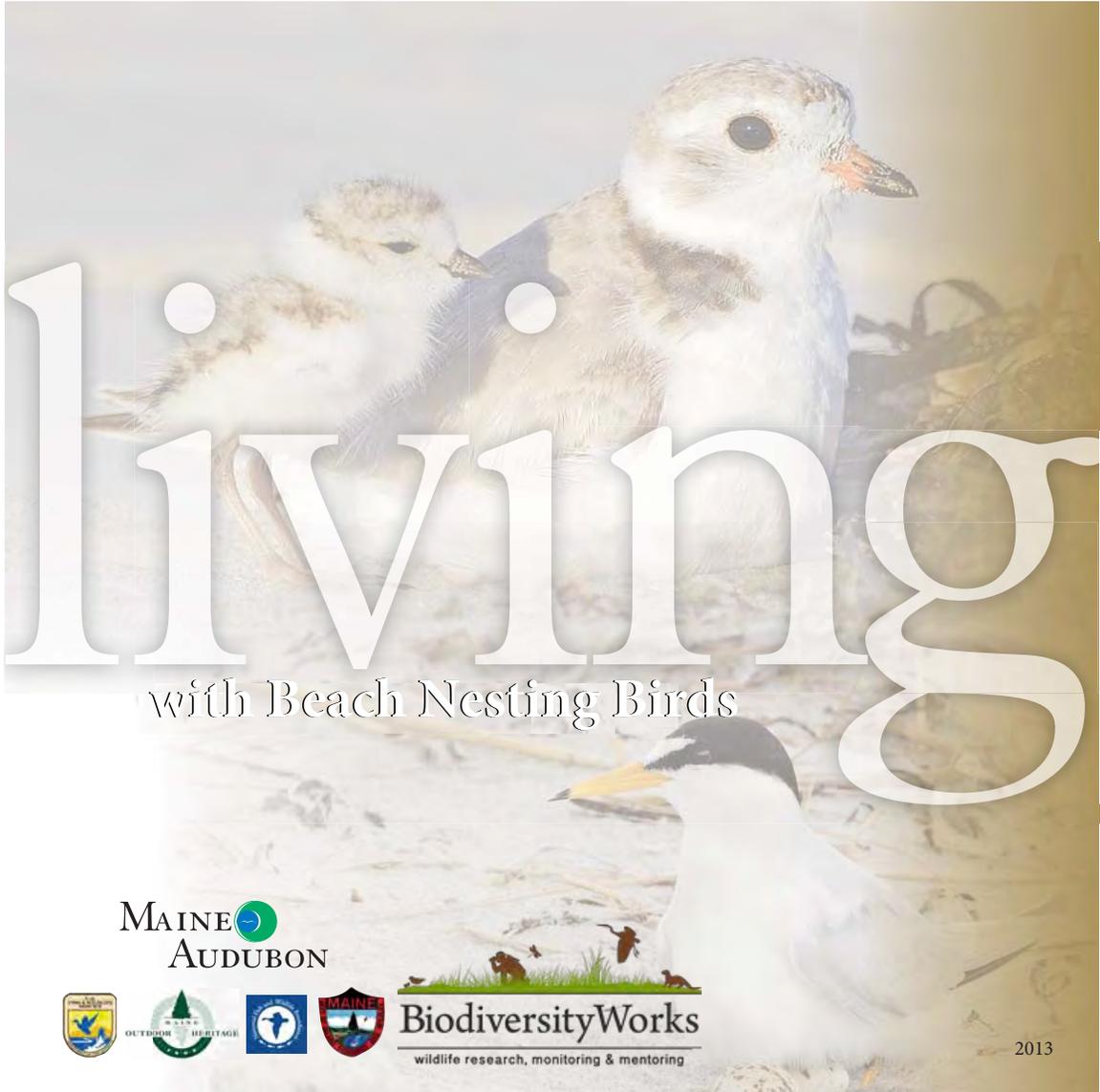
Exclosures are removed after the chicks have hatched (26 days) and moved out of the area. The symbolic fencing (signs and rope) provide a safe haven for the foraging and resting plover family. This fencing is removed after chicks are fully fledged (26-35 days after hatching).

**My dog doesn't care about the birds. Why do I need to keep my dog away from nesting areas?**

Beach nesting birds consider ALL dogs predators. Dogs cause the adult birds to leave their nest or young; exposing the eggs or chicks to wind, sun or rain, and predation by gulls, crows, or hawks.



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# Living

with Beach Nesting Birds

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