

Piping Plover Recovery in the Great Lakes: 2003 Nesting Season On Track to Match Big Brood Success of 2002

by Christine Williamson

Although the likelihood that Piping Plovers (*Charadrius melodus*) would nest in Illinois or Indiana is low now, the U.S. Department of the Interior, Fish & Wildlife Service hopes that an avian variation of "If you build it, they will come" will someday bring this species back as a breeder in Illinois.

The USFWS recently designated 201 miles of shoreline in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Ohio, Pennsylvania and New York as critical to the continued survival of the Great Lakes population of Piping Plovers. Critical habitat also was designated within the Piping Plover's wintering grounds. The designation requires that federal beaches be protected from disturbance, and encourages private landowners to do the same.

The Piping Plover was listed as an endangered species in the Great Lakes watershed in 1985, and is threatened throughout the rest of its breeding range (on the Atlantic seaboard and on the Northern Great Plains). The Piping Plover winters on beaches in North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas.

Piping Plover numbers declined primarily because of habitat loss from development and human pressure. The species was in trouble even in 1895, when Frank M. Chapman noted in "Birds of Eastern North America": As a breeding bird



Piping Plover, banded juvenile, 18 August 2003. Montrose Harbor. The photographer retrieved information from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service indicating this bird was banded at Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore on North Manitou Island in Michigan. Photo by Robert Hughes.

it is now rare, and man's increasing encroachment on its haunts threatens it with extinction as a summer resident...

Recovery plan

The Great Lakes and Northern Great Plains Piping Plover Recovery Plan (USFWS 1988b), establishes a recovery goal of 150 breeding pairs in the Great Lakes watershed – at least 100 in Michigan and at least 50 in other Great Lakes states – with stable populations for 15 years. As the mid-continent population increases, young birds will need to find their own territories for breeding and the USFWS is planning ahead with protection of suitable habitat.

Piping Plovers never were numerous in the Great Lakes region,

with pre-settlement estimates of the Great Lakes population between 492 and 682 breeding pairs. The lowest recent population figure was 17 pairs in the whole Great Lakes region. Piping Plovers last nested in Illinois near Waukegan in 1979.

Just 32 breeding pairs in the Great Lakes Region were found in 2001, although that year had the first nesting pair on the Wisconsin mainland in 52 years, according to Laura Reagan, a biologist based at the USFWS's Fort Snelling, Minn. office.

In 2002, the Great Lakes Piping Plover population leaped to 51 pairs. "That's a very big jump. In most years, we've seen our population only inching up," said Jack Dingleline, the USFWS's Great Lakes regional Piping Plover coordinator, based in East Lansing, Mich.

Dingleline said the comparatively high number of breeding Piping Plovers in 2002 in the region was due to a host of factors, although the primary drivers were very high reproductive success rates in 2001, combined with better protections and public awareness. There are just more Piping Plovers around, looking for undisturbed beaches. Biologists who track Piping Plovers noted that in 2002, pairs nested farther south on Lake Michigan beaches in Michigan than in prior years, including one pair near Luddington, and that they were