

Park Officials Work to Save Threatened Shorebird

by Betsie Tanza

Once commonly found on beaches from Baja California to Oregon, the snowy plover population has decreased so rapidly it is now listed as a threatened species. To help combat this tremendous decline, a workshop on March 18th will train volunteers to protect the fragile nest of this tiny, timid shorebird.

Sponsored by the Santa Cruz County Department of Parks, Open Space and Cultural Services, the educational workshop will be from 9 a.m. until noon at the Rancho del Oso Natural History Center at 3600 Highway 1, just south of Waddell Creek.

"The snowy plover is an indicator species," said park planner Lacy Holtzworth. "When you have one species such as the snowy plover in danger, it's an indicator the system is out of whack. If the snowy plover becomes extinct, then something else will eventually go. With the plovers being threatened it tells us the condition of the coast. By making it safe for the plover, we're making it safe for other species and maintaining diversity," Holtzworth added.

The Western snowy plover

has been listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act since 1993. The bird has been a threatened species candidate for 15 years as its population has steadily decreased, according to Holtzworth. An animal listed as threatened is not in as much danger of

introduced predator has not yet migrated to the North Coast, where the biggest threat to the plover is people. Beachgoers can unwittingly easily destroy the nest of this six inch tall bird. To protect the fragile

until the fledglings can fly, which is usually mid-September. The exclosures are removed after the breeding season is over.

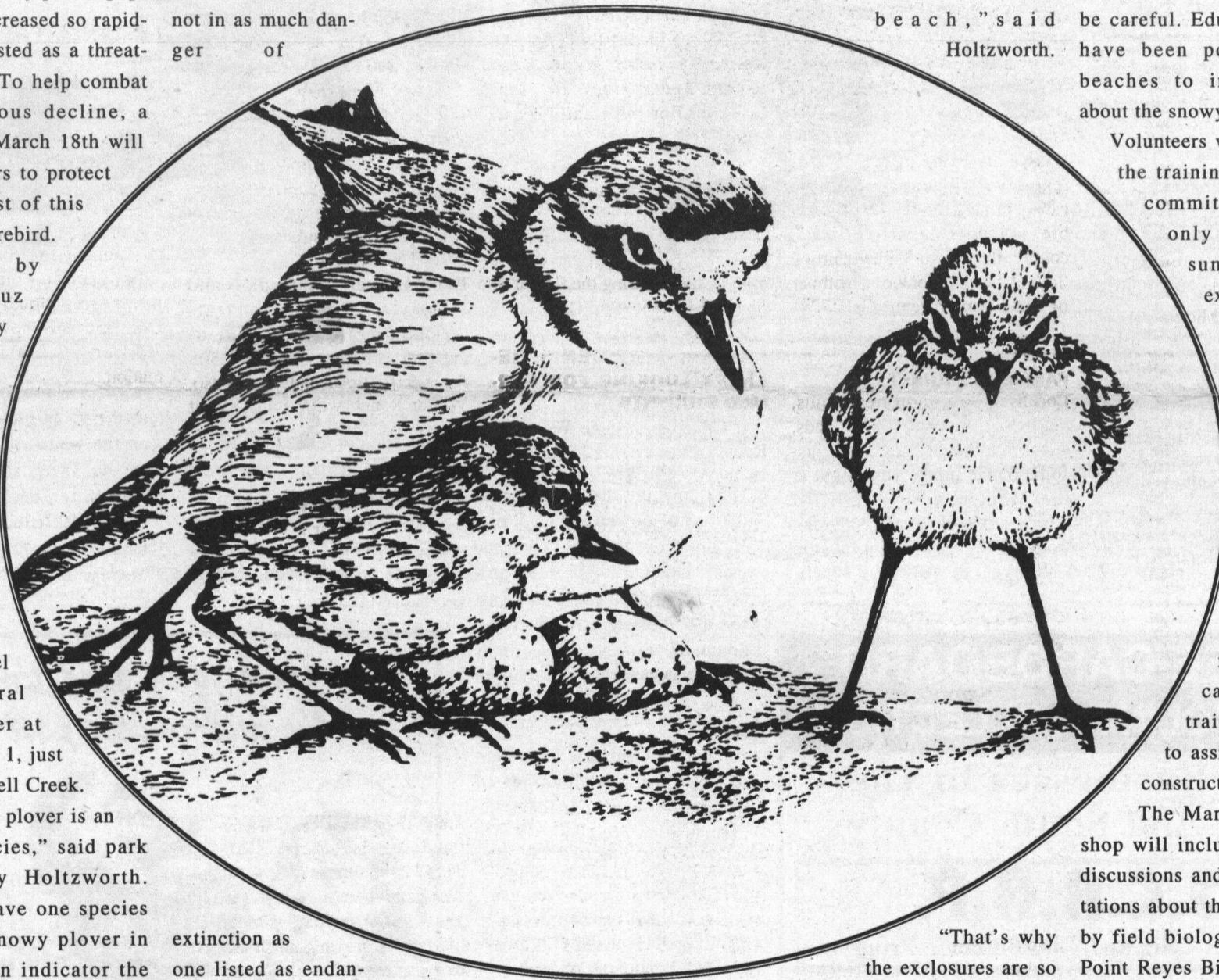
"Unfortunately the breeding season coincides with the time people like to use the beach," said Holtzworth.

breed in certain areas. It's easier for people to leave the area, then the plovers," Holtzworth said. She added that in areas of prime plover habitat, simple symbolic barriers of rope are erected just to delineate the area and remind beachgoers to be careful. Educational signs have been posted at area beaches to inform people about the snowy plover.

Volunteers who go through the training are asked to commit to working only two hours a summer building exclosures on an as needed basis. When nests are discovered, field biologists from Point Reyes Bird Observatory notify park staff. Immediately park staff call three to six trained volunteers to assist in exclosure construction.

The March 18th workshop will include educational discussions and media presentations about the snowy plover by field biologists from both Point Reyes Bird Observatory and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services. A light breakfast will be served.

The workshop concludes with hands-on training constructing an exclosure on the beach. Volunteers are advised to wear layers of warm work clothing. For further information, contact Lacy Holtzworth at 462- 8321. □



extinction as one listed as endangered, but is headed in that direction. The plight of the snowy plover has been well documented through research conducted at the Point Reyes Bird Observatory in Marin County.

On southern Monterey Bay beaches, the red fox is the most serious predator of both the birds and their eggs. This

nesting area, "exclosures" are built around the area by volunteers to keep the birds safe.

The exclosure is a triangular wood fence built to surround and protect the nesting area, once it has been determined plovers are using the site to nest. The breeding and nesting season lasts from mid-March

"That's why the exclosures are so important. Most people want to be careful and protect the bird — they just need to be educated. The birds are small and blend in with the plant life. If you weren't aware they were there it would be easy to accidentally step on a bird or its nest," Holtzworth said.

"People can sunbathe at any beach, but the plover will only