

Snowy plovers can safely call four area beaches 'home'

No change planned for recreational uses

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DAVENPORT — A handful of Santa Cruz County beaches where snowy plovers nest have been designated as critical habitat for the threatened species.

The designation by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service means that those areas are essential for the conservation of the small pale-colored plovers, which were listed in 1993 under the Endangered Species Act as a threatened species.

"If we don't have this habitat, we don't have the plovers," said Lacy Holtzworth, a park planner for Santa Cruz.

Of the 28 areas designated in California, Oregon and Washington, about 10 percent of the sites are in Santa Cruz County, said Pat Foulk, spokesperson for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Sacramento.

"A good way of looking at it is that your beaches are appealing to the plovers because they have not been thoroughly trashed," she said.

Designated habitat beaches in Santa Cruz County are Wilder, Laguna, Scott and Waddell beaches, all on the North Coast, and Sunset Beach to the south near the Santa Cruz-Monterey county boundary.

The coastal population from southern Washington to southern Baja California, Mexico is about 2,000 birds.

About 150 plovers live on the Santa Cruz County beaches, Holtzworth said. That's about 30 percent fewer than were there in 1998, she said.

"Biologists aren't sure why, but many of the breeding birds winter in other areas and they believe it is something that's happening to them wherever they winter," Holtzworth said. "It isn't encouraging."

The nesting season from March to September also happens to coincide with the beach's peak season for visitors.

Cruz County have set up enclosures around identified nests to protect them.

But that practice had to be abandoned in areas with foxes.

"Foxes figure out that inside each one of the fences is a bird. They basically hang out until they catch the adult birds, or they catch the chicks when they leave the nests," Holtz-

worth said."

The new federal habitat designations do not set up a preserve or refuge and do not affect activities on private lands unless federal funding or a federal permit is involved, Foulk said. The impact of the designation is that federal agencies must consult with the wildlife service before issuing permits or providing funding for activities that might harm the habitat.

Foulk said she expected that the

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vast majority of human recreational activities will not change. Snowy plovers prefer to nest in the soft, sandy portions of the upper beaches

or dunes, while most people are on the lower beaches where the sand is firm.

The wildlife service did not design-

nate critical habitat for the snowy plover when it listed the species as threatened because there was insufficient data at the time, Foulk said.

Heavy use of the beaches has taken its toll on the plover and its nests, she said.

The birds' nest is little more than a scratch in the sand where the small speckled eggs are laid. Dogs, foxes, off-road vehicles and people can easily smash the eggs, she said.

Even those that survive to hatch, are vulnerable to a number of predators, including ravens.

Last year, there were 14 plover nests identified in the county with 28 chicks. Only 15 fledged, meaning they learned to fly and could leave the nest.

That equates to a 54 percent fledging rate, which is under the 60 percent rate which experts say is needed to maintain the current population, Holtzworth said.

But it's much better than the fledging rate on beaches from Sunset Beach south to Marina, where only 14 percent of the chicks survived to leave the nest, she said.

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