

Snowy plover protection threatened by lawsuit

Environmentalists fighting to keep bird on endangered species list

By AMY ETTINGER
SENTINEL CORRESPONDENT

Snowy plovers nest at some of the most popular beaches in the area, putting the tiny shorebirds directly in the path of people, dogs and predators. But efforts to protect the endangered birds aren't significantly restricting access to the Santa Cruz coast, according to local parks officials.

A Sacramento group last week filed suit to remove the western snowy plover from the federal endangered species list and end restrictions on beaches from Washington state to Baja California in Mexico where the birds nest. The restrictions hurt coastal communities that count on beach-going tourists for business, the suit claims.

Snowy plovers nest locally at Waddell Creek, Wilder Ranch, Manresa, Sunset, Scott Creek and near the mouth of the Pajaro River. During nesting season, between March and September, state and county park rangers set up fenced-off areas near the birds and their eggs. Small stretches of beach that are known nesting areas are also closed to the public.

The measures keep the birds safe and shouldn't prevent people from enjoying the waves, said Tim Hyland, a resource ecologist for the Santa Cruz district of the state Department of Parks and Recreation. "The birds were here first," Hyland said. "There's no reason we can't have people and plovers on beaches."

Hyland said the protection strategy is

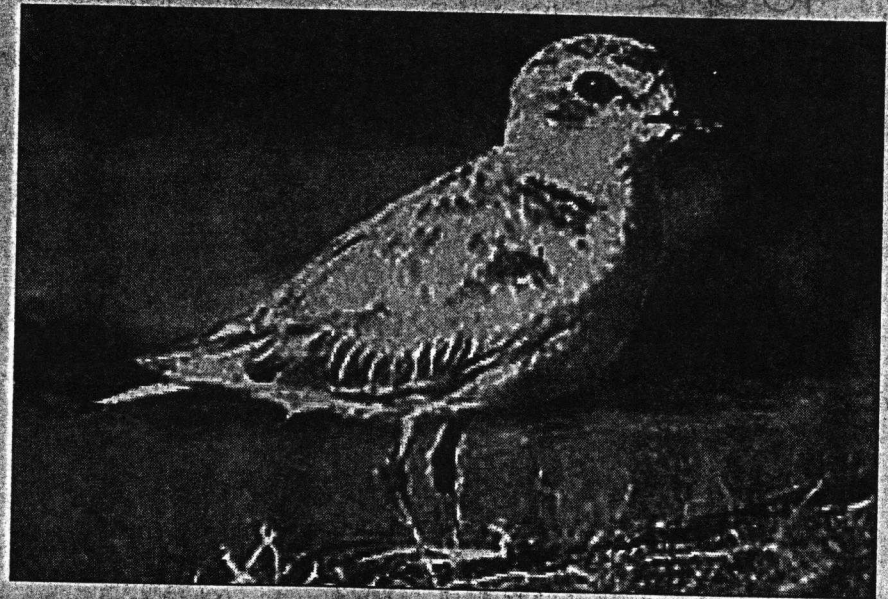
'It takes a lot of effort to get a species on the (endangered species) list. It should take effort to de-list it.'

MICHAEL SCHEELLE, COORDINATOR,
SNOWY PLOVER
PROTECTION PROGRAM

benefiting more than the snowy plover population. At Wilder Ranch, a one-quarter-mile section of beach is closed to the public, and pelicans and other shore birds are thriving.

Snowy plovers were once common to the area, but now it's believed only about 2,000 live on the West Coast. Last year, 82 snowy plover nests were counted in Santa Cruz County, said Gary Page of the Point Reyes Bird Observatory, which works with state and county parks officials in Santa Cruz to protect the plovers. Page said many of the nests were found near the mouth of the Pajaro River.

Point Reyes Bird Observatory biologists joined with the county Parks Department to form the Snowy Plover Protection Program. Volunteers and park planners help set up 10 square feet of fencing around the birds' nests at Scott Creek Beach once the eggs are spotted by biologists. During the winter months from October through February, as many as 100 snowy plover will roost and feed at



Contributed photo

Snowy plovers nest locally at Waddell Creek, Wilder Ranch, Manresa, Sunset, Scott Creek and near the mouth of the Pajaro River. During nesting season, between March and September, state and county park rangers fence off areas near the birds and their eggs. Small stretches of beach that are known nesting areas are also closed to the public.

Scott Creek. A much smaller number nest there between spring and fall. About a half-acre of the beach is closed to protect the snowy plovers.

"I think we've been successful at Scott Creek, keeping good public access while keeping protection areas for the plover," said Michael Scheele, a county park planner and program coordinator for the Snowy Plover Protection Program.

The snowy plover is considered an "indicator species" on the county's North Coast. Its decline raises concerns about

the ecological health of the North Coast, Scheele said, and the sharp decline in the species is the reason it was put on the federal endangered species list in 1993.

"It takes a lot of effort to get a species on the list. It should take effort to de-list it," Scheele said.

For more information about the Snowy Plover Protection Program, visit www.scparks.com.

Amy Ettinger can be reached at a_ettinger@yahoo.com.