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# Signs alerting BIRDS beachgoers of vulnerable bird

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Paul Zak has been driving over the hill from San Jose on weekends for at least seven years to let his dog romp on the beaches along the north coast of Santa Cruz County.

"It's always been a place you can go to be alone, to do what you want, to get away from it all," he said Wednesday. "Why, people even swim nude up there."

But all that is changing, at least as far as Zak and his dog are concerned.

"This past Sunday," Zak, an electrical contractor, complained, "they'd posted the beaches. They've banned dogs and horses and off-road vehicles."

Actually, the sign that offended Zak has long been in place, at

Wilder Ranch State Park, where beaches have been closed to protect wildlife habitat.

Soon, however, Santa Cruz County will put up signs at the adjacent Laguna Beach just north of Wilder Ranch. Those signs will warn beachgoers to be on the lookout for nests of the western snowy plover.

The snowy plover is a shorebird that may soon go on the federal endangered species list. Any signs already on the beach have been left by scientists studying the rare bird, according to officials.

The snowy plover lays its eggs directly on sandy coastal beaches. Parents "squish down in the sand. They make a depression we call a 'scrape' and lay their eggs,"

## Western snowy plover

*Charadrius alexandrinus nivosus*

■ **Size:** 6 to 7 inches long with a 13½-inch wing-spread.

■ **Description:** White with thin black bill; black marks behind eyes and on forehead. Black slash on lower throat. Dark gray or green legs and feet.

■ **Habitat:** Broad expanses of dry sand on ocean beaches or shores of salt or alkaline lakes. It's found along the Pacific Coast from southern Washington to Baja California and in some inland areas, as far east as Texas.

■ **Behavior:** Runs up and down the beach, following the advance and retreat of waves, eating small marine animals and insects.

■ **Nesting:** In hollows on open beaches. Chicks hatch 24 days after eggs are laid and leave the nest in search of food within hours.

Source: Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds, Federal Register



said Ron Jurek, a wildlife biologist with the California Department of Fish and Game in Sacramento.

"The eggs and the new hatchlings are vulnerable to humans and to human-related predators," Jurek said. "Horses and vehicles can crush them, dogs can chase the parents away. People can step on them. And they're also

vulnerable to predators like kestrels and falcons."

Jurek and Bruce Elliott, a Fish and Game wildlife biologist in Monterey, said the birds are now a "candidate species" for ranking on the endangered species list. Candidate species have the same protections as animals on the list, Elliott said.

This is fine and dandy as far as

Zak is concerned, but how about people who want to take their dogs for quiet strolls along the sand?

"There are a lot of people who bring their dogs over," he said. "What I suspect is that they're either going to ignore those signs and take their dogs to the beach anyway or they're going to be really upset."