

The Piping Plovers Have Landed – Update #1 June 26, 2007

After wintering along the Gulf of Mexico, the first pair to return to Grand Beach for the summer season was observed setting up house in parking lot #5 on Sunday, April 29th.

The 2007 Manitoba Piping Plover Recovery Program is well into another season and expectations are high that we can build on the successful breeding season of 2006. Surveys were conducted at 42 potential nesting sites in Manitoba during the 2006 International Piping Plover Census in order to determine a more accurate account of the population of plovers within the province. This census is conducted every 5 years across North America during a two week period in June and is intended to update current population statistics. Although preliminary results show that the Piping Plover population in the Northern Great Plains (includes the Canadian prairie provinces and Northern U.S. states) has increased from 2953 birds in 2001 to 4700 birds in 2006, Manitoba once again saw their population decrease. Only 8 adult birds were found in the province (all at Grand Beach) in 2006, down 50% from 2001. This resulted in the lowest number of Piping Plovers ever in Manitoba since monitoring began in the 1980s. On the positive side, these 8 adults (4 breeding pairs) were able to raise a total of 13 chicks to adulthood which resulted in a very successful 2006 breeding season.

Surveys to date in 2007 have resulted in a slight increase in the Manitoba plover population with the observation of 12 adult birds. Two of these birds were seen attempting to nest at the Riverton Sand Bar, but human disturbance (more specifically ATV activity) may have prevented the birds from establishing a permanent nest at this site. Restrictive fencing had been erected at the nesting site prior to the breeding season to prevent ATVs from accessing the area, but this proved to be of little deterrent.

Eight adult plovers (four nesting pairs) have once again been observed at Grand Beach. These are most likely the same pairs that had successfully nested here in 2006. A pair of plovers was first observed by Park staff on April 29 and the remaining birds were confirmed by members of the recovery program on May 3.

Below is a history of the nesting activity at Grand Beach as of June 22, 2007:

Nest 1: Parking Lot #5.

The nest was first discovered in the parking lot on May 18. There were three eggs in the nest at the time and the fourth egg was laid a couple of days later. This nest hatched on Friday June 15 and so far all 4 chicks are doing well. The chicks can be seen foraging along the beach (just north of Parking lot 5) several hours each day when the weather is calm, otherwise they retreat to the shelter of the parking lot where they brood and forage throughout the day/night.

Nest 2: East Grand Beach.

A nest with one egg was discovered in the dunes of East Grand Beach on May 16. Four eggs were laid and the birds were almost two weeks into the incubation period when the nest was abandoned. It is not known whether predators or human disturbance was the reason for the nest abandonment.

Nest 3: The Channel.

This nest was discovered on May 26 with one egg. A full clutch was laid and was a week into the incubation period when the nest was flooded in the evening of June 7. Staff members found the eggs near the nest early the next morning. The eggs were gathered and placed back into the nest. The adults resumed incubation soon afterwards. After another strong storm on June 11, the nest was once again washed out. Fearing that the eggs were no longer viable, they were picked up in an attempt to have the birds re-nest with a new clutch of eggs.

Nest 4: West Beach.

Two eggs were found in a nest at the West Beach site on June 1. A full clutch was laid and the birds are well into the incubation period. These eggs are expected to hatch the first week in July. This nesting site had not been used for a couple of years and it was suspected that either human disturbance or mammalian predators in the area had prevented the birds from nesting in past years. Snow fencing placed around the nesting site early in the season seems to have resolved the issue with disturbances.

Nest 5: Parking Lot 5.

The pair that had abandoned the nest at East Grand Beach has re-nested in Parking Lot 5. An egg was found on June 7, but no other eggs have been laid and the pair has since abandoned the site. With the nest located close to vehicle traffic, it may have been too much of a disturbance for the birds to handle after experiencing disturbance at their previous site at East Grand Beach.

When Piping Plover chicks are on the beach, guardians close off a small section of the beach with flagging tape and signage so that the chicks can forage without human disturbance. Chicks are very vulnerable at this early age and therefore require uninterrupted foraging periods so they can gain the strength needed for their survival. Please respect these foraging areas by not walking/jogging through them as the chicks are well camouflaged and can be easily stepped on. We welcome the public to come have a closer at the chicks, but we ask that you please locate one of the Piping Plover Guardians (those in the bright orange T-Shirts) onsite as they can find a safe vantage point for you to view the birds.

We are always looking for people to come help us with guardian duties, especially when the chicks arrive as they need constant monitoring. Anyone who would like to volunteer a few hours to help monitor the Piping Plover chicks and/or their nests at Grand Beach this summer, please contact the Manitoba Piping Plover Program Coordinator at **945-6817** or send an email to wildlife@gov.mb.ca. Your help is greatly appreciated!