

Counting for Conservation: the 2016 International Piping Plover Census

by Tara Mulhern Davidson

Piping plovers have long been on the radar for conservationists across North America, particularly in Saskatchewan. Listed in 1987 as an Endangered Species in Canada, Saskatchewan provides breeding habitat for almost two thirds of the North American population of this interior shorebird species¹.

Piping plovers are shorebirds that nest directly on gravelly freshwater beaches and saline flats across North America. The birds have bright orange beaks and legs, buff-coloured wings and backs, and a black band around their neck. Environment Canada cites a variety of factors that potentially compromise the survival of piping plovers, including predation; human-caused water level management; and habitat alteration from recreational vehicles, agriculture, resource extraction, and construction.

During a two week time frame in June of 2016, volunteers and conservationists trekked across prairie, along sloughs, and beside beaches to once again conduct the International Piping Plover Census on 162 different basins in Saskatchewan. The census, which is conducted every five years, is a comprehensive monitoring effort to determine how the shorebird population is holding up in Saskatchewan and across the continent. Alan Smith, the provincial coordinator working on behalf of Nature Saskatchewan, provided some insight on how the summer work went.

"The census gives us an idea of population trends and of course data is gathered on the types of habitats [piping plovers] are occurring in," Smith explained, adding that observers are looking for any conditions that may adversely affect the bird. "For instance, a lot of the basins are

controlled by human intervention," Smith said. "Humans have a significant role to play in the management of the water and therefore the management of the species," he added, saying that water level management plays a major factor in the recovery of piping plovers and that there has been a lot of runoff to manage in Saskatchewan in the last few years.

Smith describes piping plovers as a "disturbance" species, meaning the beaches and saline flats that they prefer to nest on in Saskatchewan tend to be created by fluctuations or disturbances in water levels over a long period of time. "Even though water levels over the past five to six years have been quite high, breeding habitat will be created. The species requires those fluctuating water levels to obtain the habitat they require."

continued on page 43




Piping plover eggs and nests blend in with their gravelly surroundings. In fact, this nest appears to have five eggs in it, although one is actually a rock of similar shape and size. Photo courtesy of Alan Smith

Piping Plover Census cont. from pg. 42

When compared with past survey results, Smith said that the piping plover numbers are down over the long term, but they are slightly up from the most recent survey undertaken in 2011. Smith noted that although the number of birds is just slightly higher in 2016, the number of actual pairs displaying an intent to breed is up over 40%, potentially suggesting that habitat conditions are improving. Smith will submit Saskatchewan data to the international coordinator and Nature Saskatchewan will publish the findings later this fall.

Recognizing that ranchers and landowners play a key role in conserving piping plovers, Nature Saskatchewan

has a program for producers who may be interested in helping to support habitat. Plovers on Shore is a voluntary program for producers to identify and protect habitat. "We assure landowners that, if they have the species on their land, they must be doing something right already," said Becky Magnus, Species at Risk Manager with Nature Saskatchewan. "We also keep our landowner participants informed of what is going on with species-specific research and information," Magnus added.

Nature Saskatchewan uses a cooperative approach with landowners to protect habitat and approximately 51 land owners participate in the program which conserves about 85 miles of shoreline habitat. 

For more information on the program, interested producers can call Nature Saskatchewan at (306) 780-9832.

¹Plovers on Shore brochure, Nature Saskatchewan, 2015. Available at www.naturesask.ca


Registration is now Open for the 2017 "Reclaiming Spaces, Restoring Species" Workshop

The Saskatchewan Prairie Conservation Action Plan (SK PCAP) is pleased to announce that registration for the 2017 Native Prairie Restoration and Reclamation Workshop (NPRRW) is now open. The workshop will be held February 8 and 9, 2017 at the Ramada Hotel in downtown Regina, SK. The theme of the workshop is "Reclaiming Spaces, Restoring Species" and the agenda includes plenary sessions, a trade show, a poster display, and many networking opportunities.

"This year's theme focuses not just on prairie spaces and landscapes, but on the species that make their homes there," says Kayla Balderson Burak, SK PCAP Manager. "We will bring in species and restoration experts from across North America to share their practical solutions which will hopefully result in tangible outcomes on

Saskatchewan's prairie grasslands and beyond," she adds.

The NPRRW will include sessions on range health and soil remediation; prescribed burning; bioremediation; restoring wildlife and plant species at risk; the power of partnerships and collaboration, and much more. Also returning will be the popular case study exercise that evaluates restoration and reclamation in riparian, First Nations and urban settings.

The NPRRW has become the preeminent event for networking, skill building, and knowledge transfer among prairie restoration and reclamation specialists across Western Canada as well as the United States. 

Register now to secure your spot at this valuable workshop. Registration, program, and other information can be found at www.pcap-sk.org/upcoming-events-workshops/2017-nprrw or call SK PCAP at (306) 352-0472.