

Balancing Conservation and Grazing: Protecting Saskatchewan's Piping Plovers and their Habitat

Shirley Bartz, Saskatchewan Prairie Conservation Action Plan

The Piping Plover (*Charadrius melodus circumcinctus*) is a small shorebird with a sandy-coloured back, a white belly and bright orange legs. They have a single black band around their throat, a black band across their foreheads and a short, stout orange bill, with a black tip. Piping Plovers rely on their large eyes to hunt visually, searching for invertebrates at the edges of freshwater and alkali ponds and lakes.

Shorelines of water bodies are important to many animals, providing drinking water for cattle, recreation for humans, and breeding habitat for Piping Plovers. This overlap in land use for multiple species has led to Piping Plovers being listed as an endangered species throughout their range in Canada (SARA 2003). Threats to this species include water levels that fluctuate outside the natural regime,

vehicle ruts, cattle disturbance, housing development, invasive species, industry, dredged material, increased presence of predators (gulls, crows, skunks, raccoons, domestic cats and dogs), all terrain vehicles, garbage, encroaching vegetation and erosion (International Piping Plover Census 2011).

In Saskatchewan, Piping Plovers arrive on their breeding grounds in late April to mid-May. They select nest locations on beaches with minimal vegetation as it can provide cover for predators and impede Piping Plovers line of sight as they scan for potential threats to their nestlings.

Periodic habitat disturbance such as grazing or flooding is an important contributor to minimize vegetation growth on these beaches. Piping Plovers are known to exhibit high-site fidelity,

returning to one nest location year after year (COSEWIC 2013).

Male Piping Plovers establish a territory and build a shallow nest called a "scrape," just above the normal high-water line on a wide flat beach composed of gravel, sand, or pebbles. Males perform both aerial and ground displays to attract a female, who then inspects the male's nest before she selects him as a mate. Piping Plover females usually lay four eggs, which both parents incubate. Young Piping Plovers are able to find their own food within hours of hatching, but both parents continue to care for the nestlings and will try to lure potential predators away from the nest and young with a "broken wing" display.

The main food sources for Piping Plovers
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Piping Plovers
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are aquatic and terrestrial invertebrates and other small animals found near the shoreline or that wander close to their nest. Adult Piping Plovers and juveniles that cannot fly yet will feed along lakeshores within the nest territory, as well as at nearby wetlands, seeps, ephemeral river edges, or pools. Adults and juveniles that are able to fly will spend most of their time feeding within five metres of the water's edge (ECCC 2006).

In 1991, the International Piping Plover Breeding Census began counting Piping Plovers at five-year intervals around the globe. Data collected have shown that over one-third of the global population of Piping Plovers breed in Canada, with Saskatchewan supporting 91 per cent of all breeding Piping Plovers in Canada in 2024 (Nature Saskatchewan 2025). These studies indicate that breeding populations of Piping Plover in Saskatchewan are below the goal range set in the federal

Recovery Strategy, with numbers of breeding pairs steadily declining (Birds Canada Nature Counts 2025).

As Piping Plover habitat in Saskatchewan shrinks or becomes less reliably available, their ability to breed and raise chicks will be reduced and their population will continue to decline. People that manage land with alkali water bodies surrounded by gently sloping sandy shorelines may wonder what they can do to help this endangered species.

Saskatchewan Prairie Conservation Action Plan (SK PCAP) has developed a guide for managing optimal habitat components for Piping Plovers. This guide walks land managers through identifying Piping Plover habitat and provides an Environmental Benefit Index that allows land managers to evaluate and prioritize opportunities for conservation on their land. The Index is especially helpful in determining priority sites to invest in, particularly when funds are limited

(https://www.pcap-sk.org/rsu_docs/documents/pcap-plpl-module.pdf).

Canadian Forage and Grassland Association (CFGa) has created a Habitat and Biodiversity Assessment Tool (<https://www.canadianfga.ca/en/projects/habitat-biodiversity-assessment-tool/>) focusing on stewardship opportunities to build resilience that is important to landowners as well as to at-risk wildlife and plants. Stewardship opportunities are selected for your land based on geographic location and existing habitat features. The locational information uses known and likely habitats that are suitable for species at risk, such as the Piping Plover, to narrow down the stewardship opportunities suggested for your land.

Additional resources are available for land managers with potential habitat for Piping Plovers such as Birds Canada's 2024 Prairie Conservation Incentives Guide (<https://view.publitas.com/birds-canada-gykhaz9yrrpp/grassland-conservation->

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incentives-guide-final-web-jul-2024/page/1). This guide includes descriptions of provincial programs available in Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Alberta that can help land managers fund projects such as wetland and grassland restoration, as well as development of water source alternatives that keep cattle from disturbing shoreline habitat. Saskatchewan programs include Nature Saskatchewan's Plovers on Shore program, the Saskatchewan government's Farm and Ranch Water Infrastructure Program, Ducks Unlimited Canada's Wetland Restoration Lease program and others.

REFERENCES

Birds Canada
Nature Counts
<https://naturecounts.ca/nc/socb-epoc/species.jsp?sp=pipplo>

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Environment and Climate Change Canada. 2006. Recovery Strategy for the Piping Plover (*Charadrius melodus circumcinctus*) in Canada. Species at Risk Act Recovery Strategy Series. Environment Canada, Ottawa. vi + 30 pp.



Adult Piping Plover and three chicks, which are able to find their own food within hours of hatching. Photo courtesy of United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)

Environment and Climate Change Canada. 2009. Action Plan for the Piping Plover (*Charadrius melodus circumcinctus*) in Alberta [Proposed]. Species at Risk Act Action Plan Series. Environment Canada, Ottawa. ii + 11 pp. with Appendix

Nature Saskatchewan
Plovers On Shore
2025
[https://www.naturesask.ca/what-we-do/stewards-of-saskatchewan/plovers-on-](https://www.naturesask.ca/what-we-do/stewards-of-saskatchewan/plovers-on-shore-new)

shore-new https://www.naturesask.ca/rsu_docs/pos-brochure-2023_final.pdf

Saskatchewan Prairie Conservation Action Plan
Guide to Managing for Optimal Habitat Attributes Online
2017
https://www.pcap-sk.org/rsu_docs/documents/pcap-pipl-module.pdf

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