

# General Field Notes

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## **Piping Plovers Nesting at Cape Hatteras, N.C.**

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Increasing concern is being expressed about the status of the Piping Plover (*Charadris melodus*) in North America. It was, for example, Blue Listed in *American Birds* in 1982 (Tate and Tate 1982) and is the subject of considerable concern by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The status of the Piping Plover in North Carolina is apparently primarily that of a winter resident species that nests sparingly along the barrier islands from Pea Island to Morehead City (Potter et al. 1980). *Birds of North Carolina* (Pearson et al. 1959) indicated that the species was a casual summer resident at Pea Island, with nests found in 1901 and 1902.

There were apparently no nests located in North Carolina between 1902 and 1960, when a young bird was photographed in early June at Ocracoke (Hespenheide 1961). The next report was of a chick at Shackleford Banks in 1970 (Quay et al. 1970), and in 1977 a nest was found by Ricky Davis on Core Banks (LeGrand 1977). In 1983 P.J. Crutchfield documented an isolated breeding site at Sunset Beach, Brunswick County, N.C. (LeGrand 1984), apparently the southernmost nests in North America.

I spent the summer of 1984 working with nesting colonial waterbirds in the Cape Hatteras National Seashore. While monitoring the activities of nesting gulls, terns, and skimmers, I located four Piping Plover nests and one additional brood of young that had already left the nest by the time of their discovery.

The first Piping Plover nest was found on 18 May on Cape Point (see front cover). This nest contained four eggs and was on an open, sandy flat adjacent to the ocean. On 5 June the eggs appeared to have hatched, but the adults and young could not be found in the immediate area. The adults and two young were observed on 12 June. The adults and young were seen in the vicinity of the nesting site throughout the summer, and the two young apparently fledged successfully.

The second Piping Plover nest was found on 27 May, also at Cape Point. This nest contained two eggs and was in an area of low, sandy flats. This nest was destroyed by flooding following very heavy rains on 30 May and 31 May. Following the loss of the

nest, the adults appeared to be reneesting in the same spot but then abandoned nest building.

The third nest, which may have been constructed by the same pair that failed at nest number two, was located at Cape Point on 15 June. This nest contained two eggs on 15 June; a third egg was deposited between 15 and 17 June. On 11 July two of the three eggs hatched. The third egg hatched on 12 July, and all three young left the nest on that day. The adults and young remained in the general area throughout the summer, and all chicks apparently fledged.

The fourth nest was approximately 0.3 mile N of Hatteras Inlet. The habitat was very similar to that at Cape Point. This nest, containing four eggs, was found on 27 June. When the nest was checked on 10 July, four eggs were present, but on 11 July only one egg remained in the nest. Although actions of the adults indicated that young were nearby, they could not be found in the immediate area.

On 30 June two Piping Plover chicks and two adults were feeding in a marsh flat approximately 1 mile N of Hatteras Inlet. The young appeared to be at least 1 week old. A single chick was in this same area on 8 July. After this sighting the young were not seen again.

The habitat in which all Piping plovers nested was very similar to that used by nesting Least Terns (*Sterna albifrons*). All four nests were adjacent to, or on the fringes of, Least Tern colonies. Both the Hatteras and Cape Point sites were very wide, open, sandy flats that were bordered on one side by the Atlantic Ocean and were adjacent to low-lying sand flats. The sand flats were used extensively by the Piping plovers for feeding.

The Piping Plover nests were very distinctive and easy to separate from those of the Least Tern. Plover nests were on the open sand and were lined with small, light-colored shell chips. There was no vegetation present in the immediate vicinity of any nest. The eggs were similar in size and color to the Least Tern eggs but were more oval and more finely speckled.

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