

# Snowy plover hatchlings make their return

**For snowy plovers, a fragile, fluffy kind of hope**

By Katie Frankowicz  
EO Media Group

Wildlife biologists discovered another western snowy plover nest at Nehalem B0ay State Park over the Memorial Day weekend.

It's been a week of good news for the tiny, threatened shorebird. Last Wednesday, the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department announced the first hatchling in 50 years in that area. Several days later three chicks hatched at the Sitka Sedge Natural Area near Pacific City.

They've come a long way since 2015 when the first nest at Nehalem Bay State Park after conservation efforts began in earnest there failed. When that happened, wildlife biologist Vanessa Blackstone cried on beach.

It was like a scene from a movie, she says.

You know: "Nooooooooooooo!"

Though plover conservation efforts have been underway along the southern and central portions of the Oregon Coast since the 1990s, managed North Coast sites like Nehalem Bay are relatively new. Biologists hoped that as plover populations rebounded elsewhere, the birds would begin to search farther afield for new habitat and return to traditional sites up north. Now — with an estimated 518 birds statewide and recent successes at Nehalem Bay — they can say with certainty that this is beginning to happen.

The odds are stacked against the Nehalem Bay chick, and any others that follow it. The hatchling is roughly the size of two cotton balls or a golf ball, though getting bigger every day — a small bird on a large beach. But even if it doesn't survive, for Blackstone and others who have worked to restore snowy plover populations on the West Coast, it is a fragile, fast-moving, fluffy kind of hope.

"It means Oregon remains



COLIN MURPHEY/EO MEDIA GROUP

**Signs clearly mark areas where shorebirds, like the threatened western snowy plover, might be nesting in Nehalem Bay State Park. Wildlife biologist Vanessa Blackstone, left, scans the beach looking for nests.**

at the forefront of recovery for this bird!" Blackstone, who works for the Oregon Department of Parks and Recreation, wrote in an email after news of the plover chick broke.

It means, she said, that "not only did we pick the right locations when selecting nesting areas in the (state's habitat conservation plan), it also means our management is working."

### Field work

A few days before the Memorial Day weekend, Blackstone set out to locate the hatchling.

Rangers restrict access to the southern portion of the 4-mile-long sand spit that makes up Nehalem Bay State Park beginning in May and continuing through the entirety of the plover nesting season. Now with a confirmed hatchling on the beach, these restrictions had become even more crucial.

The park is located just below Manzanita, a town often overrun with tourists in the summer, and park rangers were expecting a crowd over the long weekend. Blackstone wanted to know where the chick was before the weekend hit, the better to warn people away from areas where it might be feeding or resting.

She had a hunch that the chick, now 2 weeks old and very mobile, may have moved

northwards with its parent, looking for food outside the protected nesting area. Male plovers look after chicks once they hatch while females continue to mate and establish nests.

### Dangers

If you are on a sandy beach littered with driftwood and broken sea shells, everything looks like a western snowy plover: that tan stone, those scattered puffs of sea foam, the pile of twigs and dried grass the wind just caught and stirred.

Blackstone moved slowly, shouldering a spotting scope on a tripod. She started out looking for tracks because where there were tracks there could be birds.

Plovers feed on small invertebrates. As they forage for food, they run in straight lines, pause, look around, then dash suddenly to the side to snag prey. The distinctive, slightly pigeon-toed tracks they leave behind reflect these sudden starts, stops and right-angle turns.

Last Thursday, Blackstone found little evidence of plover activity at the southern

end of the beach where signs warn people away from plover nesting areas. She turned north towards Manzanita, stopping every few steps to scan the beach with her scope.

Sanderlings, another small, fast-moving shorebird, scurried along the wet sand. Up above the dunes, a crow slid sideways on the wind, head questing from right to left. It sent a shadow rippling over wave-prints in the dry sand.

Predators haven't yet figured out that the sparrow-sized plovers and their even smaller eggs — and now chick — are here, as far as Blackstone can tell. Elsewhere in Oregon, plover nesting grounds are a buffet for gulls, coyotes and corvids like crows and ravens. Wildlife biologists often sweep away their footprints after checking on plover nests to avoid leading predators right to them. In California and southern Oregon, the states and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have had to consider lethal options in controlling problem predators.

One western gull in southern Oregon figured out that

plover parents will flee their nests when disturbed, hoping to draw predators away. They'll flutter down the beach, pretending their wing is broken: "Eat me! Eat me! I'm easy to catch!" The gull ignored them and pillaged 10 nests in a single day.

### Home base

But crows and gulls aren't the only issue.

Snowy plovers see danger everywhere. A dog, sniffing around and oblivious to a nest — usually only a shallow scrape in the dry sand — can send parents scurrying. So can a beachcomber wandering among the dunes, or a colorful plastic kite fluttering overhead.

"One person, one dog, one kite, they'll get over it," Blackstone said. But when another person goes by a few minutes later, followed by another dog or another kite, plover parents are constantly hopping off eggs.

"So many nests fail because they get cold," Blackstone said.

"Certainly within the species you see a range of tolerance for disturbance," said Eleanor Gaines, a conservation biologist who works with the Oregon Biodiversity Information Center. The center has tracked plover numbers since the 1990s when they first became federally listed as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act. The center provides information to the different state and federal groups involved in snowy plover recovery efforts.

In Oregon, the beaches are relatively remote. In California, plovers nest on beaches heavily used by people.

"They rope them off (in California), but the birds do seem to tolerate more human disturbance than we see up here," Gaines said.

Plovers have what biologists call "site fidelity." Once they successfully nest somewhere, they tend to come back. It is part of what makes news of the chick in Nehalem

so encouraging. If it survives to adulthood, it too will return someday.

### North

Blackstone walked for more than an hour, slowly zig-zagging from where high tide had deposited a chain of beach debris then up to dry sand. She paused to look for tracks or to look through her scope, noting other bird species, puzzling over unfamiliar tracks.

Then: "Western snowy plover! I knew they were going to go north."

The adult plover was hard to see unless it moved. Blackstone pondered it through her scope. A sudden movement at the plover's side made her do a double take. Two birds? No: The chick!

Minutes later, the parent, spotting Blackstone and reporters from The Daily Astorian, would be running back and forth across the sand — "Eat me! Eat me!" — and the chick would have disappeared, hiding somewhere nearby. But for now, the gangly hatchling covered in a patchy fuzz with its long legs and useless "little chicken wings" bobbed next to its parent.

"Only 1,000 yards north of where we want him," Park Ranger Ken Murphy would later sigh when Blackstone told him the news.

### 'Guided luck'

The chick, and the new nest, are not flukes.

"More like guided luck," said Chris Havel, associate director with Oregon Parks and Recreation. "With some tweaking of the ground and help from visitors, a traditional breeding ground can regain some of its former attractiveness."

"But you never can tell what will happen next," he added, "and this could be the start of a more wild, more natural Nehalem spit, or something could interrupt the process and we'll need to reset our sights on next year."

The work they've done, though, and the nests they've seen "improves the odds."



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