

our natural world

Hatching a plan to save plovers



IN THE FIELD

Jennifer Smith

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Two 1-inch long piping plover eggs lay in the sand, their speckled gray shells looking like just another pair of rocks on the pebbled shoreline at Orient Beach State Park.

A torrent of chirps burst forth from the eggs' anxious parent nearby as Carolyn Spilman, Long Island Bird Conservation Coordinator for New York Audubon, inspected the nesting site.

"It's a distress call," Spilman said. "It doesn't like me here."

It couldn't know that Spilman and Steve Papa of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service were here to help. Their plan: Build a fence around the nest to keep out gulls, raccoons and other predators that make life tenuous for this federally protected bird.

The structure is what biologists call an "exclosure." Ten feet in circumference, the cylindrical wire fence has a 2-inch-by-4-inch mesh — big enough that the plovers can hop in and out, but blocking bigger birds



Since piping plover, right, do not build conventional nests, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officials build covered wire fences to protect their eggs.

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and mammals. Protective netting stretched across the top completes the job.

"It's put up for the duration of incubation, until hatching," said Papa, a senior endangered species biologist.

Without human help, camouflage is the piping plover's best



PHOTO BY JOSEPH D. SULLIVAN

line of defense. Adults have white and sandy plumage that helps them blend in on the beach. They lay their eggs in small depressions, near look-alike pebbles and broken shells.

Those tactics weren't enough to prevent these migratory birds from being hunted

to near extinction at the turn of the last century. Now under federal protection, populations along the East Coast have since rebounded. But they remain under pressure because of recreation and development along the beaches where they breed.

On Long Island, efforts to boost the piping plover population during the breeding season have paid off, Spilman and Papa said. Each year state, federal and local workers, along with volunteers and advocates, survey beaches for breeding pairs, fence off nests and limit certain beach activities, such as off-road vehicle use, that could disturb or kill the birds.

Last year, there were 437 pairs of amorous plovers on Long Island, said Papa. That's more than 200 additional breeding pairs than in 1986, when the bird was placed under the protection of Endangered Species Act.

But reproductive success fluctuates. "They've found breeding habitat on Long Island, but the chicks are not reaching adulthood," Spilman said.

That's where the fence comes in.

Piping plovers arrive on Long Island shores in April and May to nest after spending the winter further south. The birds pair up, mate and the female lays her eggs — usually a clutch of four. Most

See PLOVER on G15

THE MONTH OF JUNE

You can see

While piping plovers lay eggs in shallow depressions they've scratched in the sand, the osprey uses big sticks to build its nest on 20-foot platforms erected by bird lovers or amid the tops of dead trees. Among raptors, only the eagle is larger, and Long Island is home to one of two breeding populations in New York State (the other is in the Adirondacks). Osprey pairs often return each spring to the same nest, which

can rise to 10 feet high after a few seasons of use. Ospreys lay their eggs (about three) in March, so by June many of the young birds are testing their wings. Eventually those wings will span four to six feet. The osprey is one of those species of wildlife that benefited from the state's ban in 1971 of the insecticide DDT. It has gone from endangered status to threatened, and now to a species of "special concern," according to the state Department of Environmental Conservation. You can see osprey platforms in many

places near Long Island's ocean-front, bays and rivers. Specifically, they can be seen around Jamaica Bay, on islands in Great South Bay, along Sunrise Highway west of Connetquot River State Park, at Orient Beach State Park and at Terrell River County Park in East Moriches. This bird of prey subsists mostly on live fish, which it rips from the water after steep dives from 50 to 100 feet. The osprey's talons are ridged, the better to secure their wriggling prey.

— JOE HABERSTROH



Ospreys feed mostly on live fish, caught after long dives into the water. You can find them near many Long Island waterfront areas.

WINNERS

Compiled by Michael Ebert

Edward Blaskey
Bank executive



Edward Blaskey of Merrick was honored last month at the 16th annual Long Island Luncheon coordinated by Outreach, a drug and alcohol treatment program with facilities throughout the state. Blaskey, who was honored for his efforts to "build healthy lives," is the Long Island market president for TD Bank. He is also president of Advancement for Commerce, Industry & Technology in Farmingdale and is on the board of SUNY Old Westbury College Foundation.

Debra McQuillan
School board president



Debra McQuillan of Freeport has received the Award for Excellence in School Board Service from SCOPE Education Services in Smithtown. McQuillan is president of Freeport school district's Board of Education and is credited with helping to boost academic performance, staff morale and the district's social climate during her 15 years of service. She helped gain support for a bond issue that resulted in the construction of New Visions Elementary School, district officials said.

Richard Jay Scholem
Restaurant critic



Richard Jay Scholem of Huntington has received the Golden Fork Lifetime Achievement Award from the Long Island Dining Alliance. Scholem is a restaurant critic for Long Island Pulse magazine and City Guide magazine in Manhattan and has previously reviewed Long Island restaurants for The New York Times and Long Island Business News. He is also former president of the Family Service League of Suffolk County and former chairman of the American Civil Liberties Union's Suffolk Chapter.

Jackie Sullivan
Student



Jackie Sullivan of Wantagh was recently named a 2009 national volunteer of the year by the U.S. Soccer Foundation's Passback Program for collecting more than 3,900 pieces of new and used soccer equipment during a yearlong span. Sullivan, a sophomore at Gen. Douglas MacArthur High School in Levittown, has been collecting soccer equipment since 2004 to benefit disadvantaged youths in regions that include Haiti, New Orleans, Uganda and Baghdad. She has amassed more than 9,000 pieces of gear in total.

NOMINATE SOMEONE AS A WINNER. Send e-mail information about the accomplishment or honor to winners@newsday.com, or mail to Winners, Newsday, 235 Pinelawn Rd., Melville, NY 11747-4250. Please include a photo; color is preferred. Photos will not be returned.

Saving piping plovers

PLOVER from G16

chicks have hatched by the end of July; the birds usually fledge in August.

That's how it works if nothing happens to the eggs. Often, something does, and the clock starts all over again. "Each time they re-nest their energy goes down, so they don't lay as many eggs," Spilman said.

The nest she and Papa fenced in that day had only two. But they saw a parent incubating the eggs — a sign no more would be laid.

They assembled the enclosure a few hundred feet down the beach from the nest. Papa joined the ends of the fencing with zip ties, then he and Spilman put the netting over the top to keep out bigger birds.

Park manager Sue Wuehler helped them walk the fence over to the nest site. They dug a 9-inch deep trench and dropped the fence down, anchoring it with sand and rocks. They sank

stakes into the ground with a post pounder, then tied the fence to the stakes with more zip ties to prevent predators from tipping it over. Then, the group retreated back to their trucks to watch.

"He's in," said Carolyn, peering through binoculars. "There he goes. He's on it."

It took 14 minutes. The whole procedure is timed to ensure the plovers don't abandon the nest. An absence of an hour means the bird has rejected the fence, and it must be removed.

Down the beach, a black-backed gull the size of a house cat foraged by the surf. After they hatch, the baby plovers remain vulnerable to predators like this until they learn to fly.

"They're rooting around, and they're out feeding," Spilman said. "They don't know to get out of the way in time. They get crushed by vehicles, chased by dogs. It's actually quite remarkable when they survive."

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