

RESULTS OF THE 1984 CENSUS OF PIPING PLOVERS,

AMERICAN OYSTERCATCHERS, AND WILLETS IN MASSACHUSETTS

by Scott Melvin, Massachusetts Natural Heritage Program

Piping Plovers (Charadrius melodus), American Oystercatchers (Haematopus palliatus), and Willets (Catoptrophorus semipalmatus) were systematically inventoried in Massachusetts for the first time in 1984. The statewide census was conducted by over thirty individuals, many of whom are also involved in tern census and management activities, and was coordinated by the Natural Heritage Program, a part of the Nongame and Endangered Species program of the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife.

An estimated 112 pairs of Piping Plovers were censused during the period of May 18 to July 1, 1984. Nesting or territorial birds were reported from over forty coastal locations, from Salisbury and Plum Island south to Westport and Dartmouth, and east to Cape Cod, Martha's Vineyard, and Nantucket. Most sites reported only one to four pairs; the exception was an estimated fourteen pairs at Sandy Neck in Barnstable.

As expected, the 1984 total of 112 pairs exceeds the 70-plus pairs that were reported incidental to tern censuses in 1983; many Piping Plovers not associated with tern colonies presumably went unreported in 1983. Thus, we believe that the difference between the 1983 and 1984 totals represents a sampling bias rather than a real increase and that the Piping Plover population in Massachusetts is actually stable or declining.

The majority of Piping Plover reports were for the period of May 18 to June 12; in fact, more observations were reported from the first two weeks in June than for the "official" census period of May 18 to 24. This suggests that future Piping Plover censuses can be timed to overlap censuses of colonial waterbirds, particularly terns, as long as complete coverage of potential Piping Plover habitat is achieved and inventory efforts go beyond traditional colonial waterbird nesting sites to check other areas of beaches and dunes where Piping Plovers may occur.

The Piping Plover has recently become an object of considerable concern to conservationists, as population declines have been documented or suspected over much of its breeding range in North America. It is currently under formal consideration for listing as a Federal Threatened Species by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Massachusetts' 1984 total of 112 pairs represents the largest breeding population in eastern North America. Piping Plovers nest from Newfoundland and Quebec south to Virginia, at a few sites on the Great Lakes, and west to Nebraska, Minnesota, the Dakotas, and the prairie

provinces of Canada. The entire North American breeding population is currently estimated at only 1600 pairs.

Declines in Piping Plover populations on the East Coast are attributed to loss of coastal nesting habitat to residential and recreational development and disturbance of nesting birds by beachgoers, off-road vehicles, and dogs. Conservation efforts for this species in Massachusetts are aimed at preserving coastal beach and dune habitat and protecting birds from disturbance during the May-June nesting season.

A total of 90-95 American Oystercatchers, including an estimated 42 pairs, was reported in the Massachusetts inventory during May and June 1984 (see Table 1). All breeding locations were in southeastern coastal areas. Thirty-two of 42 pairs (76 percent) were reported from three locations: Martha's Vineyard, Nantucket, and Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge (NWR).

Table 1. Results of inventory of breeding American Oystercatchers, May to June 1984.

Location	Estimated Pairs	Individuals
Little Beach, Dartmouth	1	2
Monomoy NWR, Chatham	12	25-30
North Beach, Chatham	1	2
Naushon Island, Gosnold	1	2
Weepecket Islands, Gosnold	1 ^a	2
Penikese Island, Gosnold	1 ^a	2
Cuttyhunk Island, Gosnold	2	4
Martha's Vineyard	14	28
Muskeget Island	1+	7
Whale Island	2	4
Nantucket	6	12
Totals	42	90-95

^aResident but apparently not nesting.

An estimated 85-94 Willets, including 37-39 pairs, were reported in 1984 (see Table 2). Breeding Willets currently have a more widespread distribution in the state than do American Oystercatchers, occurring from Plum Island south to Dartmouth and east to several locations on Cape Cod. Two locations, Monomoy NWR in Chatham and the general area of Plum Island and the Parker River NWR, accounted for over 55 percent of the pairs reported.

Table 2. Results of inventory of breeding Willets,
May 21 to August 5, 1984.

Location	Estimated Pairs	Individuals
Woodbridge Island, Newburyport	1	2
Plum Island/Parker River NWR	7-9	14-18
Calf Island, Boston Harbor	0	1
West Island, Fairhaven	2	4
Barney's Joy, Dartmouth	2	4
E. Sandwich Beach, Sandwich	1	2
Sandy Neck, Barnstable	1	2
Gray's Beach, W. Yarmouth	1	2
West Dennis Beach, Dennis	1	2
Forest Beach, Chatham	2	4+
Harding's Beach, Chatham	2	4
Morris Island Causeway, Chatham	1	2
Monomoy NWR, Chatham	13	35-40
North Beach, Chatham	2	4
New Island, Orleans and Eastham	1	2
Cuttyhunk Island, Gosnold	0	1
Totals	37-39	85-94

Brad Blodget and I extend our thanks to all who contributed population data on breeding shorebirds this year. The total observer effort and resulting statewide coverage were outstanding, and we appreciate the individual efforts.

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