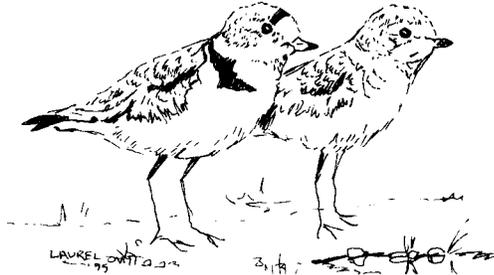


# Threatened and Endangered Species

United States Department of Agriculture  
Natural Resources Conservation Service  
Montana

## PIPING PLOVER

*Charadrius melodus*



**OFFICIAL STATUS:** Threatened—Montana. Threatened species are species that are likely to become endangered species within the foreseeable future throughout all or a significant portion of their range.

**LISTED:** 50 Federal Register 50733; December 11, 1985 (entire range except Great Lakes watershed).

**HISTORICAL STATUS:** It appears that the piping plover was more widespread than its present distribution. This may be especially true for the Great Lakes population.

**PRESENT STATUS:** There are three distinct piping plover populations in North America; the Atlantic Coast, Great Lakes, and Great Plains populations. A 1991 international census estimated a total piping plover population of 2,337 breeding pairs. The Great Plains population occurs in the states of Montana, North and South Dakota, Nebraska, Iowa, Colorado, Minnesota, and the provinces of Alberta, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Ontario. The western most breeding piping plovers in the U.S. are found in Montana on sand flats above the west end of the Fort Peck Dam (Valley County), on the shorelines of the Big Dry Arm of Fort Peck Reservoir (Garfield and McCone counties), and on the saline wetlands near Dagmar and Medicine Lake National Wildlife Refuge (Sheridan County).

**HABITAT:** In the Great Plains, piping plovers utilize the barren sand and gravel shores of rivers and lakes. Plovers avoid areas with dense vegetation. Generally speaking, the lakes used by plovers in Montana are alkaline and have salt-encrusted, white beaches. The selection of alkaline lakes is probably a consequence of the sparse vegetation around these lakes. Beaches used by piping plovers will generally average 30 yards in width. Piping plovers also utilize barren river sandbars. In Montana, this habitat type is found on the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers.

**LIFE HISTORY:** The breeding season in Montana extends from late April until August. Pairs remain mated for the duration of the breeding season. Pairs are territorial which means they defend their nest area from other plovers. Both sexes share the incubation duties which last from 25 to 31 days. A 4 egg clutch is

laid in a shallow depression in the sand/gravel substrate. Plover chicks are able to walk and feed within hours of hatching. The chicks can fly in about 21 days. Piping plovers feed on insects, crustaceans, and mollusks.

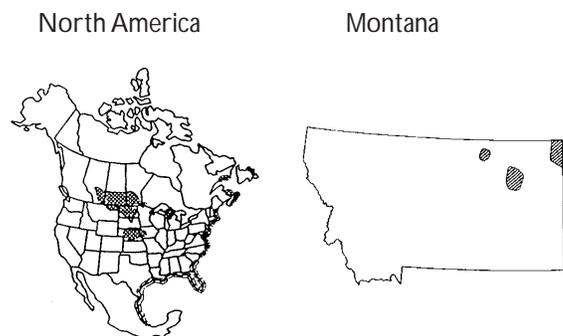
**AID TO IDENTIFICATION:** The piping plover is a small shorebird the color of dry sand. Distinctive markings include a black band on top of the head and another across the breast. The similar killdeer has 2 black breast bands. The black bands are not well formed in juvenile plovers and in birds in winter plumage. Plovers have a melodic flute-like call.

**REASONS FOR DECLINE:** Habitat destruction is a major reason for the population decline. In Montana, reservoir construction on the Missouri River has resulted in a loss of sandbar habitat. Plovers utilizing the remaining sandbars on the Missouri River are susceptible to human activities, predation, and water fluctuations as the result of dam operations. Plovers that use alkaline wetlands are susceptible to cattle trampling, wetland drainage, and contaminants.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:** Avoid Missouri River sandbars and alkaline wetlands that have piping plovers present. Leave the area immediately if piping plovers are observed. Advise others to do likewise. Restrain pets when near piping plovers.

**COMMENTS:** Piping plovers on river sandbars often share the sandbars with least terns, an endangered species. Piping plovers in the Great Lakes watershed are listed endangered.

**REFERENCES:** *Great Lakes & Northern Great Plains Piping Plover Recovery Plan* by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 1988.



Present Distribution of the Piping Plover