

MOUNTAIN PLOVER (*Charadrius montanus*)

Description

The mountain plover is a small/medium-sized bird with long legs that is most often observed on the ground in shortgrass prairie habitat. It is light brown on the back, with a dark cap, a dark line from the bill to the eye, and white under parts. It closely resembles a killdeer but lacks any dark banding around the neck and breast. The mountain plover rarely flies, relying instead on its running ability. Its diet includes insects, especially grasshoppers, crickets, beetles and flies. The mountain plover builds its nest in a shallow scrap in the ground, lines it with plant material and lays up to three, brown speckled eggs. The young are able to run as soon as they hatch and often move from the immediate nesting area once all eggs have hatched.

Distribution

The mountain plover occurs in Nebraska as a spring migrant, as a spring nester, and as a summer resident. Historically, the species was a resident throughout the panhandle. Today, it is a rare but regular resident in the southern panhandle of Nebraska. Recent records of the mountain plover have primarily been in Kimball and southwest Cheyenne counties during the spring migration/nesting period. There is one summer record of the mountain plover from Box Butte County. They usually arrive in their nesting areas in mid-March to mid-May.

Habitat

The mountain plover is a species associated with the high plains and shortgrass prairie. They prefer sites with very short vegetation, and very little or no cover or litter. Traditional habitat includes highly overgrazed pastures, burned areas, and sandy/gravelly sites. The mountain plover is one of a group of species often associated with prairie dog towns. They will also utilize tilled cropland, mowed areas, and disturbed sites.

Status

Global: G3-Vulnerable. Federally not listed. State Threatened. Nebraska: S2-Imperiled. Breeding populations exceed 10,000 individuals; breeding range has contracted over time but the population has not greatly declined in recent years and threats are not as great as previously believed. Conversion of native grassland to wheat and irrigated cropland, the elimination of prairie dog towns, and implementation of grazing regimes that maintain higher vegetation have greatly reduced suitable mountain plover habitat. The loss of optimum habitat has been exacerbated by the use of alternative habitat by the mountain plover. As an alternative to the low vegetation native grassland preferred by the species, the mountain plover will nest in fallow or disked cropland. This makes the birds and nests vulnerable to agricultural practices of disking, spraying, etc.

Management

There is no chance of restoration to historical levels; the best hope is the stabilization of declining populations. The conversion of grasslands to cropland, land development, and prairie dog control, continue to erode and fragment the small areas of remaining suitable habitat. Prevent conversion of suitable habitat to cropland. Implement management regimes that will provide very short vegetative cover during the spring migration/nesting period and summer brood rearing. If nesting occurs on cropland, work with the landowner to avoid nest destruction and detrimental impacts. Off-road vehicle access should be restricted between 1 April and 1 August in areas identified as plover habitat.

More Information

<http://www.fws.gov/mountain%2Dprairie/species/birds/mountainplover/>

<http://www.ngpc.state.ne.us/wildlife/plover.asp>

<http://ecos.fws.gov/speciesProfile/profile/speciesProfile.action?sPCODE=B078>