

U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service
Region 4
Migratory Birds and State Programs
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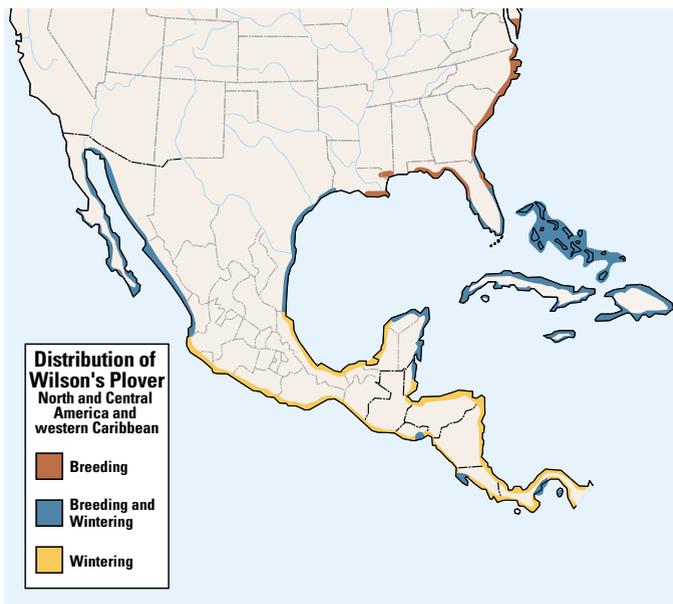
Fragile Coastal Wildlife

*The Southeastern
Gulf and Atlantic
Coastal States*



Introduction

The Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico support primary nesting and wintering habitat for many shorebirds. Some of these, such as the Piping Plover and Snowy Plover are Federally and/or state listed threatened species. Wilson's Plover and American Oystercatcher are Federally and/or state listed species of special concern. Increasing human population, coastal development, beach use, erosion, and habitat disturbance and loss are some of the causes for concern. You can make a difference. Human disturbance and pets can kill young birds and destroy nests. Please walk softly and enjoy our coastal natural resources.



Focus Species: Wilson's Plover, Piping Plover, Snowy Plover, and Oystercatcher.



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Wilson's Plover chick – Wilson's Plover chicks are whitish below. The back is buffy with black mottling and a pair of thin black lines running down the middle. Snowy Plover chicks are similar; but paler, and without black lines. They may drop and lie motionless if approached. All plover chicks are extremely difficult to see unless moving.

Nesting Ecology of Coastal Birds and Turtles

Beach-nesting shorebirds, like the Wilson's Plover, nest solitarily and do not typically associate with other birds, although they may occasionally nest on the edges of gull, tern, or skimmer colonies. The nests are very inconspicuous. Watch carefully for birds and avoid disturbing them. The birds will nest on upper beach and dunes, so walk below the high tide line on the wet sand. Wilson's Plover nests, like those of other beach nesters, may just be small depressions in the sand.



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Snowy Plover (left) – Snowy Plovers are small and pale. The legs of the Snowy are gray, the bill thin and black. The breast band is limited to small patches at the sides of the breast.



Wilson's Plover nest/eggs – Wilson's Plover nests may be located solitarily on the beach and dunes or they may occasionally be placed near other beach nesting birds. Like the Snowy Plover's, the nest of the Wilson's is a scrape in the sand, sometimes with small plant or shell fragments. The eggs are cream colored with black speckling. Snowy Plover eggs have less black speckling than Wilson's Plover eggs.

The color of the eggs and chicks can mimic sand and beach debris. Young chicks are small and may look like beach ghost crabs. Adult plovers (and chicks) use the intertidal zone for feeding and the beach and dunes for nesting, loafing, and roosting.

Other species to look for are colonial nesters. These are species that nest in aggregations or colonies. They include Least Tern, Gull-billed Tern, Common Tern, Black Skimmer, and several gull species. Please do not approach these colonies or let pets run through them.



Semipalmated Plover – A small plover slightly larger and darker than the Snowy. Note the yellowish legs and base of the bill in the Semipalmated. The breast band is dark and complete.



American Oystercatcher – A large shorebird with brown back, black head; white underneath, with a long, thick, red to orange bill, and red eye ring. Legs are pale, fleshy-colored. It nests on beaches, in dunes, salt marshes, and among rocks.

Sea turtles also use these same beaches for nesting. Coastal beaches and dunes are important to many species. Know your beach. It is critical habitat for many species that use it for nesting and migration.

How You Can Help

Be Aware, Avoid Conflicts, and Take Responsibility. Learn how to identify these species. If you see them nesting, alert your local natural resource or fish and wildlife agency. If you are involved in beach monitoring, please make a record of these species to help scientists know where and when they are in your area.

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Wilson's Plover with nest – Wilson's are larger than Snowy and Semipalmated plovers. Like the Semipalmated, the breast band is complete, but bill shape and color differs. The nest is a shallow depression in the sand, usually next to a plant or debris. All plover nests are very difficult to see.



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Marbled Godwit – Note the large size and buffy coloration. The bill is long, up-turned, and bi-colored with red-orange at base and a black-tip.



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Willet – Birds may be plain gray or heavily barred all over with a stocky, gray bill. Notice striking white and black wing stripes in flight.



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Killdeer – This plover is separated from all other shorebirds by its two black breast bands. Notice orange rump and red eye ring.



Dave Menke/USFWS

Black-bellied Plover – A large plover with a thick dark bill. Winter plumage is uniformly gray and breeding birds have black underparts. Notice the black “underwing pits” in flight.



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Sanderling – Often feeds actively at edge of waves. Head, back and breast of breeding birds have reddish colors. Winter plumage is pale and gray with white below.



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Wilson's Plover (cover) – Notice the long thick, black bill shape.