

# Piping Plover

*Charadrius melodus*



TPWD PHOTO



The piping plover is a “winter Texan,” living on the beaches and tidal mudflats of the Texas coastline and migrating north in the spring. This beautiful little bird finds it hard to survive habitat loss and is listed as a threatened species.

Coastal Wetlands

# Piping Plover

*Charadrius melodus*



## APPEARANCE

**Height:** 6 to 7.5 inches (15 to 19 cm)

**Wingspan:** 15 inches (31 cm)

### Distinguishing Characteristics

- Sandy-colored with grayish-brown crowns and backs
- White foreheads and dark bands across their crowns
- Dark, but incomplete rings around their necks.
- Yellow-orange legs, black bands across their foreheads from eye to eye, and black rings around the base of their necks.
- Small, stocky, sandy-colored birds that resemble sandpipers.
- Short, stubby bills

## LIFE HISTORY

**Range:** From Canada south through the central United States to Texas. They winter primarily along Gulf Coast beaches and the Atlantic coast from North Carolina south to Florida.

**Diet:** Marine worms, beetles, spiders, crustaceans, mollusks and other small marine animals

**Predators:** Gulls, crows, raccoons, foxes and skunks are threats to the eggs and falcons may prey on the adult birds.

**Sexual maturity:** At one year

**Mating season:** Late March through April

**Nest:** Scrape shallow depression in the sand about 1 by 2.5 inches (2.5 by 6 cm)

**Eggs:** Four gray to pale sand-colored eggs with a few dark spots

**Incubation:** 25 days

**Young:** Born within four to eight hours of each other, and fledge 30 to 35 days later

**Life span:** Less than five years, but on occasion, up to 14 years

## HABITAT

Piping plovers prefer sand and gravel shorelines, river sandbars and islands.

## BEHAVIOR

Males compete against each other for females' attention. They perform elaborate flights, and then scrape nests in the sand, tossing shells and small stones and twigs into them with their beaks. After their nests are built, they stand beside them with their wings partially spread and tails fanned. The males repeat this behavior until a female indicates interest. Once he has her attention, he begins a high-stepping "dance," continuing the courtship ritual. Although both sexes share responsibility for incubating the eggs, females commonly leave the young when the hatchlings are 14 to 20 days old. Males often remain with them until they can fly.

The chicks can move freely from their nests within hours of drying off. When predators or intruders come close, the young squat motionless on the sand while the parents attempt to attract the attention of the intruders to themselves, often by feigning a broken wing. The young plovers and adult plovers generally return to the same nesting area year after year.

Plovers often run short distances, pausing to stare at the sand with a slightly tilted head, before picking a food item from the sand. When not feeding, plovers rest and preen.

## NOW YOU KNOW!

- There are just over 5,000 known pairs of breeding piping plovers.
- Texas is the wintering home for 35 percent of the known population of piping plovers. They begin arriving in late July or early August, and will remain for up to nine months.

## PIPING PLOVERS AND PEOPLE

Piping plovers were common along the Atlantic coast during much of the nineteenth century, but were hunted nearly to extinction for the *millinery* (hat) trade. Following passage of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act in 1918, their population peaked in the 1940s. The current population decline is attributed to increased development and recreational use of beaches since the end of World War II. Although it is listed as threatened in Texas, it is listed as endangered in several Midwestern states. Vehicular and foot traffic and pets playing on the beach may destroy the birds and eggs and disrupt the species' breeding grounds as well. Beach raking and other recreational uses degrade their wintering sites in Texas.