



Piping Plover

Piping Plovers rediscover Gros Morne National Park

Habitat conservation encourages a cautious species to return

Darroch Whitaker, the ecologist at [Gros Morne National Park](#), could hardly believe his eyes on June 6, 2009. For the first time in 34 years, a [Piping Plover](#) (*Charadrius melodus melodus*) was scurrying around on the beach at the park's Shallow Bay.



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Long absence ended

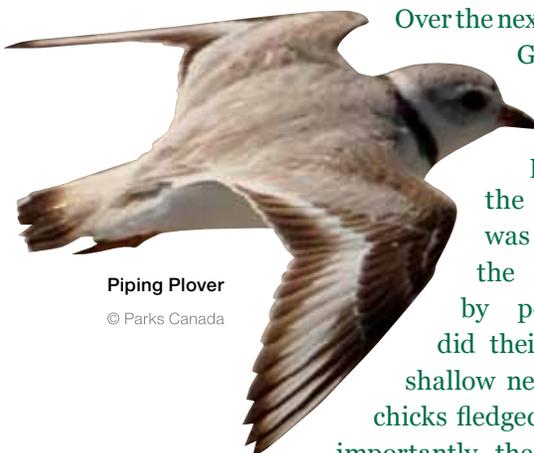
The Piping Plover has been listed as endangered by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada ([COSEWIC](#)) since 1982. Its range extends from Atlantic Canada to the Great Lakes in Ontario and into the United States and the Caribbean. The population is currently estimated at only 6,400 adults.

Atlantic Canada's northernmost Piping Plovers have occupied Shallow Bay in the past, but were already in decline when Gros Morne National Park was established in 1973. The birds disappeared from the park in 1975.

For more than 30 years, the staff at Gros Morne National Park looked for the birds, but the closest beach with plovers was 160 kilometres south of the park.

Social media, plover-style

The pair's decision to nest at Shallow Bay is important not only for the couple's successful reproduction, but the message these birds are sending to other plovers. Piping Plovers look to others within their species for trustworthy information. Young, inexperienced birds depend on the presence of other plovers to assess the quality of a beach for breeding purposes. If a beach has plovers – especially a pair with eggs or fledglings – the young birds will consider the area a good place to nest.



Piping Plover
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Over the next few days, the staff at Gros Morne National Park observed a pair of plovers courting on the beach. Swift action was taken to cordon off the area. Undisturbed by people, the plovers did their part by digging a shallow nest in the sand. Four chicks fledged that summer. More importantly, the plovers returned to nest in Shallow Bay in 2010 and 2011.



If a beach has no plovers, the young birds are likely to fly over the site in search of a location that is obviously satisfactory to others. High-quality habitat can be left unoccupied for decades as a result.



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The single pair that showed up at Shallow Bay in 2009 took a large risk in settling on a beach with no other plovers. The pair's annual return dramatically increases the possibility of other plovers deciding to breed at Shallow Bay.

Critical habitat maintained

Gros Morne is among the national parks that have maintained ideal breeding areas for Piping Plovers as part of the Parks Canada mandate to protect habitat even after a species is no longer present. This long-term protection of habitat increases the chances of one day successfully restoring a species to its previous range.

The establishment of Gros Morne National Park placed several high-quality beaches for Piping Plovers under the agency's protection. This habitat was protected even though Canada had not yet enacted the *Species at Risk Act* and no one had seen a plover in the park for decades.

As at every Parks Canada beach, sandy shores within Gros Morne National Park are protected from all-terrain vehicles, which remain one of the greatest threats to plovers.

The staff at Gros Morne National Park is prepared to quickly take action to prevent an area occupied by plovers from being unduly disturbed by park visitors. Otherwise, the plovers might feel threatened and abandon their nest. They might also reject the area as a future breeding site.

Informing people about the new couple's need for a little privacy has been a wonderful opportunity for the staff at Gros Morne National Park to make visitors and the public in general aware of the various threats facing this endangered species. The staff has publicized the return of the plovers through park literature, educational initiatives, media events and website updates.



Beach surveying

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Gros Morne National Park of Canada

Future hopes

The future of Piping Plovers in Gros Morne National Park remains precarious. Any number of misfortunes could result in the loss of this crucially important pair of plovers. The pair's consistent return and presence in Shallow Bay since 2009, however, is being noticed by other Piping Plovers. In fact, a third adult was seen feeding with them in July 2010. This visitor likely lost a nest and was scouting for a new breeding site. Having noted the presence of the breeding pair, the plover might return to Shallow Bay with a mate.



Piping Plover chicks hatching

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Little do they know it, but the two daring plovers that chose Shallow Bay have created real hope for repopulating an important portion of the Piping Plover's historical range. The protection of their habitat within Gros Morne National Park has kept that hope alive. The park staff is working hard to ensure that Shallow Bay's new plovers continue to feel safe and perfectly at home in Gros Morne. The return of this endangered species after an absence of more than 30 years highlights the vital role that national parks play in protecting habitat that facilitates the recovery of imperiled species.

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