

Voices
of the
SEASHORE



MATT LAU

and the



**Western
Snowy Plover**

(Charadrius nivosus nivosus)

BY HEATHER CLAPP

On a windy Sunday morning last month, I met with National Park Service biologist Matt Lau, to see if we could capture some film footage of the snowy plover and locate any nests. Matt has worked in the park for six years, first as a PRNSA intern before joining the National Park Service at Point Reyes National Seashore. He has a huge heart and cares a whole lot about the federally threatened western snowy plover. I so appreciate Matt and the work he does every day to keep this bird safe.

Listen to the Western snowy plover.

Don't you just love its voice? These small shorebirds aren't flashy. No bigger than a sparrow, they blend into the dunes with their gray legs, a short black beak, and pale sandy gray upper parts, and snowy white feathers on their bellies. They make a slight depression in the sand in open areas when creating a nest. The swaths of open dunes found on our beaches, including the restored dune habitat south of Abbotts Lagoon that PRNSA has supported for years, are so important for the plover as they need to see approaching predators. These open sand fields also help camouflage the chicks.

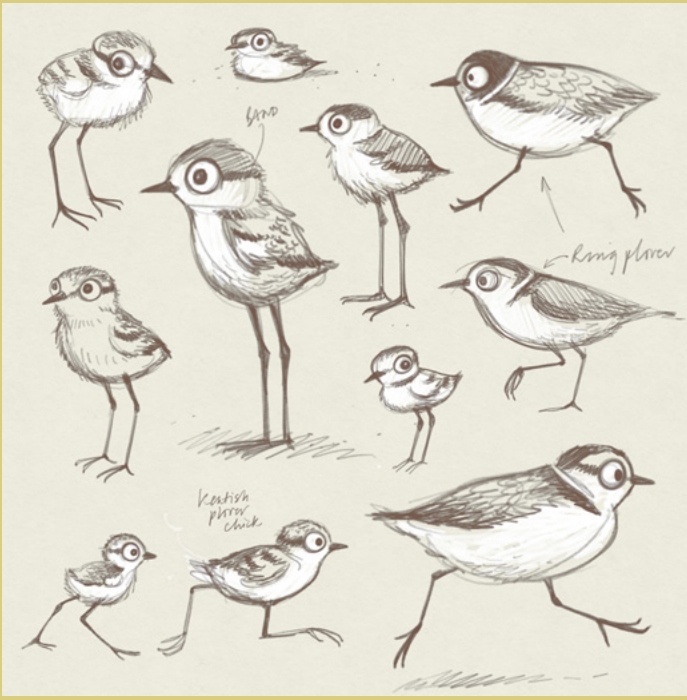
Along my beach walk with Matt I learned some of the daily rhythms of a plover. Their main food sources are invertebrates (insects and crustaceans) found on dry sand or in wet areas exposed by the tide (like juvenile mole crabs). As visual hunters, they make quick bursts of movement interspersed with abrupt pauses, as they look around for prey. Sometimes, they can be seen snapping at kelp flies in the air. Plovers have lived on California beaches for thousands of years, but



Current population estimates of snowy plovers in Point Reyes National Seashore are approximately 32 birds. Along the entire Pacific Coast, there are no more than 2,500 birds. The health of our beaches and the importance of protecting their nesting sites is important for their survival.

today human use of their remaining beach habitat seriously threatens their survival. Loose dogs in protected areas are of particular concern.

Several times, we saw a winged shadow gliding across the sand, near the roped off nesting areas. Matt would immediately look up, as if an alarm had gone off. He breathed a sigh of relief when the shadow was a gull.



We invite you to learn more about the plover through the practice of drawing. The artwork provided is a gift from Artist Mel Northover (follow on Instagram at @allinmelshead) in honor of our community of supporters who care about this park and the conservation of this special bird. Mel says "Drawing can be such a unique activity that fosters learning through observation and connection with the subject but it can be lots of fun when you inject character."

I soon began to feel anxious each time a bird shadow appeared on the sand. One of these "flybys" was a raven and Matt explained that the raven flies over the plover's nesting area to see if it can stir up some movement, thus signaling a nest. If it spies plover movement, it will look for eggs. Clever indeed. And

alarming! Matt attempts to get to the nest before the raven does to put an enclosure (protective mesh fence) over the nest to prevent raven predation (see link below).

The number of snowy plovers who reside, nest and fledge their young is an indicator of the health of our sandy beaches and entire coastal ecosystem. What I heard when I was out with

"Aside from their intrinsic value from being a living organism, I care about the conservation of western snowy plovers as they are truly unique beach specialists who have lived in these habitats for millions of years and they have an interesting natural history! For example, once the nest hatches, the sole responsibility of raising the chicks falls on the adult male, while the female departs to go find another mate to create a new nest." - Matt Lau

Matt is that our work to protect plover nesting habitat is important to the survival of this species.

Each voice in this incredible park is unique and needs to be heard and preserved. Not only does the voice of the plover have meaning to their own community members, but if we truly listen, we might

hear them speaking on behalf of the entire seashore. Their preservation matters. Their voice matters. Thank you Matt for the work you do every day to ensure a future for the western snowy plover.

For further reading, here is an [update on the 2021 breeding season and the links between raven activity and snowy plover nest success](#).