

## Rebound of Great Lakes plovers a sign that Endangered Species Act works

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**Critics who want to roll back protections on endangered species say the act is a failure; but recovery is a process that can take decades.**

With 72 pairs at last count, it's been a good start to summer for the endangered Great Lakes population of piping plovers.

Given the many ongoing threats to these small shorebirds, it's difficult to be sure where we'll stand at summer's end when these seasonable residents hit the skies for the nearly non-stop, two-day, 1,300-mile flight to their overwintering beaches along the Gulf of Mexico and elsewhere in the southeastern U.S. and the Caribbean.

For those of us working for decades to help these once nearly extinct birds recover, it's exciting times here up north, with five pairs spotted on Lake Ontario, two pairs in Illinois and a pair at a new site in Wisconsin.



Two male piping plovers were spotted in May 2015 near Park Point in Duluth, raising hopes that a nesting pair might establish there. According to a recent bird study, Great Lakes plovers are up from 12 to more than 70 pairs since 1985.

That may not seem like much to celebrate. But when a species is nearly wiped off the face of the earth, recovery is no easy process. By the time the Great Lakes piping plover was protected in 1986 it was almost functionally extinct, with as few as only a dozen pairs remaining at half a dozen sites.

The daunting task of recovering Great Lakes plovers to a sustainable population is not easy. I have records of sites where a half-century ago collectors took every bird and every egg. Still today, plovers have yet to return to some of those sites.



And, yet, thanks to the powerful conservation tools provided by the Endangered Species Act and the work of countless dedicated people, plovers are steadily recovering.

Hardly are plovers alone in their slow but encouraging return. That important point was driven home by a new study by the Center for Biological Diversity showing that a remarkable 85 percent of all U.S. continental birds currently protected by the Endangered Species Act are increasing or stabilized.

The first-of-its-kind analysis of more than 1,800 population surveys for all 120 birds protected under the Endangered Species Act was good news for birds and anyone who tires of watching some politicians falsely accuse the Endangered Species Act of doing a poor job of recovering species.

Just to our west, the 19 governors who make up the Western Governors' Association released a report earlier this month calling for the Endangered Species Act to be "updated" by giving states more control over when and how imperiled species should be protected and even determining the degree to which industries should be allowed to harm protected species and their habitats.

At the heart of the governors' attack on the act has been a well-honed messaging theme that the act is a failure because fewer than 2 percent of protected species have recovered enough to be delisted.

The absurdity of that statement has always been clear to anyone interested in stepping beyond the political rhetoric.

The great majority of species protected by the act — like Great Lakes piping plovers — were pushed toward extinction for many decades and, not surprisingly, most aren't expected to fully recover for several more decades.

The recent study of the recovery of protected birds found, for example, that while federal scientists projected that, on average, recovery of bird populations would take 63 years, to date protected bird species have only been listed for an average of 36 years. So, unless you're playing political games, you wouldn't expect virtually any of them to be recovered yet.

There's a lot of work still to do to get the Great Lakes piping plover population and other protected birds to the point where they can be delisted, but we're making important progress. According to the recent bird study, Great Lakes plovers are up from 19 to more than 70 pairs since 1985; the interior least tern is up 600 percent since 1985; and the Kirtland's warbler has increased more than 1,000 percent since 1971.

For those of us lucky enough to see the wonder of a piping plover skittering across the sand of our favorite beach, it's a tribute to the fact that we're all evolving in our efforts to learn how to better share our environment with other species.

And it's a reminder of the critical role played by the Endangered Species Act, which has prevented the extinction of 99 percent of protected species and put the great majority on the road to recovery.