

Endangered shorebird on a winning streak in Pennsylvania

Piping plovers successfully fledge four chicks for the fourth consecutive year

Pennsylvania's preeminent male piping plover had kicked off his fifth mating season by courting an interested lady plover shortly after arriving in mid-April at Presque Isle State Park's Gull Point in Erie County.

Cheers rang out. This endearing endangered bird's circle of life looked set to complete itself again on Gull Point, where tremendous investments had been made to lure this troubled bird to nest along its shoreline.

Then the lady plover disappeared.

Birds lose their mates regularly in the wild. But when the species is Pennsylvania's rarest nesting shorebird and one of the most critically endangered species globally, seeing them succeed in the breeding season matters.

Several anxious days ensued, even though the plover breeding season would roll on for a few more weeks. The clock's always ticking for the conservation organizations that have worked so diligently to bring them back.

Then it happened: A damsel showed. More importantly, she found the beach's reigning bachelor!

This male has advertised his charms on Gull Point for years. But last summer, one of his progenies from a 2017 nest dethroned him and went on to nest with a female that hatched in 2018 at Wasaga Beach on Ontario's Georgian Bay, some 250 miles north of Presque Isle.

This year, good-old Dad reclaimed his king-of-the-beach title. A certifiable "comeback kid!" His mate turned out to be the lady plover from last year. His son, the breeding male from 2017, never showed.

With Lake Erie water levels higher than ever, the suspense built over where the birds would choose to settle down. Finally, they decided to nest on high ground. A sigh of relief rippled through the Presque Isle Piping Plover and Common Tern Recovery Partnership.

Together, the pair incubated and defended a four-egg nest for 28 days, which was protected from predators by wire fencing. A remotely controlled camera and almost daily field monitoring also assisted with nest surveillance.

Four tiny chicks emerged on schedule in late June, each about the size of two cotton balls. Unlike backyard songbirds, plover chicks hit the ground running shortly after hatching, but it would take another week until they could adequately regulate their own body temperature.

For the next three weeks, the parents warmed their chicks under their breast feathers until the chicks could no longer fit, kept the chicks out of harm's way, actively fending off other birds, like killdeer or gulls, that veered too close for comfort. They did what any good parent would do. At 23 days of age, the four chicks were officially welcomed into the critically endangered Great Lakes piping plover population.

Survival of all four chicks was not only significant for Pennsylvania, but also for the Great Lakes piping plover population in a year with low chick survival across the U.S. and Canadian Great Lakes.

At the time of publication, in 2020 there were a total of 79 nests from 64 unique pairs and over 82 chicks fledged in the wild, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's East Lansing Field Office.

Additionally, a captive rearing program at Detroit Zoo and University of Michigan Biological Station was able to rescue more than 30 additional chicks after the nests were washed-out or abandoned by the adults. Pennsylvania plover chicks benefitted from this program in 2017 after one nest was inundated by Lake Erie's rising waters.

What started happening on Gull Point with piping plovers and, to a lesser degree, common terns took [years of habitat-restoration work and thousands of dollars to accomplish](#). So far, four unique plover pairs since 2017 have fledged 16 chicks on Gull Point. Three of the 12 are known to have gone on to become breeding plovers.

Prior to that habitat work, piping plovers were absent as breeding birds from the Lake Erie shoreline – the only nesting location in Pennsylvania – for more than 60 years. The piping plover's [Great Lakes population](#) is the smallest of the North America's three piping plover populations and is federally protected as endangered, with only 71 pairs recorded last year across all nesting sites in U.S. and Canada.

Now, with four consecutive years of piping plover reproductive success on Gull Point, this portion of Pennsylvania's Lake Erie shoreline has become a legitimate destination for these endangered species. Although its resurgence isn't yet close to the level wildlife managers are seeking, significant progress is being made. Let's hope it continues!

The Presque Isle Piping Plover and Common Tern Recovery Partnership, coordinated by the Game Commission, includes the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Pennsylvania Field Office, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers – Buffalo District, Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources - State Parks, Audubon Pennsylvania, Erie Bird Observatory and Western Pennsylvania Conservancy.

