Western Snowy Plover
(*Charadrius alexandrinus nivosus*)
Status - Federal: Threatened State: Special Concern

Photo: Bruce Casler

The western snowy plover is a small shorebird distinguished from other plovers by its small size, pale brown upper parts, dark patches on either side of the neck, behind the eye, and on the forehead; and dark gray to blackish legs. Snowy plovers weigh between 1.2 and 2 ounces. They are about 5.9 to 6.6 inches long. Snowy plovers can be found on flat, sandy coastal beaches, salt pans, coastal dredged spoils sites, dry salt ponds, salt pond levees and gravel bars, and the beaches and open areas around river mouths and estuaries.

California Department of Pesticide Regulation
Endangered Species Project
www.cdpr.ca.gov/docs/endspec/index.htm

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Distribution: The Pacific coast population of the western snowy plover breeds primarily on coastal beaches from southern Washington to southern Baja California, Mexico. In California, eight major breeding locations include San Francisco Bay, Morro Bay, Nipomo Dunes area, the Point Sal to Point Concepcion area, the Oxnard lowlands, and Santa Rosa and San Nicolas Islands in the Channel Islands.

Reproduction: The nesting season extends from early March through late September. Pairs of snowy plovers nest singularly or in loosely concentrated colonies. Males scrape a shallow depression in the sand, sometimes lining it with pebbles, twigs, and debris to conceal it. By April, females lay an average of 3 eggs over 4 or 5 days. Parents take turns incubating the eggs for 27-30 days, and about 6 days after the eggs hatch, females usually leave the family group to initiate a second nesting attempt with a different male. A resourceful female may produce as many as 3 broods in succession between March and September. Within hours of hatching, the precocial nestlings leave the nest and begin to forage. Males accompany the chicks as they develop their foraging skills and flight feathers. Fledging (reaching flying age) occurs in about 1 month. Late-season broods may extend fledging into the third week of September.

Food: Snowy plovers are primarily visual foragers, using the run-stop-peck method. They forage on invertebrates in the wet sand and amongst surf-cast kelp within the intertidal zone, in dry, sandy areas above the high tide, on salt pans, on spoil sites, and along the edges of salt marshes, salt ponds, and lagoons. They sometimes probe for prey in the sand and pick insects from low-growing plants.