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Story and Photos by **Chuck Graham**

Fledglings' Flight

An odyssey of egg to flight for
three Western Snowy Plovers

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Under the protective wing of its father, one of three young western snowy plover nestles in for warmth along a coned-off section of Carpinteria State Beach. The nest is the first one found in the depressions of the sandy landscape since 1960. The adult male remained with his three chicks for a month preparing them to fledge.



For weeks, the photographer kept a healthy and safe distance from the family of western plovers discovered in the sand on Carpinteria State Beach. Barriers were established to ensure the public did not interfere with their fledgling activity. No matter how still the photographer remained, it always seemed at least one of the youngsters had a fix on his position.

A predawn run on the deserted Carpinteria State Beach offered something not normally expected along Southern California's celebrated beaches—a sense of solitude. Through the encompassing darkness, the only sound above the breaking waves to my right was my rhythmic breathing and the crunch of shoes in the soft sand.

In the dark, the cool sea breeze flowed inshore from across the shimmering Santa Barbara Channel and beyond the Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary and promised to keep the mid-May temperatures later in the day to a reasonable level. Knowing the morning would bring its normal throngs of birders, nature walkers and ocean anglers, I lowered my head and picked up the pace to finish the open stretch of beach. When I passed the habitat restoration efforts at Carpinteria Creek, I felt myself reach a meditative state of mind.

That's when I collided with a roped off section of sand in the upper dunes of the state beach. I stopped and retreated several paces. I caught my breath and

scanned the area before me, amazed that what I saw had been absent from this beach for more than 60 years.

In the center of the roped area sat a small, wired cage placed protectively over the sunken nest of a western snowy plover. The nest, built from a collection of items found on the beach, was the first active plover site on Carpinteria State Beach since 1960. Through the cage's tines sat an adult, protecting three olive-shaded speckled eggs.

Between the size of a sparrow and a robin, western snowy plovers are rare shorebirds that nest along coastal habitats from Washington State to Mexico's Baja California.

Light-colored feathers serve as camouflage against the sandy open habitats where they mate and raise their young. The western snowy plovers' nesting season begins in March and runs through September. Incubation period lasts about 30 days, with both parents swapping out the responsibility of nest-sitting duties.

During the season, biologists survey

beaches that are historic nesting grounds for snowy plovers, like Carpinteria State Beach. Over the years, the nesting activity on many of the beaches had degraded significantly, the sites fraught with disturbances caused by beachgoers, domestic pets—on or off leash—all-terrain vehicles, horseback riders and people flying kites. If local authorities discover an active nest, they section it off with ropes to give the plovers a chance.

Hardy Shorebird

The roped-off area at Carpinteria State Beach provided a clear warning to unaware tourists out for a weekend trip to the beach, but I wondered if it would be enough in the face of all the threats to an active nest. Besides the obvious predators, such as crows, western gulls, skunks, raccoons and opossums, the nest was situated in the middle of one of the most crowded state beaches in Southern California.

Staring at the nest, I couldn't help but be harkened back to a year earlier and the discovery I'd made while kayaking around the remote and rugged isles that make up the Channel Islands National Park. In contrast to the sparse available habitat for the snowy plover on Carpinteria beach, a mere 25 miles to the southwest offers excellent nesting habitat for the western snowy plover. Exhausted from my efforts across the channel, I beached my kayak just before dark on Santa Rosa Island, at the wind-swept easterly fringe called Skunk Point. Immediately in the growing darkness, my sea salt-encrusted eyes began playing tricks on me as the beach began to shift.

It was a challenge to decipher what I was seeing from the water's edge. I had to drop down on all fours before I realized what I'd been watching was a colossal squadron of western snowy plovers. Something had scared them, and they all picked up at once and shuffled across the deserted beach. The massive group was at least 100 feet beyond the hightide mark, and even if I didn't know where they had come from, I knew their choice of landings was fortunate. Skunk Point is the only location across the entire volcanic archipelago where western snowy plovers have nests in great numbers.



Unlike most other Southern California beaches, Skunk Point offers undisturbed habitat nearly every day along with a monumental flotsam of bleached driftwood and mounds of tattered kelp loaded with kelp flies and beach hoppers. And this is all because there are no people.

Top photo, whenever local authorities discover an active western snowy plover nest, they section it off with ropes to give the plovers a chance. Each day lifeguards coned off a wider perimeter beyond the roped area, above, extending it as far as the water's edge, prohibiting anyone from trespassing through the plovers' turf.



One of the three chicks wander along the peaks and valleys of the sandy beach. Throughout the time the three prepared to fledge, the adult male was never far away, always prepared to get between his young and any threat.

Still, the island carries a host of other natural threats. I never did see what forced them to scurry during that crisp, cool evening, but the endemic island foxes seem an obvious possibility. If not that predator, there are always peregrine falcons, ravens and gulls that prey on the tiny birds.

Once, the population numbered in the thousands but has dwindled to less

Western snowy plovers benefit people with activity, not so when tables are turned

Through their natural consumption of insects and mollusks on beaches and along the shoreline, western snowy plovers serve as an important beach cleaning service that benefits the ecosystem and visitors alike. Western snowy plovers are an indicator species that helps scientists assess the health of beach ecosystems. Tourists sometimes visit beaches where they are known to live, just to watch how them run up and down the beach and attend to their nesting duties.

Some of our activities on beaches create as much damage as if we were predators.

Shoreline construction destroys the habitat of all shorebirds. Family dogs and kites seem innocent to their owners, but a dog's curiosity and often rambunctious behavior is terrifying to a tiny bird. And western snowy plovers view kites in the same way they see large soaring birds, as an overhead threat. When a disturbance causes western snowy plovers to fly or run away, they lose the energy needed to maintain their nests and the eggs can die from exposure—to either nearby predators or to the cold air. They need a parent's constant vigilance to sit on the nest and keep them warm.

than 2,000 breeding plovers in California. In 1993, the federal U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed the snowy plover as threatened under the Federal Endangered Species Act. California considers it a Species of Special Concern.

"During the pandemic we noticed plovers moving around, said Hans Sin, senior environmental scientist for California Fish and Wildlife. "The species has stabilized in Southern California."

Sin is one of the biologists who coordinates partnerships with other state agencies, nonprofits and volunteers to create public awareness of the western snowy plovers. Part of what she does is to identify where the shorebirds congregate and nest on crowded Southern California beaches. She and other biologists in the field recognize that the species has no alternative, so they continue to face threats to survive.

Thirty Days

Nests are nothing more than a scratched-out depression in the sand beyond the wrack line. Once the chicks hatch, they are no bigger than a person's thumb, but with long legs and oversized feet, they are well equipped to travel across soft sand to forage for food.

Determination by the parents paid off for the young family as just after 8 a.m. on June 8, all three eggs hatched. Right out of the gate the chicks showed their mobility. A little wobbly on their long legs, the chicks gained confidence and their stride improved. One in particular seemed to jump out first, always ahead of his two siblings. With the guidance of the parents, the youngsters found their way along the sandy waterline and into the grassy bluffs. Watching over them was their fearless, vigilant father. It would be another 30 days before the chicks would be ready to fledge.

As is normal for the species, adult females grow restless early and depart first. In this case, the female carried a colored band on her leg, meaning there was a trail to tell where she'd come from. A little research and I'd learned she'd hatched on one of the beaches attached to Vandenberg Space Force Base in Northern Santa Barbara County. Each nesting season, officials restrict access

to the space program beaches because of western snowy plovers. At Carpinteria, as soon as the chicks were mobile, she was quickly gone to possibly breed with another male and nest again on some distant shore.

Ever since I came across the snowy plover nest on that early morning beach run in May, I spent as much time as possible just outside the roped-off area, observing and documenting their life cycle. I began with the parents swapping out on nesting duties and then did my best to capture everything after that.

The first morning out of their eggs, the chicks were still damp and huddling close to their father. However, once the morning air warmed, they darted away and sought out the wrack line and its delicious possibilities. A beach's wrack line holds the accumulation of tattered kelp, seagrass, driftwood and shells, and other organic matter left behind as the tide returns to the sea. This collection of kelp flies, beach hoppers and invertebrates are a snowy plover's smorgasbord.

"The wrack line is very important for food," said Sin, who has been with CDFW for seven years. "If a sand dune system

is protected, it's even better. Effects of recreation are common throughout the range of species."

Indeed, with so many adversaries against the tiny shorebirds, every time I traveled to the site, I braced myself for the possibility that the three chicks and father wouldn't be there. But the hardy family received a huge boost in survival assistance from the state beach lifeguards.

Every day from 10 a. m. to 6 p. m., the lifeguards coned off a wider perimeter beyond the roped area, extending it as far as the water's edge, prohibiting anyone from trespassing through the plovers' turf. It kept most threats at least 100 feet away from the growing chicks until they could fly, which biologists estimated to be early July. Not taking any chances, lifeguards maintained that coned-off distance all the way through September until the official nesting season finished.

In the meantime, the adult male continued his ardent watch over his growing chicks. On one occasion, the father repeatedly chased off a Cassin's kingbird that wanted nothing more than to share in the bounty of kelp flies. On a differ-

A routine began shortly after the three chicks hatched in early June. Each day at sunset, a cool breeze would roll in from offshore and the chicks would find their way to their father, where they could warm themselves against his feathers.





Minutes before it flew for the first time, one of the three young snowy plovers wandered off a few feet from the others and stretched out its wings several times, almost like someone limbering up before physical activity. Less than a minute later all systems were go, and the fledge was a success.

ent occasion, while the father had flown off somewhere another adult male had showed up. While I had no idea what the imposter had in mind for the three helpless chicks, a determined father suddenly reappeared and bore into it, chasing it across the sand and then across the sky until it had flown away.

“It’s that self-defense,” said Sin. “It’s that paternal response. It’s their instinct in regard to chasing that adult plover off the state beach.”

First Flights

A few days after a hectic Fourth of July holiday, the western snowy plover chick that had displayed the more outgoing behavior of the brood was first to fledge and leave the sandy Carpinteria State Beach. It took several more days before the other two were ready to take flight. There were lots of wing stretches and big hops in the sand, but the small birds continued to cling to their father.

I was lucky enough to be there on the day it happened. There was no grand ceremony or ticker-tape celebration, it just happened the way things happen in nature—the way that it had

been happening for centuries before, it just happened. And when it did, the two chicks flew off with their father, destination unknown. They would most likely search for a patch of beach to rest and forage on, and their existence would be one of flight instead of a brushed away nest on a sandy beach. If they survive, the newest ranks to adult plovers would one day experience that innate urge to mate and nest. If lucky, they could find a remote beach somewhere; if not so lucky, touchdown on a crowded one. Either way they will reclaim for a season their old, historic habitat along the California Coast. 🐘

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