

Status and Occurrence of Snowy Plover (*Charadrius nivosus*) in British Columbia.

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Introduction and Distribution

The Snowy Plover (*Charadrius nivosus*) is a small graceful shorebird that is a threatened or endangered Species throughout all of its North American range (Page *et al.* 2009). The Snowy Plover is a ground nesting bird found primarily on unvegetated to sparsely vegetated coastal beaches and shores of inland alkaline lakes (Page *et al.* 2009). An estimated 18,000 Snowy Plovers breed in North America, where the United States Pacific and Gulf coasts populations are imperiled by degradation of their habitat from development, human recreation and invasive species (Page *et al.* 2009). The Pacific coast population is listed by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service as threatened, and the Gulf coast population is state-listed as endangered in Mississippi and threatened in Florida (Page *et al.* 2009). There are two recognized subspecies of the Snowy Plover in North America. The first subspecies of Snowy Plover, which is also the nominate, is the widespread subspecies (*C. n. nivosus*) and is found throughout western North America east to Louisiana (O'Brien *et al.* 2006). The second subspecies (*C. n. tenuirostris*) occurs in the Caribbean and along the Gulf Coast east of Louisiana (O'Brien *et al.* 2006).

The range of the Snowy Plover is patchy with populations scattered throughout the United States. Along the Pacific Coast the Snowy Plover breeds from southern Washington (Paulson 1993) to Magdalena Bay, Baja Sur, Mexico; the Gulf of California at mouth of the Rio Colorado, at Cienga de Santa Clara, (Mellink *et al.* 1996) and on islands of Angel de La Guarda and (probably) Punta Arena la Ventana (AOU 1983, Palacios *et al.* 1994); locally along the west coast of Mexico from Sonora to Oaxaca (Binford 1989, Mellink and Palacios 1993, Palacios and Mellink 1995, Mellink and Riojas-Lopez 2005); and on the coast of South America from southwestern Ecuador to Chiloe Island, Chile (Blake 1977, AOU 1983, Castro and Myers 1988).

There is an inland population of Snowy Plover found throughout western North America into Mexico. This is a localized breeding species found in south-central Oregon at Harney, Lake, and Klamath counties (Gilligan *et al.* 1994), San Joaquin Valley, Salton Sea and eastern California (Page and Stenzel 1981, Shuford *et al.* 2008), western and central Nevada (Herman *et al.* 1988), northwestern Utah (Paton and Edwards 1990), and southern Arizona (Monson and Phillips 1981). Snowy Plovers have been found irregularly in southern Saskatchewan (Gollop 1987). It is irregular in southwestern Wyoming (Kingery 1990), southwestern Montana (Eng 1981), central and eastern Colorado (Andrews and Righter 1992), southern New Mexico (Page *et al.* 1991), central and southwestern Kansas (Thompson and Ely 1989), western Oklahoma (Baumgartner and Baumgartner 1992), lakes in the south and playa lakes region of Texas (Gorman and Haig

2002), and in central Mexico in the states of Zacatecas, San Luis Potosí, Jalisco, and Mexico (Howell and Webb 2010).

The Snowy Plovers found along the Gulf Coast are discontinuously distributed along the southwest coast of Florida from Marco Island north to Anclote Key and along the coast of the Florida Panhandle where most Florida breeders now occur; in Alabama and Mississippi mainly on offshore islands; along the lower Texas coast from Matagorda Island to the Mexican border; and south to northeastern Veracruz and the north coast of Yucatán Peninsula (Gorman and Haig 2002, Himes *et al.* 2006, Howell and Webb 2010,).

The Snowy Plovers found along the Atlantic Coast breed on islands throughout the Caribbean and Bahamas, but documented sites are few. They are common year-round residents south of San Salvador Island to the Turks and Caicos Islands, and an uncommon resident north of San Salvador. In the Caribbean, breeding is documented in Cuba, Hispaniola, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands (Raffaele 1989, Gorman and Haig 2002); and on islands off the north coast of Venezuela from Curaçao east to Margarita (AOU 1983, Voous 1983), but few specific locations have been officially noted.

The winter range of the Snowy Plover incorporates much of the breeding range, but birds do retreat from the northern breeding areas and head south for the winter. Along the Pacific Coast, the Snowy Plover is local in the winter from southern Washington (Widrig 1980, Pearson *et al.* 2008) to Nayarit, Mexico, including both coasts of Baja California (Page *et al.* 1986, Howell and Webb 2010), at least rarely from Guatemala to Panama where it may be somewhat overlooked (Castro and Myers 1988, Ridgeley and Gwynne 1989, Howell and Webb 2010), and from southwestern Ecuador to Chiloe Island, Chile (Blake 1977, Castro and Myers 1988).

The Snowy Plover winters at inland areas and is regular at Salton Sea, Tulare Lake Basin in Kings and Tulare counties, and interior lakes in southern California; rare and irregular in southern Arizona, southern New Mexico (Shuford *et al.* 1995); in northwestern and central Texas (Elliott-Smith *et al.* 2004); and is also reported in interior Mexico south to the central volcanic belt (Howell and Webb 2010).

The Snowy Plover winters along the Gulf Coast of the United States and Mexico to the Yucatán Peninsula with records of birds at many sites on the coast of Tamaulipas (Mabee *et al.* 2001, Elliott-Smith *et al.* 2004, Howell and Webb 2010,).

Along the Atlantic coast, the Snowy Plover is irregular in western Florida in the winter (Stevenson and Anderson 1994); in the Bahamas it is uncommon in the north, but common in

the south of San Salvador (Gorman and Haig 2002); on Caribbean Islands they are characterized as common in the Dominican Republic and Anguilla, and uncommon in the United States and British Virgin Islands, St. Martin, and St. Barthélemy (Raffaele *et al.* 1998, Elliott-Smith *et al.* 2004); and on islands off the northern coast of Venezuela, they have been sighted on Tobago, Isla de Margarita, Islas los Roues, Bonaire, Curaçao, and Aruba (Elliott-Smith *et al.* 2004).

The Snowy Plover has turned up across Canada as a vagrant with scattered records from most Provinces. In British Columbia, the Snowy Plover is a casual vagrant mostly in the Spring with 19 provincial records. There is one record on May 27, 1998, at Judas Creek, Yukon (Eckert and Sinclair 1998).

Recently, in 2011, the American Ornithologists Union split the Snowy Plover from the Kentish Plover (*Charadrius alexandrinus*) which is found throughout Eurasia (Chesser *et al.* 2011). There are no known records of Kentish Plover for North America (Chesser *et al.* 2011). There is a record of either a Snowy or a Kentish Plover with marginal photographs from May 23-24, 1991, at Nome River mouth, in Alaska which unfortunately is not definitive to species (Gibson and Kessel 1992).

Identification and Similar Species

The identification of the Snowy Plover is covered in all standard North American field guides. The Snowy Plover is a small species measuring 16 cm in length, with a wingspan of 43 cm and weighing 40 grams (Sibley 2000). The larger by comparison Semipalmated Plover measures 18 cm, has a wingspan of 48 cm, and weighs 45 grams (Sibley 2000). The Snowy Plover is a very obvious species and should not pose any identification issues for observers in British Columbia.

Adults hold their breeding plumage from February to August (Sibley 2000). Adult males are very pale gray above with a thin dark black bill, and a thin black line that runs from the base of the bill to the dark eyes (Message and Taylor 2005). The legs are long and dark gray (Paulson 1993). The head has a black bar across the forehead with a dark ear patch and broken dark lateral patch on the sides of the breast (Hayman *et al.* 1986). The underside of the bird is all white (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). Adult females are brownish-gray above with reduced black markings, and otherwise look the same as the adult male (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). In flight, the upperwing has black primaries and secondaries with a bold white wing stripe (Message and Taylor 2005). The underside of the wing is white with bold white axillaries and a dark secondary edge and dark primaries (Message and Taylor 2005).

Adults hold their winter plumage from September to February (Sibley 2000). Birds in this plumage are very drab and non-descript (Hayman *et al.* 1986). The black markings are not present and are replaced with brownish-gray markings instead (Paulson 2005).

Juvenile plumage is held from July to October (Sibley 2000). These birds are very drab and scaly due to the pale edges on the crown and wing feathers (Hayman *et al.* 1986). They lack the black markings of adult birds (Hayman *et al.* 1986).

The Snowy Plover's flight call is a nasal and husky "koorWII" (Sibley 2000). It also gives a hard "quip" or rough "quirt" (Sibley 2000). The display song given from the ground is a repeated whistled "tuEEoo" (Sibley 2000).

Occurrence and Documentation

The Snowy Plover is a casual vagrant to British Columbia with nineteen provincial records. The records appear to show a great tendency for this species to turn up in British Columbia as a Spring overshoot along the west coast (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1 and 2). In Washington State, birds arrive to breed in mid-March with the bulk of the birds arriving in mid-April (Paulson 1993, Wahl *et al.* 2005). Records for British Columbia of Snowy Plover in April are birds that overshot the breeding grounds (Paulson 1993, Wahl *et al.* 2005). This explains most of the records for May as well (Paulson 1993, Wahl *et al.* 2005). The few records for birds found in June and July could be failed breeders that wandered northward looking for available habitat (Paulson 1993, Wahl *et al.* 2005). There are four records for the month of April with the peak of highest number of records occurring from May with eight records, and then dropping in June with six records and two records in July (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1 and 2). There is a single record for the month of December (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1 and 2). Vancouver Island has the most provincial records with 13 (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). The Lower Mainland around Vancouver has five records (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). There is one incredible record from Sandspit on the Queen Charlotte Islands (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). There are interior populations of the Snowy Plover in western North America, and an interior provincial record is highly likely in the future, especially since the interior of Washington State has had a couple of records (Wahl *et al.* 2005). There have been no confirmed breeding records for British Columbia; however, there is one record of one to three adult birds found and photographed in good breeding habitat at Chesterman's Beach, south of Tofino from June 7, 13 & 15, 1986 (Campbell *et al.* 1990b, Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). Breeding was never confirmed on this intriguing record (Campbell *et al.* 1990b). The lack of fall records shows that to date there is likely no successful breeding records for British Columbia and that birds found are spring migrants. Observers should watch for this species along open

sandy beaches on the coast or on dry lake beds in the interior where shorebirds congregate, as it is highly likely that there will be future records of this species in British Columbia.



Figure 1: Snowy Plover adult male in breeding plumage at Moss Landing State Beach, California on May 4, 2015. Photograph © Michael Ashbee <http://www.mikeashbeephotography.com/>.



Figure 2: Snowy Plover adult female in breeding plumage at Moss Landing State Beach, California on May 3, 2015. Photograph © Michael Ashbee <http://www.mikeashbeephotography.com/>.



Figure 3: Snowy Plover in juvenile plumage at Moss Landing State Beach, California on February 4, 2015. Photograph © Michael Ashbee <http://www.mikeashbeephoto.com/>.

Table 1: Records of Snowy Plover for British Columbia:

- 1.(1) adult April 29 - May 6, 1972: Brad Boyle, Lee Kelsey, mobs: Comber's Resort (Crowell and Nehls 1972c, Poynter 1972, Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 2.(1) adult May 28, 1972: Ron Schaefer: Denman Island (Crowell and Nehls 1972c, Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 3.(1) adult June 6, 1972: Adrian Dorst: Green Point, Pacific Rim National Park (Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 4.(1) immature July 17, 1973: Peter Ward: Chesterman's Beach (Ward 1973, Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 5.(1) adult male June 14, 1976: Bruce A. MacDonald, Jude Grass, mobs : Iona Island Sewage Ponds, Richmond (Crowell and Nehls 1976d, Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 6.(1) adult July 12, 1980: Mike Shepard, George Sirk (RBCM Photo 724) Sandspit, QCI (Harrington-Tweit *et al.* 1980, Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 7.(1) adult June 2-5, 1981: (RBCM Photo 697) Chesterman's Beach, south of Tofino (Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 8.(1) adult female May 26-31, 1985: Glen Thompson, mobs (RBCM Photo 1055) Iona Island Sewage Ponds, Richmond (Mattocks 1985, Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 9.(1-3) adults June 7,13 & 15, 1986: (RBCM Photo 1092) Chesterman's Beach, south of Tofino (Campbell *et al.* 1990b)

- 10.(1) adult May 13, 1989: Edward L. Nygren (RBCM Photo 1240) Little Qualicum River Estuary (Nygren 1990, Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 11.(1) adult May 8, 1991: Gavin Johnston, Ken Wright: Nel's Bight, Cape Scott Provincial Park (Siddle 1991c)
- 12.(1) adult female June 15, 1991: Robin Owen, mobs: foot of 112th St., Boundary Bay, Delta (Dorsey 1996a, Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 13.(1) adult April 9, 1994: Don Cecile: Rath Trevor Beach, Parksville (Bain 1994c, Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 14.(1) adult male May 6, 1996: Mitch Meredith, mobs: Chesterman's Beach, south of Tofino (Bain and Holder 1996c, Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 15.(1) adult male June 15-18, 1996: Al Russell, Tammy Proctor, mobs (photo) Roberts Bank Coal Port Jetty, Delta (Bowling 1996d, Davidson 1999, Plath 2000)
- 16.(1) adult April 29, 1997: Adrian Dorst: Incinerator Rock, PRNP (e-bird Canada database: Accessed February 17, 2013)
- (1) adult May 6, 1997: Adrian Dorst: Comber's Beach, Pacific Rim National Park (e-bird Canada database: Accessed February 17, 2013)
- 17.(1) adult male April 29-30, 2003: John Ireland, mobs (photo) Roberts Bank Coal Port Jetty, Delta (Cecile 2003b, Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 18.(1) adult May 24, 2010: Steve Baille: Long Beach, Pacific Rim National Park (Charlesworth 2010b)
- 19.(1) adult [with colour leg bands] December 18, 2014: Robin Kite: south end of Long Beach, Pacific Rim National Park (BC Bird Alert Blog: Accessed December 27, 2014)

Table 2: Seasonal distribution of Snowy Plover records in British Columbia:

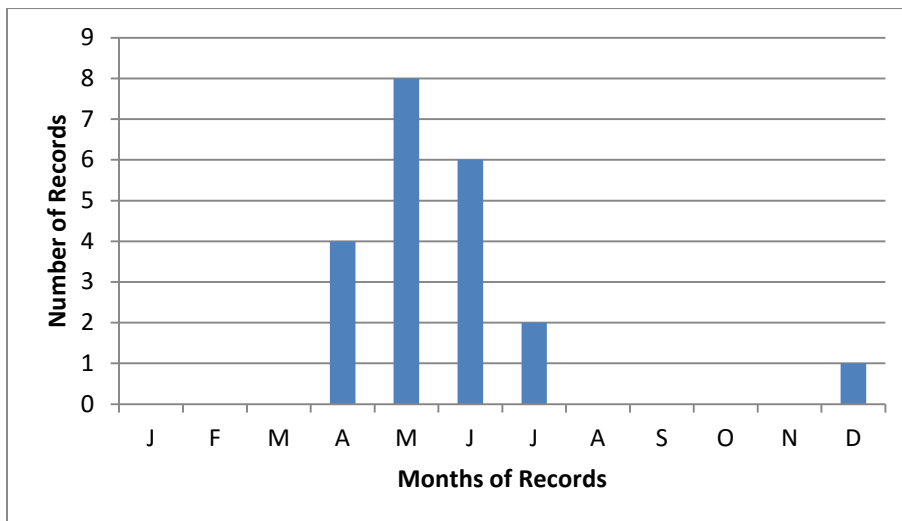


Table 2: Note the sharply defined occurrence in the Spring migration of this species reflecting that these birds are likely overshoot migrants. Of interest is the single winter record.

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We wish to thank Michael Ashbee for giving us amazing photographs of Snowy Plovers he took in California. Please view more of Mike Ashbee's amazing images at <http://www.mikeashbeephotography.com/>. All photographs are used here with the permission of the photographer and are protected by copyright law. Photographs are not to be reproduced, published or retransmitted on any website without the authorization of the photographer.

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