

Picnic n' Plovers

By Heather Avery

I am new to this grand adventure called 'bird watching.' I had on a few rare occasions stopped with my father, an interested 'birder,' to haul out binoculars and view birds from afar. However, this was my first real bird outing, on the binocular hunt for the elusive and endangered Piping Plover.

It was a passive and fog ridden day on the coast of Martinique Beach for the group of interested birdwatchers. The Ecology Action Centre, Coastal Issues Committee headed by Jen Graham, had put out an invitation to all members to go for a Picnic n' Plover Walk on Martinique Beach, Nova Scotia. All involved were eager with anticipation to view the endangered birds. With the thick Maritime fog covering the beach, many thought this was unlikely to happen. But luck was on our side and the luck was in the shape of Sue Abbot, Bird Studies of Canada.

Plovers must be able to safely hatch their young if their numbers are going to increase. Plovers hatch their young in nests near the dune lines on many beaches – the same area that many people like to place their beach blankets or coolers. Abbott stressed that if people could be more cautious walking along the wet sand or when heading to the beach to be further away from the dune lines. This simple action would decrease the amount of damage that easily happens to many nesting sites on the shores of Nova Scotia.

When Abbott showed the group a nesting site from behind the protective fencing put in place by Abbott, I was blown away! There was nothing to see! I was expecting large twigs, feathers and more of a rounded nest shape similar to ones I've seen in the branches of trees. These birds, while hatching their eggs near the thicker vegetation of the dunes, have their eggs quite exposed, but camouflaged. It would be easy for any human to simply walk on a nesting site and continue along without ever knowing they had just wiped out a nesting site, and the future of piping plovers, with one footstep.

Further along in our walk, Abbott points out a plover that is head bopping. Abbott explains the bird is protecting its young and keeping a wary eye out for predators – us at the moment, not a fox or owl. The chicks are unable to fly and the adults have to take care of them for about 4 weeks since they still have to grow in their flight feathers. As we continued our observation, the adult continuously had the look like it was ready to dash away the young to the protective vegetation of the dunes. Another bit of action we saw was when the Plovers fed. They eat the kelp, bugs, sand fleas and marine worms they find on the shoreline. It is an interesting feasting ritual to observe; their technique is to walk quickly to a location, check for food and grab the food and leave.

Overall though, my favourite bit of odd Plover action was their pace; they are absolutely amazing to watch with the naked eye. I've never seen anything like them – birds that prefer to walk then fly. They dart so quickly across the sand; you would think they were flying inches above grey and white bits of rock.

It was a day of great insight for a novice birder. I don't know if I will ever be a 'die hard bird watcher,' but I am now a 'die hard protect Piping Plovers person' and hope others will follow suit. They simply put the awe back in the wonder of how nature

works and what it creates. I can't wait to participate in future endeavors with the Ecology Action Centre and Bird Studies of Canada.