

Wing and a Prayer

The elusive piping plover is hanging on in Alberta, but its hold is slipping

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BUFFALO LAKE — He swats off clouds of mosquitoes while tramping along the marshy shore of the lake, wishing he'd remembered bug spray.

Even as the ravenous cloud buzzes around his head, wildlife biologist Ron Bjorge's skilled ear is tuned to bird calls.

You can hear 50 per cent more birds than you can actually see, said Bjorge, who this day had hoped to locate breeding pairs of piping plover.

Last counted in 1991, the small shorebird's total population was estimated at 5,482 birds, including 2,441 breeding pairs. About 180 piping plovers were found in Alberta, down from a 1986 estimate which counted 288 individuals.

The census is being repeated this summer to document the total population and to monitor the bird's status in the province, said Bjorge.

Alberta co-ordinator for the International Piping Plover Breeding Census, Bjorge is among a huge crew of biologists and amateur naturalists who are combing known habitat across Canada and the United States.

In a two-mile hike Tuesday morning, Bjorge had zeroed in on countless species, including Wilson's phalaropes, Bonaparte gulls, three kinds of sparrows, northern orioles, avocets, wrens, redbird blackbirds, lesser scaups, willets and a great blue heron.

But the elusive little plover, pale-hued kin to the killdeer, is neither seen nor heard.

Part of the reason there are no more birds on this particular sandspit of Buffalo Lake is because it has become overgrown with vegetation, said Bjorge.

A small pond just north of the lake has some excellent nesting spots for piping plovers. On first investigation, the pond didn't yield any sightings, either.

However, Bjorge said he would take a more thorough look the next day to be sure he didn't



Photo by CLEVE WERSHLER/Alberta Environmental Protection

A piping plover stands watch over her eggs

miss anything.

Information gathered by Bjorge and about 30 other Alberta participants will be compiled in an overall census, used to document trends in plover populations.

While there don't seem to be too many birds around Central Alberta this year, Bjorge heard they were doing well in Ontario, in areas where flooding helped renew a few nesting sites.

The piping plover requires a range of secure breeding sites, since the suitability of each varies over time, said Bjorge.

For that reason, habitat conditions as well as population counts will be included in the census.

In Alberta, there are about 75 lakes which, subject to annual changes, have suitable nesting sites. Pressures on those lakes include recreational and agricultural use which may disturb the nests during breeding season.

However, the bird's saving grace is that it seems to prefer a type of beach which no other species finds appealing, said Bjorge.

"After all, who would want to lie around on a bunch of rocks?"

Stabilizing Buffalo Lake may have silver lining

BUFFALO LAKE — Prospects look grim for piping plovers scouting real estate along the beaches of Buffalo Lake, says a Red Deer wildlife biologist.

But Ron Bjorge, Alberta co-ordinator of an international piping plover census, said he has found excellent habitat along other ponds and small lakes just north of the main water body.

And he doesn't believe a project to stabilize water levels in Buffalo Lake itself will have any impact on housing opportunities for the sand-colored shore bird.

Environmentalists opposed to the stabilization project raised alarms, stating that changing the lake level would decimate key breeding for piping plovers — an endangered species.

But past records show little if any evidence of piping plovers nesting along the main part of the lake, said Bjorge, who works for Alberta Fish and Wildlife.

Breeding pairs have, in previous years, been observed on Rockland Bay, which is separated from Buffalo Lake by a narrow bridge of land.

Stabilizing the lake may, in fact, enable the province to improve plover habitat by managing water levels in Rockland Bay, said Bjorge.

Similar to a killdeer but smaller and paler, piping plovers pick their nesting sites in areas shunned by other species including people.

They hide their eggs among the stones on barren, rocky beaches which are generally unappealing to humans.

Piping plovers depend on fluctuating water levels to scour the shoreline of vegetation, which tends to take over when the water remains low for a number of years.

Buffalo Lake experienced its latest plover explosion about 20 years ago, after an unusually wet spring raised lake levels above normal, drowning marsh grasses, aspen and other plants.

Please see **PREDATORS** on Page A2

Please see **EXPOSED**, Page A2