

# **ESSENTIAL HABITAT: *PIPING PLOVER AND LEAST TERN* NESTING, FEEDING, AND BROOD-REARING AREAS**

---

## **WHY DO THE PIPING PLOVER AND LEAST TERN NEED THIS LEVEL OF PROTECTION?**

The piping plover is a small, sandy-colored shorebird that nests on beaches from Newfoundland to South Carolina. The least tern is the smallest North American tern and nests on beaches along the East and West Coasts.

Both species are imperiled throughout much of their range in the United States and Canada. Once common on sand beaches in southern Maine, the piping plover and least tern are now listed as endangered under the Maine Endangered Species Act. The East Coast population of piping plovers is also federally listed as threatened. In 2001, only 55 pairs of piping plovers and 120 pairs of least terns nested in Maine.



Habitat loss and lack of undisturbed nest sites are two of the primary factors jeopardizing populations of piping plovers and least terns. Historically, Maine had more than 30 miles of suitable nesting beaches that may have supported up to 200 pairs of piping plovers and 1200 pairs of least terns. However, the construction of seawalls, jetties, piers, homes, parking lots, and other structures along Maine's sand beaches has reduced the amount of suitable nesting habitat available to these species by more than 75%. Today, only about a dozen sites provide suitable habitat where these two species nest, feed, and raise their young. The capability of this remaining habitat to support nesting plovers and terns is further reduced by continued development and intense recreational use. Ensuring the availability of this limited habitat is essential for the continued existence of piping plovers and least terns in Maine. Designation of these areas as Essential Habitat (on-going since 1995) will help to maintain the last remaining habitat for these endangered birds.

## **IS THE SEASONAL TIMING OF PROJECTS A MAJOR CONCERN?**

**Yes!** Piping plovers and least terns are sensitive to disturbance during their nesting season. Generally, this is between **May 1 and August 31** but may vary slightly from year to year. Seasonal timing of activities will often be a determining factor in project reviews and should always be addressed in a project's design before seeking final MDIFW evaluation. **Contact an MDIFW Regional Wildlife Biologist for assistance in determining seasonal timing concerns.**

## **WILL BEACHES WITHIN ESSENTIAL HABITATS CONTINUE TO BE OPEN FOR SWIMMING AND SUNBATHING?**

**Yes!** Some of our most popular State Parks (i.e. Reid and Popham Beach) are also successful tern and plover nesting areas. They provide examples of how, if managed properly, plovers, terns and existing recreational uses of beaches can coexist.

**COULD ESSENTIAL HABITAT DESIGNATION BE USED TO PREVENT  
REBUILDING OF STORM OR FIRE-DAMAGED STRUCTURES OR SEAWALLS?**

**No.** This rule is **not** intended to preclude rebuilding of existing structures in accordance with implementation of the coastal sand dune regulations. Furthermore, emergency repairs to utilities and structures, including seawalls, are exempt from this rule.

**ONCE AN AREA IS DESIGNATED AS ESSENTIAL HABITAT, WILL IT ALWAYS  
BE SO?**

**Not Necessarily.** The Law allows Essential Habitat designation only for species on Maine's Endangered and Threatened Species List. Designating piping plover and least tern nesting, feeding, and brood-rearing areas as Essential Habitat will allow Maine's piping plover and least tern populations to grow. If these species recover to the point where they are no longer endangered or threatened, all Essential Habitat designations will be eliminated. Also, if an individual area were no longer considered essential to achieving recovery goals for the species, Essential Habitat designation would be removed.