



**Humboldt
Redwood™**

Snowy Plover Annual Report

2019

Gravel Extraction Surveys

February 1, 2020



Cover photo: Sean McAllister

Project Description

Title: Snowy Plover Surveys for Gravel Extraction

Purpose: Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) monitoring

Date Initiated: March 1999

Projected End Date: Ongoing

Manager: Sal Chinnici, Director, Forest Sciences

Executive Summary:

The HRC HCP Section 6.6 (PALCO 1999), Snowy Plover Conservation Plan, requires reconnaissance-level surveys for the Federally threatened western snowy plover (*Charadrius nivosus nivosus*) for implementation of gravel extraction permits on Eel River gravel bars upriver from the Rio Dell Bridge. The HCP objective is to avoid impacts to western snowy plovers nesting on gravel bars. The breeding season is defined in the HCP as 24 March to 15 September. In 2019 HRC conducted gravel extraction operations on the Lower Truck Shop, Dinner Creek, and Elinor bars near Scotia from 27 August to 17 October. Potential impacts to snowy plovers were avoided in 2019 by conducting reconnaissance-level surveys for plovers on the subject bars as required by the HRC HCP. No snowy plovers were detected.

No change in monitoring strategies or intensity is recommended at this time.

Project Manager / Primary Author



Sal Chinnici

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INTRODUCTION

The HRC HCP Section 6.6, Snowy Plover Conservation Plan, requires reconnaissance-level surveys for the federally threatened western snowy plover (*Charadrius nivosus nivosus*) for implementation of gravel extraction permits on gravel bars upriver from the Rio Dell Bridge. In 2019 HRC conducted gravel extraction operations on the Lower Truck Shop, Dinner Creek and Elinor gravel bars along the Eel River near Scotia. Gravel extraction operations occurred from 27 August to 17 October. Potential impacts to snowy plovers were avoided in 2019 by conducting reconnaissance-level surveys for plovers on the subject bars as required by the HRC HCP. No snowy plovers were detected.

The HRC gravel bars upriver from the mouth of the Van Duzen River do not currently require western snowy plover surveys per the Army Corps of Engineers (ACOE) Letter of Permission (LOP 2015-1) for gravel mining in Humboldt County. However, the snowy plover is a covered species of the HRC HCP, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) has recommended that surveys be completed prior to extraction, although at a less-intensive level than is required where plovers have previously been found nesting on river bars (e.g. near Fernbridge). The less-intensive level of survey effort is in recognition of the history of negative surveys for the area, in addition to the location of the HRC gravel bars several miles upriver from any known snowy plover nesting. Surveys have been conducted since 1996 for plovers and other avian species along the Eel River on gravel bars where extraction may take place, including in 2019, with no snowy plover detections recorded.

In 2003 the USFWS clarified that the HCP reconnaissance-level surveys are those surveys conducted within a two-week period prior to operations on the gravel bars. In keeping with the HCP requirements, if the reconnaissance-level surveys detect snowy plovers, full protocol surveys are to be conducted on all gravel bars within one mile of the detection, and mitigation measures applied for any nests that are found.

METHODS

During the surveys a qualified biologist traverses the gravel bars searching for snowy plovers, and also records other sensitive avian species that are detected. Survey methods involve walking

and stopping frequently to scan with binoculars the entire exposed, contiguous gravel habitat, including areas separated by narrow river channels, as snowy plover chicks have been observed crossing such channels (McAllister 2019, Appendix 1).

The reconnaissance-level surveys require each gravel bar to be thoroughly searched twice for adult plovers, young, and eggs prior to extraction, with searches six to seven days apart, and apply to gravel bars that are to be operated on between 1 March and 15 September.

RESULTS

The HCP objective is to avoid impacts to western snowy plovers nesting on gravel bars. The breeding season is defined in the HCP as 24 March to 15 September. Gravel extraction operations occurred from 27 August to 17 October. Potential impacts to snowy plovers were avoided by conducting the required reconnaissance-level surveys for plovers as required by the HRC HCP. No snowy plovers or other sensitive avian species were detected.

A brief summary of operations follows. Appendix 2 contains aerial photos showing gravel bar locations.

Lower Truck Shop Bar: This bar was proposed for an approximately 29,989 yd³ extraction via trench, totaling approximately 2.1 acres. The actual extraction volume calculated was 31,416 yd³.

Dinner Creek Bar: This bar was proposed for an approximately 24,377 yd³ extraction via alcove, totaling approximately 3.9 acres. The actual extraction volume calculated was 22,410 yd³.

Elinor Bar: This bar was proposed for an approximately 29,878 yd³ extraction via skim, totaling approximately 5.0 acres. The actual extraction volume calculated was 28,320 yd³.

DISCUSSION

Snowy plover surveys were conducted prior to the 2019 gravel extraction operations with negative results. No surveys were conducted prior to operations in 2017 or 2018 because the operations were conducted outside of the established plover breeding season.

Prior to 2019, 2016 was the most recent season in which pre-extraction reconnaissance-level surveys were conducted prior to the beginning of operations. No snowy plovers were detected in 2016 either. The 2019 surveys marked more than 14 years of snowy plover surveys on the HRC gravel bars along the Eel River, all with negative results for snowy plovers.

There may be several reasons why snowy plovers are not nesting further upriver than their known extent, including on the HRC river bars. Some biologists have suggested a difference in nesting habitat; for example, increasing confinement of the river channel and narrowing of the canyon, and differences in nesting substrate (for example, see previous HRC annual reports).

Recent research indicates that snowy plovers nest on wider beaches compared to random locations (Patrick and Colwell 2014). According to McAllister (2019), there are no snowy plover records from anywhere upstream of the Van Duzen River confluence with the Eel River, and although the plovers were found breeding at sites below the confluence from 1996 to 2010, there have not been any detections there since 2010 (Feucht et al. 2019).

In the Recovery Plan for the Pacific Coast Population of the Western Snowy Plover (USFWS 2007) HRC lands fall within Recovery Unit 2 (RU2), including Del Norte, Humboldt, and Mendocino counties.

Colwell et al (2017) reported that, from 2001 to 2016, the number of breeding adults in Recovery Unit 2 (RU2) varied between 19 and 74, and that there were two distinct time intervals of change: first, there was a decline from 2001 to 2009 of 74 to 19 breeding adults, which was followed by seven consecutive years of growth at an annual rate of 22%. During the seven-year period of growth, immigrants from other sites comprised an average of 62% of the breeding adults.

Based on their 2017 results, Feucht et al (2017) have reported that the RU2 population did not grow in 2017, which ended a trend of positive growth for seven consecutive years. Immigration continued to play a critical role in this population growth, as the arrival of 24 first-time breeders from outside RU2 were observed. Breeding occurred on 11 beaches, with the majority nesting occurring on the South Spit of Humboldt Bay (26%), Clam Beach (26%), and Centerville Beach (17%). Breeding was documented at Freshwater Lagoon for the first time. The principal cause of nest failure was predation by corvids and other species. Reproductive success (fledglings per male) was greater than the recovery objective for RU2 for the second year in a row in 2017 (Feucht et al 2017).

Feucht et al. (2018) reported that 63 adults (29 males, 34 females) bred in RU2 in 2018, representing a 12% decline from 2017, and the first decrease in nine years. Western snowy plovers nested on 13 beaches (12 in Humboldt Co. and one in Mendocino Co.), with chicks hatching at ten locations and juveniles fledging from eight. They found nests on two sites (Elk River Spit and McNutt Gulch) for the first time since regular monitoring began in 2001. In total, plovers initiated 75 nests, hatched 80 chicks, and fledged 48 juveniles. Plover reproductive success was 1.66 ± 1.42 fledglings per male, surpassing the recovery objective of 1.0 for the third year in a row (Feucht et al. 2018). There were no breeding activities recorded on Eel River gravel bars again in 2018, which makes eight consecutive years.

According to Feucht et al. (2019), in 2019, 72 adults (34 males, 38 females) bred in RU2, a 14% increase from 2018. Plovers nested on seven beaches (six in Humboldt and one in Mendocino) and fledged chicks at five locations. The sites with the most breeding plovers were the South Spit of Humboldt Bay ($n=30$) and Centerville Beach ($n=15$). The most common cause of nest failure was predation by common raven (*Corvus corax*) and striped skunk (*Mephitis mephitis*) (17% of nests). Reproductive success was 1.71 ± 1.31 fledglings per male, the highest to date and surpassing the recovery objective of 1.0 for the fourth year in a row (Feucht et al. 2019). Again, there was no breeding activity observed on Eel River gravel bars, which now makes nine consecutive years.

Predation of eggs and young by ravens, crows, gulls, and other species, as well as human disturbance of nesting habitat, continue to be significant problems for snowy plover reproduction in this recovery unit.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Continue using reconnaissance-level surveys as currently required for gravel extraction operations during the breeding season.
- No changes in monitoring strategies or intensity are recommended at this time.

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MEMORANDUM

To: Sal Chinnici, Forest Sciences Manager, Humboldt Redwood Company LLC

From: Sean E. McAllister

Date: November 4, 2019

Re: 2019 Eel River Snowy Plover Surveys – Upper Truck Shop, Dinner, and Elinor bars

Dear Sal,

Per your request, I performed 2 consecutive weekly surveys for Western Snowy Plover (*Charadrius nivosus nivosus*) at the three sites, known as 'Upper Truck Shop', 'Dinner' and 'Elinor' gravel bars, along the Eel River just upstream from the town of Scotia. Surveys were performed on August 22nd and 29th, 2019.

Methods

Survey methods involved walking and stopping frequently to scan with binoculars the entire exposed, contiguous gravel habitat, including areas separated by narrow river channels. A thorough search was made for Snowy Plover adults, young and eggs, as well as those of other ground-nesting birds, especially Spotted Sandpiper (*Actitis macularius*) and Killdeer (*Charadrius vociferous*). Attention was also given to the possible presence of special status riparian species, Willow Flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii*) and Western Yellow-billed Cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus occidentalis*), which have known, albeit rare, occurrences along the lower Eel River. Maps of the survey routes are attached below.

Results

No Snowy Plovers were detected during any of the surveys. Adult and fully-fledged juvenile Killdeer and Spotted Sandpipers were observed at each survey site, but there was no sign of active nesting or brooding by any gravel-nesting birds. No Willow Flycatchers, Yellow-billed Cuckoos or other special status species were detected in the adjacent riparian habitats.

It can be noted that there are no prior Snowy Plover records from anywhere upstream of the Van Duzen River confluence with the Eel River, and although the species was known to breed at numerous sites below the Van Duzen River from 1996 through 2010, there have not been any detections there since 2010 (Feucht et al 2019¹).

¹ Feucht, E.J., M.A. Colwell, K.M. Raby, J.A. Windsor, and S.E. McAllister. 2019. Final Report: 2019 Western Snowy Plover Breeding in Coastal Northern California, Recovery Unit 2. Unpublished report submitted to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Arcata Field Office.

Survey Routes
Gold = 22 August 2019
Purple = 29 August 2019

Upper Truck Shop Bar

Dinner Bar

Elinor Bar Survey Routes
Gold = 22 August 2019
Purple = 29 August 2019

Humboldt Redwood Company LLC Eel River Gravel Bars Upper & Lower Truck Shop Bars



2019 Anticipated
Extraction Area

Bridge Location

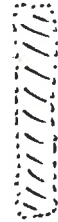



Gravel Bar 1 inch = 750 feet

Produced by HRC GIS. Vector graphics by Larry J. House, Kate GravelBar.mxd 5/21/2009 1:34:33 PM

Humboldt Redwood Company LLC Eel River Gravel Bars Dinner Creek Bar



 2019 Anticipated
Extraction Area
 Bridge Location



 Gravel Bar 1 inch = 500 feet

Produced by ITC-GIS, where GIS stands for Geographic Information Systems, in House, Kate Gravel Bars, and 5/21/2009 10:43:30 AM

Humboldt Redwood Company LLC
Eel River Gravel Bars
Elinor Bar



2019 Anticipated
Extraction Area



Gravel Bar 1 inch = 500 feet

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