

Every spring, flocks of shorebirds migrate north to breed. Every spring, some of these migrants settle down and nest here in North Carolina.

These small shorebirds come for some

Coastal Courtship and Roadside Romance

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Plovers are small- to medium-sized shorebirds in the large Charadriidae family. They have rounded heads, large eyes, short stout bills and medium-length legs. Seven of North America's 12 plover species visit North Carolina during their fall or spring migrations. Some fly from South America, where they overwinter, all the way to the Arctic for breeding. But only three plover species, the piping plover, Wilson's plover and killdeer, stay to breed in North Carolina.

ON THE MOVE

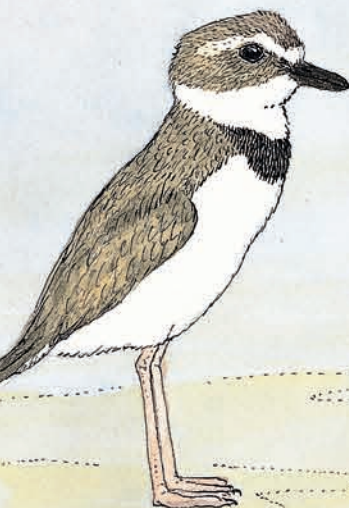
Many killdeer overwinter in Central America and migrate north to breed. In mild regions such as North Carolina, killdeer also establish year-round territories or migrate only short distances in response to winter's weather.

Most Wilson's plovers overwinter along the coasts of Central America.

Piping plovers overwinter along coastal beaches from North Carolina south to the Yucatan, Bahamas and West Indies. Each spring they migrate thousands of miles north to breed. Most return to freshwater habitats in the central northern plains of North America, but some return to nest along the Atlantic coast.

In April, both Wilson's and piping plovers arrive along North Carolina beaches to court and nest. By August, when their chicks are strong fliers, they begin to migrate south again.

WILSON'S PLOVER



Standing tall, a Wilson's plover hunts a fiddler crab. A piping plover snags a marine worm.



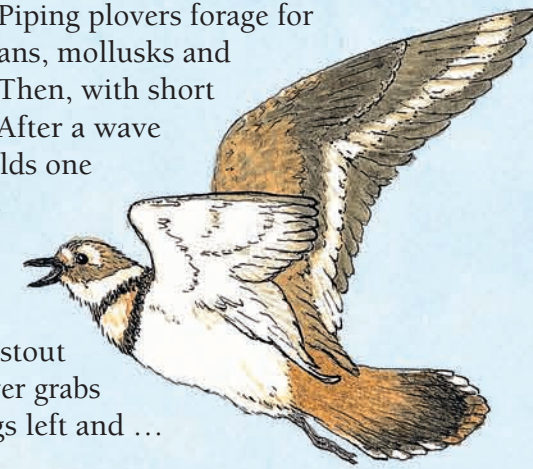
VISUAL HUNTERS

All plovers are visual hunters, chasing prey on the ground. Piping plovers forage for invertebrates such as marine worms, insects, small crustaceans, mollusks and marine animals' eggs. A plover stands tall to scan the beach. Then, with short dashes and pecks along the water's edge, it pursues its prey. After a wave recedes, leaving a film of water on the beach, a plover often holds one foot out and vibrates it against the wet surface before pecking. This may stir a hidden invertebrate, and the plover sees its movement under the surface.

Wilson's plovers hunt for fiddler crabs during low tide on mud or sand flats. A hungry hunter grabs one leg of a crab with its stout bill, and shakes till the crab loses its leg and falls. Then the plover grabs another leg and shakes again. Soon the fiddler crab has no legs left and ... gulp!, the plover eats the crab.

The plaintive call "killdeer! killdeer! killdeer!" makes killdeer the noisiest of our three nesting plovers. Killdeer are inland shorebirds who hunt for earthworms, insects, snails and other invertebrates, small vertebrates such as green tree frogs, and some seeds.

WILD NOTEBOOK



KILLDEER

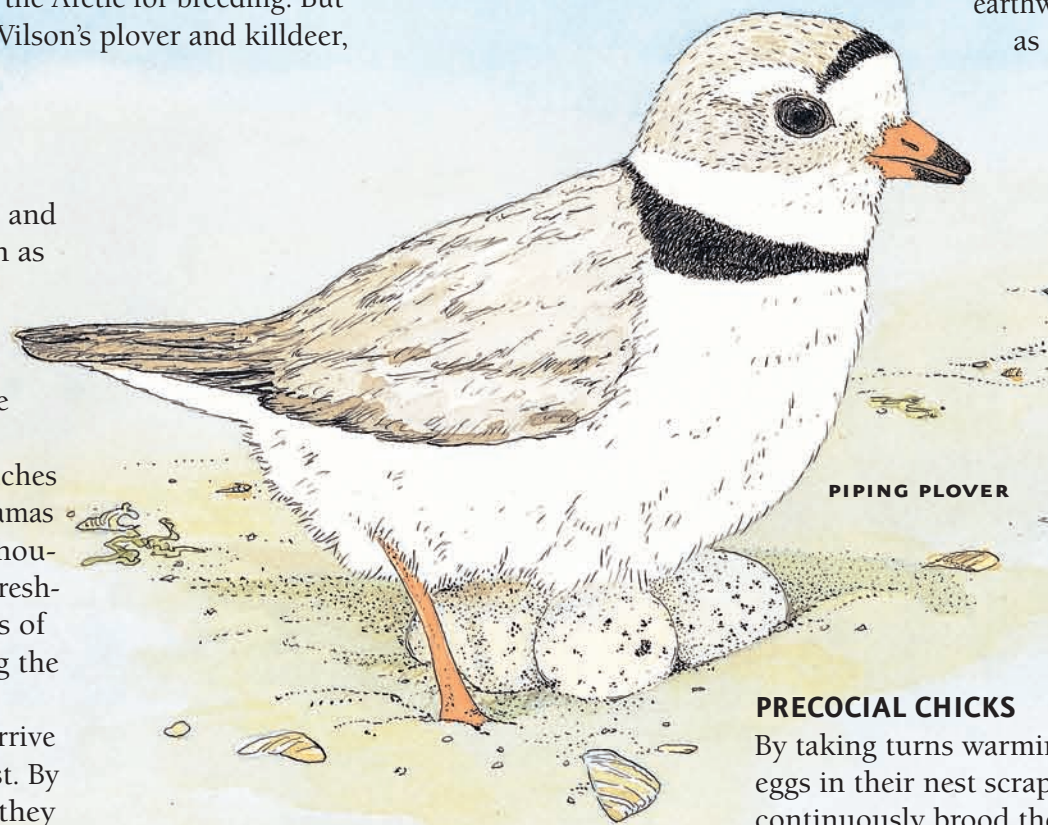
JUST THE RIGHT NEST SITE

In March, killdeer build simple, scraped nest depressions on gravelly roadsides, grassy fields, lawns and other open areas.

In April, a male piping plover claims his nesting territory on an open stretch of sand above the high tides and courts his mate. He chooses a spot near a beach where the waves are gentle. This will be a safe foraging area for his chicks, once they hatch. The mated pair of plovers often settles near a colony of least terns, who build nests close together and noisily defend their colony from predators.

Wilson's plovers also nest on sandy beaches above the high tides, sometimes close to a piping plover's territory. They choose sites close to the flats where fiddler crabs, their favorite prey, live.

PIPING PLOVER



PRECOCIAL CHICKS

By taking turns warming or shading the eggs in their nest scrape, plover parents continuously brood their eggs. Precocial plover chicks can run and peck for food soon after hatching, but cannot fly until they have fledged two or three months later. Chicks will follow a parent to a foraging area and feed themselves, but during their first two weeks they must often snuggle under a parent's breast to keep warm. When frightened or warned by an alarm call, the chicks lie flat and still. Their down feathers blend with the beach sand or roadside gravel, and they seem to disappear. Parents vigorously protect their chicks by threatening or leading away predators.



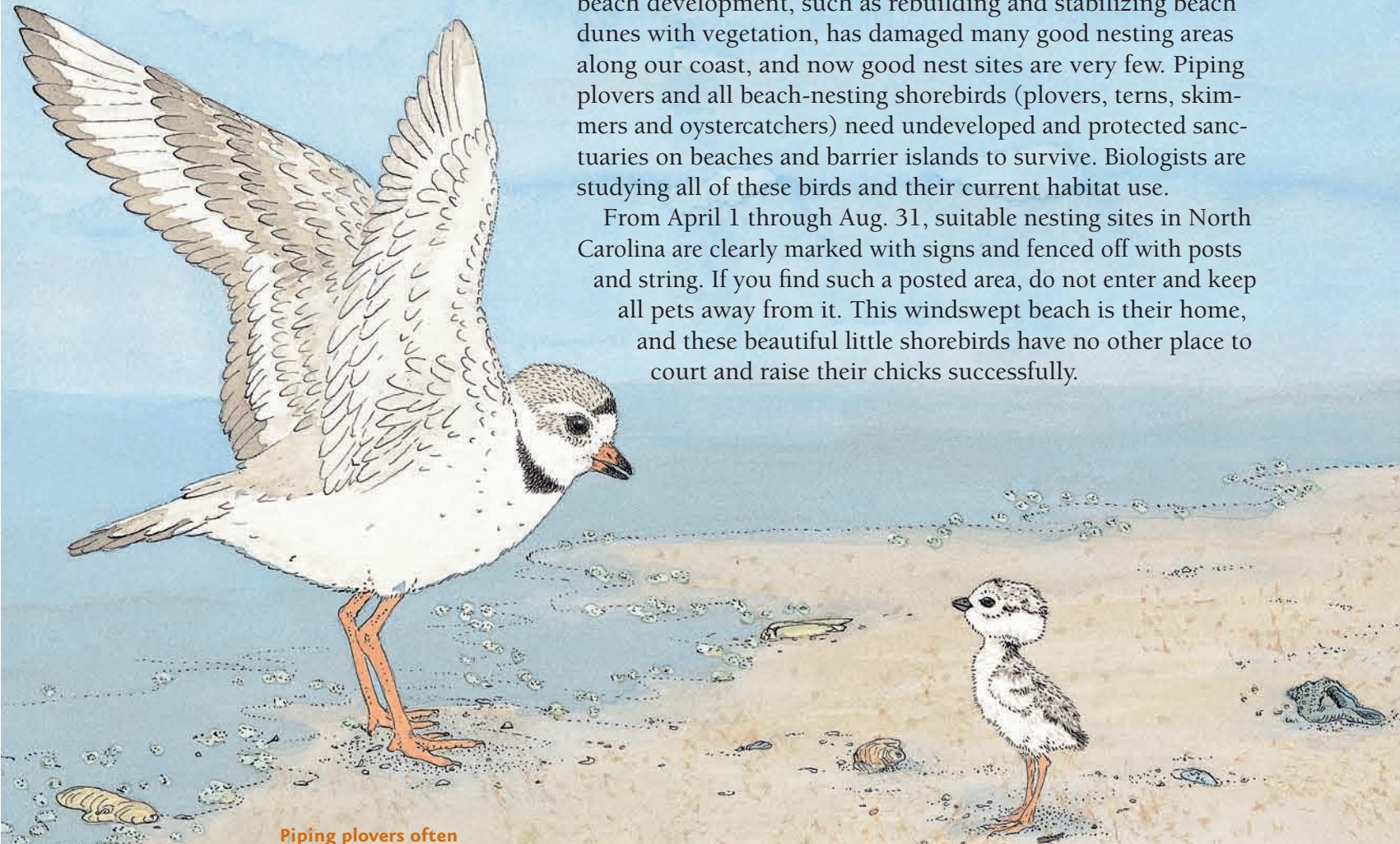
Large feet and tires can easily crush well-camouflaged chicks, because they remain motionless, hiding.



PROTECTING OUR BEACH NESTERS

The piping plover is federally listed as endangered or threatened throughout its range in Canada and the United States. Human beach development, such as rebuilding and stabilizing beach dunes with vegetation, has damaged many good nesting areas along our coast, and now good nest sites are very few. Piping plovers and all beach-nesting shorebirds (plovers, terns, skimmers and oystercatchers) need undeveloped and protected sanctuaries on beaches and barrier islands to survive. Biologists are studying all of these birds and their current habitat use.

From April 1 through Aug. 31, suitable nesting sites in North Carolina are clearly marked with signs and fenced off with posts and string. If you find such a posted area, do not enter and keep all pets away from it. This windswept beach is their home, and these beautiful little shorebirds have no other place to court and raise their chicks successfully.



Piping plovers often return to the same nest area year after year.

Read and Find Out

- "Shorebirds of North America: The Photographic Guide" by Dennis Paulson, Princeton University Press, 2005.
- "The Sibley Guide to Bird Life and Behavior" by David Allen Sibley, Knopf, 2001.

In Wildlife in North Carolina:

- "Out for the Count" by Jeff Beane, December 2006.
- "Feather Chase" by Phillip Manning, April 2002.
- "To Save an Island" by Ida Phillips Lynch, October, 2001.

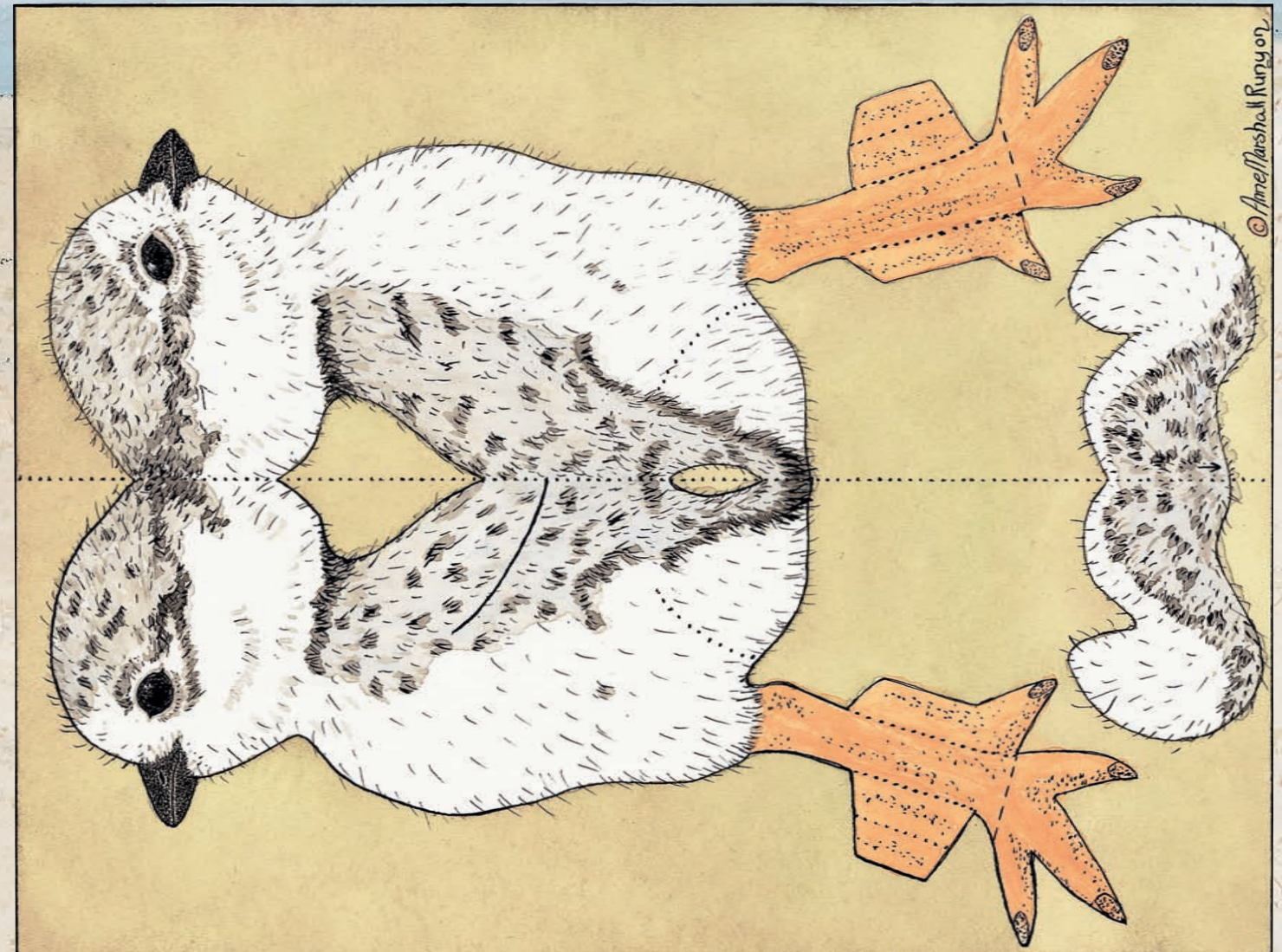
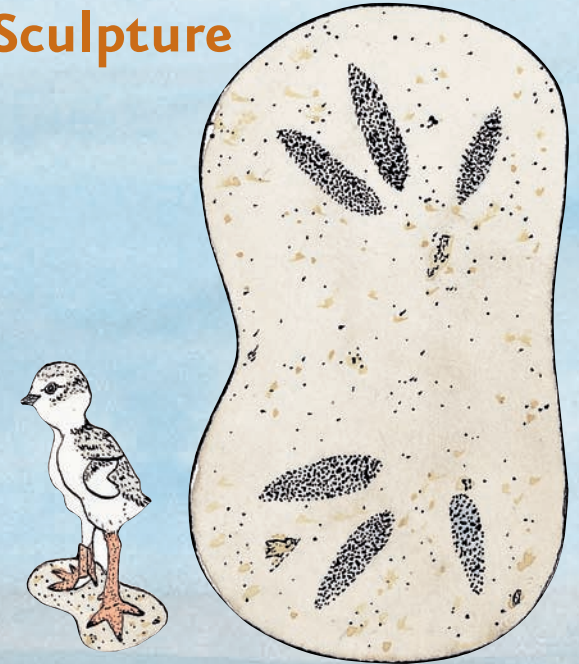
On the World Wide Web:

- To learn more about plovers, other shorebirds and about Audubon North Carolina's many coastal sanctuaries, visit: www.ncaudubon.org.

Find out more about Project WILD Workshops and literature at the Wildlife Commission's Web site at www.ncwildlife.org.

Make a Piping Plover Chick Paper Sculpture

- 1) Cut out the sandy shape with the footprints. Set aside.
- 2) Cut out chick's rectangle and fold in half along the ··· line.
- 3) Cut out both wings and chick along the black lines.
- 4) Cut wing slot, and then unfold your chick and his wings.
- 5) Crease toes up along --- line.
- 6) Fold leg flaps down along ··· line and glue together. (Chick will have little triangular "boots.")
- 7) Gently crease thighs along curving ··· lines.
- 8) Slide wings into slot, arrow pointing forward.
- 9) Glue tail tip together, and glue face together at beak.
- 10) Match chick's toes to his footprints. Glue in place.



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