

Snowy Plover nesting records from the Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area, Yolo County

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INTRODUCTION

The Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area (YBWA) is a newly created refuge located in the Yolo Bypass on the south side of Interstate 80 between Davis and Sacramento. First opened to the public in November 1997, what was farmland a few months ago is now 1,500 hectares of seasonal and permanent wetlands, grasslands, and riparian vegetation. Although the site is new, it is already producing interesting new records of birds in Yolo County, including the fourth, fifth, and sixth nesting records for Snowy Plover (*Charadrius alexandrinus*) in the Sacramento Valley.

1998 NESTING OBSERVATIONS AT THE YBWA

The 1997-98 El Niño produced heavy rains throughout California. The Yolo Bypass was flooded throughout the winter and into the early spring. As the waters in the Bypass receded in late March and early April, the elevated roads and dykes in the YBWA emerged from the water. They were initially surrounded by shallow water and mudflats until the water evaporated off the fields or percolated through the soil.

Steve Hampton (pers. comm.) first observed Snowy Plovers in the YBWA on 19 April 1998, eight individuals along the graveled roadway north of Parking Lot C. In the same area on 27 April, I watched a Snowy Plover doing a "broken-wing" distraction display in front of my vehicle on the road. Near dusk on 28 April, Robin Kulakow, Bill, David, and Leah Julian, and I found a first nest with three eggs. The nest was being incubated by a male plover at the edge of the gravel road.

Two additional nests were found on 29 April, but one of these and the nest found on 28 April had been preyed upon (Craig Stowers and other Department of Fish and Game personnel, pers. comm.). All three nests were located at the edge of the gravel road north of Parking Lot C. The surviving nest had three eggs, and 4-inch by 4-inch boards were placed near the nest to divert traffic to the other side of the road.

From mid-April to the end of May, the YBWA was open to the public and many observers saw the male and female plovers incubating the eggs and performing distraction displays along the road. On 29 May, two newly-hatched juveniles were observed near the female sitting on the remaining egg; on 30 May, the nest was empty (Craig Stowers, pers. comm.). A few days later the refuge was again closed due to flooding in the Bypass by unusually late El Niño rains.



Figure 1. Snowy Plover at the Yolo Bypass Wetlands, Yolo County, California, 1 May 1998. *Photo by Ed Greaves*

STATUS OF THE SNOWY PLOVER IN THE CENTRAL VALLEY

In the southern Sacramento Valley, the Snowy Plover is considered a rare species that passes through the area from April to mid-September (Sacramento Audubon Society 1987, Beedy 1993). A single Snowy Plover observed 6 mi. NW of Colusa, Colusa County, on 25 January 1995, was the first winter record in the Central Valley north of Los Banos (Yee et al. 1995). There are three previous nesting records for the Sacramento Valley: An adult with two flightless young at the Davis Sewage Ponds, Yolo County, 28 July 1963 (DeBenedictis and Chase 1963; Sacramento Audubon Society observations files, fide T. Manolis); adults with young near the Woodland Sugar Ponds, Yolo County, 16 May 1970 (Baldrige, Chandik and DeSante 1970; T. Manolis pers. comm.); and a nest collected near Riego, Sutter County, in 1913 (incorrectly reported as near "Reigo [sic], Butte County" in Page and Stenzel 1981).

The Sacramento Valley may never have been an important nesting area for Snowy Plovers due to the lack of suitable nesting habitat (e. g., the edges of alkaline lakes). Because of the limited number of nesting records from the Sacramento Valley, it was not included in a statewide, breeding-season survey in 1978 (Page and Stenzel 1981).

Nesting was probably more frequent in the San Joaquin Valley. Historical nesting records include observations near Los Banos, Merced County, east of Firebaugh, Madera County, Tulare Lake, Kings County, and Buena Vista

Lake, Kern County. Significant numbers may have nested at Buena Vista Lake (Page and Stenzel 1981). The only Snowy Plovers found nesting in the San Joaquin Valley during the 1978 statewide survey was a pair at Goose Lake, Kings County (Page and Stenzel 1981). The decline in the abundance of this species in the San Joaquin Valley is largely due to draining the large interior lake basins and subsequent agricultural development (Page and Stenzel 1981).

More recently, Ivey (1984) discovered that Snowy Plovers will colonize and breed on the dikes and levees around compensation ponds developed in the southern San Joaquin Valley to combat soil salinity problems. In June 1981, two pairs of Snowy Plovers with broods were observed near these ponds at Kesterson National Wildlife Refuge, Merced County. In 1982, as many as 60 pairs may have nested on newly constructed compensation ponds, approximately 30 miles south of Corcoran, Kings County (Ivey 1984). Subsequent nesting on these ponds in the San Joaquin Valley has been reported (see Shuford et al. 1995).

Snowy Plovers are present year-round in the San Joaquin Valley (Page et al. 1995, Shuford et al. 1995). However, populations are smaller in the winter than in the breeding seasons (Shuford et al. 1995), and observations of banded birds indicate that some San Joaquin Valley birds move to the California coast for the winter (Page et al. 1995).

DISCUSSION

Populations of Snowy Plovers along the Pacific Coast are listed as Threatened by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the California Department of Fish and Game considers it a Species of Special Concern. In the Central Valley, the Snowy Plover is a rare and localized breeding species, but it is not given formal protection under endangered species legislation by either agency.

By using newly constructed compensation ponds in the San Joaquin Valley and habitats at the YBWA, Snowy Plovers have demonstrated an ability to quickly colonize and successfully breed at new locations when suitable habitat is present. It would be premature to predict whether it will become a regular breeding species at the YBWA. The refuge is new and wetland management protocols designed to promote wintering waterfowl were interrupted in 1997-98 by the El Niño rains. It is unknown whether these protocols will also be beneficial to Snowy Plover, but it is possible to create wetlands that will be used by these rare birds.

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