

Snowy Plovers: Let It Snow
by Taylor Bennett

Since the beginning of August, Gulf Coast Bird Observatory has been monitoring non-breeding shorebirds. GCBO's intern, Sarah Belles, and I survey along Matagorda Beach, Bryan Beach, Quintana Beach, Surfside, and Follet's Island. We monitor for threatened, endangered, and species of high concern. Our main target species are the Piping Plover, Red Knot, Black Skimmer, American Oystercatcher, and Snowy Plover. Snow is uncommon here, but we can always look forward to seeing Snowy Plovers!

Snowy Plovers are small shorebirds that feed and roost along sandy beaches. Snowy Plovers can be found year-round in Texas, but we only see them in the fall and winter at our survey sites. We have yet to have any nesting pairs and we mainly have Wilson's Plover nest during the breeding season.

Snowy Plovers have both breeding and wintering plumage, but we mainly only see them in their winter plumage. They are pale gray-brown with white underparts which makes them blend in perfectly with their sandy beach habitat. Snowy Plovers and Piping Plovers look similar in their winter plumage, so they are somewhat difficult to distinguish in the field, but there are a few key differences between the two.

Snowy Plovers are slightly smaller than Piping Plovers and are often rounder and fluffier. The biggest difference between them is their legs. While Snowy Plovers have gray legs, Piping Plovers have orange. Both plovers have black bills during the winter, but the Snowy Plover's bill is thinner and stays black year-round while the Piping Plover's bill is thicker turns partially orange during breeding season.

Piping Plovers tend to have a plain face without markings while the Snowy Plover have a slightly dark eyeline. During the breeding season, Snowy Plovers will sport a black patch beneath its eyes, a thin black collar, and dark band across their forehead, making it seem they have a unibrow. Snowy Plovers also has different calls than Piping Plovers. Snowy Plovers make more of a *kwip* sound, while the Piping Plovers have a distinguished *peep-lo*.

Snowy Plovers mainly feed on insects such as beetles and flies. They feed on the shore or in mud flats and are often observed feeding in wrack or debris that is washed up on the shore. Their thin bill acts as tweezers making it incredibly easy to snatch up bugs. They also feed on marine worms, small clams, mole crabs, and amphipods or sand fleas. Unlike Sanderlings, which feed in flocks, Snowy Plovers tend to be solitary feeders, though they are often seen feeding alongside Sanderlings and Piping Plovers. Their different bill sizes allow them to feed on different things, so there is plenty of food for everyone.

Snowy Plovers and Piping Plovers blend in with the sand in order to hide from predators. But this also makes them incredibly vulnerable to people, vehicles, and dogs. Snowy Plovers often roost in groups with other shorebirds in open sandy areas, but one of their favorite spots to roost are within tire ruts. Please look before you drive or walk along the beach and also keep your

dogs on a leash. On behalf of Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, thank you for reading and we hope you had a safe and happy holiday.

Photo caption: Snowy Plover roosting amongst a flock of Semipalmated Plovers at Colorado River Mouth Flats along Matagorda Beach, TX. Photo by Taylor Bennett.