



NEWS RELEASE

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Santa Barbara Zoo, UCSB, and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Will Release 9 Western Snowy Plovers As Part of Collaborative Rehabilitation Program

(September 17, 2021) Santa Barbara, CA – On Monday, September 20, nine Western snowy plovers will be released into the wild at Coal Oil Point Reserve, as part of a collaborative Snowy Plover Rehabilitation Program; a partnership between the [Santa Barbara Zoo](#), [UC Santa Barbara](#) and [U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service](#), along with many other state and non-governmental organizations.

A true collaborative rehabilitation effort, the Zoo works closely with UCSB biologists, local conservation experts, and docents who monitor the snowy plovers and their nests at Coal Oil Point Reserve. When a nest is found, it is GPS marked and the team counts the number of eggs in the nest and monitors any nests that appear to be abandoned, looking for predator tracks. If a nest seems to be abandoned and there are still viable eggs, the team has special federal permits to gather the eggs and deliver them to the Santa Barbara Zoo to be incubated, reared, and eventually released back into the wild.

“UCSB is thrilled to be working with the Santa Barbara Zoo and the USFWS to recover the Western Snowy Plovers,” shared Cristina Sandoval, Reserve Director, Coal Oil Point Reserve Nature Center. “Each agency brings unique expertise to save the plovers, with research, education, rehabilitation, management, and policies all being part of a comprehensive strategy. The recovery of the Snowy Plover is a success story, thanks to these collaborations.”

“Conservation is driven and powered by people, and our mission to recover rare wildlife is best achieved in partnership with our local communities,” said David Sherer, wildlife biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Ventura. “Western snowy plovers act as an umbrella species for dune and beach habitats, and for all species that rely on coastal habitats to survive. By helping plovers, you’re helping an entire ecosystem. We’re grateful for the Santa Barbara Zoo’s work to rear and release these birds to give them the best chance of survival in the wild.”

Western snowy plovers are federally threatened under the Endangered Species Act, a mobilizer to help bring imperiled species back from the brink of extinction and promote their recovery. New data suggest an upward trend in the western snowy plover population in recent years, with 737 birds documented in San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, and Ventura Counties during the 2021 nesting season, which makes up about 30 percent of the rangewide population.

The Snowy Plover Rehabilitation Program began in 2016, when the Zoo was approached by the Monterey Bay Aquarium, to participate in the rehabilitation of Western snowy plovers. The aquarium had been running a rehabilitation program for over 10 years at the time, often receiving eggs and chicks from the Central Coast, and were seeking a local organization to oversee. With the expertise and equipment, the Zoo's Bird Curator at the time, Rachel Ritchason (now the Zoo's Director of Animal Care) received support to implement the program locally in Santa Barbara. Ritchason, along with Dr. Julie Barnes, the Zoo's Vice President of Animal Care & Health, and a handful of bird keepers trained at the aquarium learning what it took to raise the chicks. Though Ritchason had hand-reared bald eagles for release and had bred many species of birds, she had not yet worked with shorebirds. The expertise on the team contributed to the future success of the program.

After participating in training with the aquarium team, and obtaining the program permits, Ritchason and her team got the program up and running in 2016. In the first year, they retrieved only a few eggs and released two chicks. To date, they and their partners have released 72 birds in 5 years (no birds were rehabilitated in 2020 due to COVID) with eggs from as far south as Malibu and as far north as Vandenberg.

As the program continues to grow, the Zoo has invested in new equipment to increase its capacity to rehabilitate. In 2019, they invested in a new incubation room and flight pen which has helped them rehabilitate more chicks than ever this year -- at the halfway point in the season, they have nearly as many chicks as they released in the entire 2019 season.

To support the Santa Barbara Zoo, and its continued conservation efforts, including the Snowy Plover Rehabilitation Program, click here: www.sbzoo.org/support

About the Western Snowy Plover

The Western snowy plover is a shorebird that inhabits beaches and lakeshores. The Pacific Coast population of the Western snowy plover was listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act in 1993 because of declining populations mainly due to loss of habitat. The stretch of beach between Isla Vista and Ellwood (including Sands Beach) was designated Critical Habitat in December of 1999; at the time of the critical habitat designation, the population in the entire Pacific Coast of the United States was estimated at less than 1500 individuals. During the breeding season, March through September, plovers can be seen nesting along the shores, peninsulas, offshore islands, bays, estuaries, and rivers of the United States' Pacific Coast. Plover nests usually contain three tiny eggs, which are camouflaged to look like sand and barely visible to even the most well-trained eye. **How the public can help:**

There are easy steps we can all take to be good neighbors for plovers and other beach nesting birds. Keeping dogs on leashes, respecting the boundaries of nesting areas, and picking up after ourselves (to avoid leaving tasty treats that might attract predators) are all simple ways that we can better share the shore with Western snowy plovers and other wildlife.

About the Santa Barbara Zoo

The Santa Barbara Zoo is open daily from 9 a.m. for members and 9:30 a.m. for general admission until 5 p.m. (seasonal extended hours on select days); general admission is \$19.95 for adults, \$14.95 for children 2-12, and free for children under 2. Parking is \$11. The Santa Barbara Zoo is accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA). AZA zoos are dedicated to providing excellent care for animals, a great visitor experience, and a better future for all living things. With its more than 200 accredited members, AZA is a leader in global wildlife conservation and is the public's link to helping animals in their native habitats. Visit www.sbzoo.org.

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