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Nature lovers hope for a big year

By: [Brent Begin](#)
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Armed with binoculars and bundled up tight, dozens of nature enthusiasts and their equally enthusiastic children officially kicked off a yearlong effort Saturday to find 36 endangered species in San Francisco's federal parks.

The contest is called the Golden Gate National Parks Big Year Checklist, and it carries a \$1,000 cash prize for whoever spots the most of the 36 endangered species found within Golden Gate National Parks by the end of the year.

Two Bay Area residents, Steve Price and Liam O'Brien, shared the prize for 2009, the first year the contest was held, sending naturalists in search of as many endangered species that live in the Golden Gate National Park area as they could find.

O'Brien is a lepidopterist. He studies moths and butterflies for a living, but he also has a knack at spotting other species as well. In 2009, he and Price both found 28 species.

"I'm not going to give up my whole strategy," O'Brien said. "I will say that you need to have a passion. You need to attend all the events because there's such a randomness to it. It also helps to do your research."

The group went to the beach by Crissy Field on Saturday in hopes of glimpsing the Western Snowy Plover. The little bird rests in the shadow of the Golden Gate Bridge in the winter, but on this overcast, winter day, there was little luck in spotting the species.

Brent Plater, the founder of the San Francisco-based Wild Equity Institute, who also started the Big Year contest, said dogs often pester the plovers as they rest.

"Dogs are just more effective at spotting them than we are," said Plater, who has been fighting to



Brent Plater scans the beach near Crissy Field for Western Snowy Plovers. The endangered bird rests along the coastline in the winter.


protect the habitat. "They're faster; they have better eyes; they can smell them."

Efforts by a local organization, the Crissy Field Dog Group, resulted in a fence being pushed 130 feet to the west as of last week, allowing dogs to run leash free on a larger stretch of the beach. The Wildlife Protection Area beyond the fence is off limits to humans and dogs, but the sand is dotted with paw prints nonetheless.

Last year was, in fact, a big year, as a species of plant thought to be extinct in the wild, the Franciscan Manzanita, was spotted near Doyle Drive, said Michael Chasse, a graduate student at Saturday's event who is researching the rare plant.

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