

Snowy plover struggles to live in harsh, windy conditions

by Ryder W. Miller

Standing out in the cold at Ocean Beach, the Western Snowy Plover struggles each year through winter winds, even this year when the winds have been milder than in years past.

Oil spills, which can result in oil on their feathers, have made their winters harder in years past.

The endangered Western Snowy Plover spends the winter and parts of the fall and spring at Ocean Beach, not as stocially as some of the sea gulls facing the winter winds. The plovers seek rocks and flotsam to hide behind as revealed in a Wild Equity Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA) Big Year field trip held Feb. 25.

The GGNRA Big Year gives naturalists an opportunity to observe and protect endangered species that can be found in the national recreation area.

Brent Plater, SF State Environmental Studies lecturer and Big Year organizer, points out that there are more endangered species in the GGNRA than in any other national park in the country.

Participants on Feb. 25, a day which felt like the first day of winter this year, said they liked seeing interesting critters.

In the areas between the Taraval and Noriega street entrances to Ocean Beach, one can observe the Western Snowy Plover hiding from the elements behind debris on the beach. One may need binoculars to see them and a field guide picture so as not to confuse them with Sanderlings, which are larger in size and number and more active in the surf.

Plater said that more interpretive information should be available, some of

which could be signage on the boardwalk between Taraval and Noriega streets. From that vantage point one can see the plovers hiding from the wind.

Recent field work and experimentation has determined that the American population of the Western Snowy Plover (*Charadrius nivosus*), which can be found at Ocean Beach, is a different subspecies from the European population (*Charadrius alexandrinus*).

This year for the annual Audubon Society San Francisco Christmas Bird Count, 29 Western Snowy Plovers were observed in the City, but only 24 at Ocean Beach. More research by the Audubon Society is under way.

Plater said that public input would be helpful.

"There are two opportunities coming up for people to protect the snowy plover. First, the Ocean Beach Master Plan has been released, and comments can be made on the plan. Second, a supplemental EIS is being released on pet management at the GGNRA, including Ocean Beach," Plater said. "In both cases folks can request that Ocean Beach management reduce disturbances to Snowy Plovers, particularly from off-leash dogs, by ensuring people keep their dogs on a leash there, and encourage snowy plovers to start nesting in the GGNRA."

As of May 15, dog walkers will not need to keep their dogs on leash, but by July leash restrictions will resume to protect the plover's habitat.

For more information about the GGNRA's Big Year, go to the website at <http://wildequity.org/sections/2>. For more information about the snowy plover, go to www.westernsnowyplover.org.