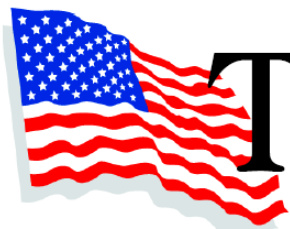


— SATURDAY, AUGUST 6, 2011 —



The Daily Press

Real people. Real news.

ashlandwi.com \$1.00

KEEP YOUR EYE ON THE BIRDIE



FOND FAREWELL — Marissa Burkman, 12, of Washburn, released a piping plover chick Friday morning on Long Island. (Sara Nemeec/Staff Photo)

In search of Wisconsin's rarest bird

By SARA NEMEC
Staff Writer

LONG ISLAND — When the park service employees said it looks like a puff ball on legs, they weren't joking. Scurrying along the sand in hot pursuit of its parents was our prize Friday morning: The 10th piping plover chick of the season. This rare sand-colored youngster was on the move and quick, though it took the team of

nine men, women and children mere minutes moving awkwardly to surround and capture it. It did its best to elude our grasp, darting this way and that to avoid our expectant hands. But its unwillingness to enter the surf became its undoing.

As we were admiring our catch, oohing and aahing over its fluffy federally endangered cuteness, it

See PLOVER Page 9



RARE BIRD — This was the 10th chick banded this summer on the island, making this year one of the most successful to date. (Sara Nemeo/Staff Photo)

PLOVER: Endangered bird

Continued from Page 1

made an escape, leaping from a pair of gentle hands back to sands of Long Island. As it was leaving us in its dust, a truly dedicated and limber male park service employee took a dive, sliding across the sand and scooping up the escapee. The second more frantic wrangling of the baby bird seemed more fitting to me than the way we had quietly encircled it in the previous attempt. The species was in a desperate situation, after all.

Other than being an endangered bird and extremely adorable, the chick we caught was unique. The other nine piping plover chicks had been caught and banded earlier in July and no one had expected more to hatch, making this year one of the most successful years for the plovers to date. This one was a late bloomer, so to speak, at 11 days old in the first week of August. However, Sumner Matteson, Bureau of Endangered Resources avian ecologist, expected the chick would survive to migrate with its parents to winter in the Gulf Coast.

The piping plover is a small, sandy-colored, beach dwelling bird that dines on insects and sports a yellow-orange bill. Adults have yellow-orange legs, a black band across their foreheads that stretches from eye to eye, and a single black ring around their necks. They run in short starts and stops and their characteristic call is "peep-lo," according to the National Park Service.

Piping plovers are an endangered species in Wisconsin and the beaches of the Apostle Islands are the only places in the state where the birds have successfully reared young in recent years. This year, six pairs of adults nested on Long Island.

Piping plovers return to their breeding grounds in April and May, making nests of shallow scrapes of sand, lined with pebbles and driftwood. They lay four eggs, which hatch after about 28 days. Young birds fledge, or are able to fly, at about one month of age. Until then, they stay motionless when intruders are near, trying their best to blend into the sand. The parents often feign a broken wing in an attempt to draw a predator's attention away from their chicks.

Matteson, who first discovered the island population of piping plovers in 1974, drove up from Madison just to band the last chick in a show of how important the baby bird really was.

The shorebird is one of his favorites, he said because they are so vulnerable and act as an indicator of the health of an ecosystem. But beyond that, Matteson said he feels people should bear the burden of restoring the piping plover populations which have been decimated in part by human development.

"Piping plovers are part of our natural heritage and we have an obligation to pass on as much of that to generations that follow," he said. "In whatever way we can restore natural resource



PRECIOUS CARGO — Ben Brandle, 10, held an endangered piping plover chick Friday morning on Long Island. The chick was caught and banded to help identify it in the future. The Apostle Islands is the only area piping plovers have successfully raised young in Wisconsin in recent years. (Sara Nemeč/Staff Photo)

abundance and diversity, we should."

In that spirit, Matteson brought along his sons, Liam, 15, and Ben, 10, to see the birds. Park Service Biologist and GIS Specialist Peggy Burkman also brought her daughter, who released the chick after it had been weighed and banded.

"It felt like holding a Ping-Pong ball, only fuzzy," 12-year-old Marissa Burk-

man said of the 20 gram chick.

On the boat ride back to shore, all agreed that this season had been favorable for the plovers.

"The birds have a lot of battles to face, but to have 10 is an amazing year," Peggy Burkman said.

Sara Nemeč can be reached at snemeč@ashlanddailypress.net.