

Man-made dunes credited with successful Plover Breeding season

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GUADALUPE – While few snowy plover chicks survived in the Oceano Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area, Plovers experienced the most successful breeding season at Unocal's former Guadalupe Oil Field since monitoring began there eight years ago.

The March to September breeding season brought the most nests and the highest hatch rate, according to monitors who located a total of 62 snowy plover nests.

Of those nests, 35 hatched for a hatch rate of 58 percent. Twenty-five nests failed and two had unknown outcomes.

Researchers studying the threatened Western snowy plover say the results indicate efforts to create nesting habitat for the small bird are succeeding.

Man-made dunes were covered with rice plugs to stabilize the dunes from wind erosion. The primary purpose of the man-made dunes was to restore the site to topography similar to that of a more mature beach dune. But the restored dunes also benefited nesting snowy plovers.

Of the 60 nests within the normal survey area, 13 are located on the restored dunes. Ten of those nests hatched, monitors said. That 77 percent hatch rate is higher than for the survey area in general.

Researchers theorize that the combination of greater cover, reduced wind and improved visibility combined to improve the nesting success of birds choosing to place their eggs there.

"We are thrilled that our efforts to restore their breeding environment has proved to be such a success," said Gonzalo Garcia, Unocal project manager. "It appears the snowy plovers have adjusted well to the restoration of the beach."

Monitors approved by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service survey a one-mile stretch of dunes north of the Santa Maria River. When plovers are located, their numbers, age, sex and location are recorded. The nests are checked regularly to determine whether the nest hatched successfully, and if not, an attempt is made to determine the cause of nest failure.

The scientific name for the Western snowy plover is *Charadrius alexandrinus nivosus*. The small bird is a federally threatened species and California species of special concern.

The plover is a small, compact bird, colored a pale tan-gray with a white breast and belly. The plover breeds at more than 28 sites on the Pacific Coast of the United States. The most common breeding sites are along coastal lagoons and beaches.