

And then there was one...

Piping plovers, the sequel. Yes, our favorite plover, the banded female, Bahama Mama was back. But this spring she choose to bypass Wood Neck beach and instead opted to go straight to a spot just East of the Trunk River, pretty close to where she had her nest last year. The canonical number of four eggs followed soon, three of which hatched successfully. And in another repeat of last year's procedure, the whole family, all five of them, on day two walked the half mile to the private beach of the Moors Association. By now everybody involved knew the routine and Falmouth's DPW erected the necessary barricade along Surf Drive. That kept the baby birds off the road, and as a bonus alerted passersby that something was going on.

During a serious storm one of the chicks was lost. Did it end up in the waves, or (my theory) got too wet and too cold and died of hypothermia? But its remaining siblings kept eating and eating and growing and growing, eventually fledged and, sometime around the fourth of July flew off for destinations unknown. And Bahama Mama? Her opinion of motherhood had not improved since last year, and she had taken off somewhere between hatching and fledging of her offspring. But the male had done a splendid job defending his territory from intruders. That included another piping plover, presumably a male already on his way south, who tried to make a pit stop. Our guy puffed himself up to twice his normal size and went on the attack. And hard to believe, sea gulls – at least 10 times his size – got the same treatment.

In the meantime a new pair had arrived on our Wood Neck Beach. Those Audubon people must know something, because they had set up a security fence (orange plastic wire) ahead of time and the birds obliged by scooping out a comfortable nest dead center within the enclosure. Soon enough four eggs appeared and all hatched on June 25. That was the good news. The bad news was the timing: by then the beach season was getting up to speed, more and more people were visiting. One of the endearing characteristics of piping plovers is that their chicks get out of the egg, look around, and walk away looking for food. Yes, the parents watch over their babies, but they don't feed them! Their food sources are the little insects in the wrack line and things they dig up from the mud flats when the tide allows that. That means that the chicks typically travel at right angles to the people traffic. We lost two to bad weather, but on July 4, when the chicks were 10 days old, disaster struck: one was simply trampled. The remaining chick is doing well. Actually, this one looks like a rambunctious little guy or girl. We can only hope that he/she fledges early (due date: July 21) and gets out of here.

To have an adequate understanding of the plovers' problems and an appreciation of what is being done to help them out, we need a few basic plover facts. Wood Neck beach is an ideal nesting site: a perfect mixture of sand, gravel and small rocks that allows a nesting bird completely to blend in. I'm using the term "nesting" loosely here: the "nest" consists of a shallow scrape. Once the pair has settled, four eggs are laid that are incubated by both adults for 28 days. All four chicks hatch within hours of each other, and immediately start scurrying

around all over the place, looking for food. After another 27-28 days they fledge, and a few days later they're gone altogether. So what can, and does go wrong?

During the incubation period the symbolic fencing with the yellow triangular signs that are set up by Mass Audubon are perfectly adequate. The only dangers then are predators of the wild and domestic variety. Dogs especially are a problem as they scare the adults into abandoning the nest. The town ordinance about "no dogs on Falmouth beaches between May 1 and October 1" gets – unfortunately and sometimes fatally – widely ignored. Enforcing the dog ordinance would be a great help.

After hatching life gets more complicated as the chicks run all over the place. The Trunk River family moved half a mile and never returned to the original nest site. On Wood Neck beach they use the original site for resting and grooming, and return there when they perceive danger. That makes life for the far-too-few volunteers (led by Mass Audubon's Grace Veres – a truly wonderful lady) who patrol the beach somewhat easier. But the problem of a few (and by now only one chick and one adult) very small and perfectly camouflaged birds running around between the feet of sometimes hundreds of people is downright scary. Volunteers point the birds out to people when necessary, but they're there only a certain number of hours. And the reactions are not always what you would hope for. About 20% of the beachgoers are interested and want to know more, 75% couldn't care less. That leaves a disturbing 5% who are downright hostile.

The Town of Falmouth has contracted with Mass Audubon to "protect habitat, monitor nesting, and provide management recommendations to optimize the birds' success," according to Kathy Parsons, Director of the Coastal Waterbird Program. They make the decision what gets closed off, install and maintain the fences and report to State and Federal authorities. Other important players in this annual drama are the lifeguards. I had an interesting conversation with the head lifeguard, Patrick Buell. We talked about the problems of mixing people and threatened birds and the fourth of July incident, after which his crew increased their interaction with the public when it came to pointing out that, yes, the birds are here and underfoot. I particularly liked his parting statement: we'll protect them till they're so numerous that we don't need a fence anymore. That will not be for tomorrow, but I'm certainly with him on this one!