



## MOUNTAIN PLOVER ON THE THUNDER BASIN NATIONAL GRASSLAND

By Tim Byer

(The following are outline notes from Mr. Byer's presentation.)

### *Mountain Plover (Charadrius montanus) Use on Thunder Basin*

- Birds arrive in early to mid April.
- Eggs are laid in early May.
- Eggs hatch in early June.
- Birds usually are migrating south by the end of August.

### *Habitat Components, Major Requirements*

- Flat ground – generally less than 12% slope.
- Low, sparse vegetation (less than 4 inches).
- 30 percent or more bare ground.
- Presence of a reliable insect supply.
- Often found in areas of intensive grazing.

### *Feeding Requirements*

Primary foods include ants, grasshoppers, beetles, crickets, and spiders. Plovers do not need free water because they obtain enough water from foods. The best foraging areas include black-tailed prairie dog (*Cynomys ludovicianus*) colonies and areas of high concentrations of livestock manure.

### *Nesting conditions*

- Nest sites are generally away from concentrations of vegetation.
- Male builds the nest.
- Several scrapes within his territory.
- Displays at each.
- Female generally lays a clutch of two to three eggs.
- She may lay two clutches if conditions are right.
- Material may be added to the nest after eggs are laid.

### *Commonly Occupied Habitat*

Prairie dog colonies provide the majority of the occupied habitat on Thunder Basin. The prairie dog modifies its habitat in ways that accommodate the mountain plover needs. Their activities provide bare ground, low vegetation, and higher levels of insects than surrounding areas. Prairie dogs provide an early warning system from danger. Colonies are generally found on flat ground and normally away from water.

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### *Plague*

In 2000-2001, plague infected the prairie dog colonies and it continues today. More than half of the prairie dog colonies supporting mountain plover have been affected. In some cases, mountain plover no longer use the impacted towns. The good news is mountain plover have continued to use many of the impacted towns. Plover focus on low vegetation and bare ground, not the prairie dog.

Re-colonization by prairie dogs means much of the mountain plover habitat has lasted long enough for prairie dogs to begin re-establishing their colonies. With the re-establishment of the colonies comes a revival of the mountain plover habitat.

### *Playa Habitat*

These areas often provide all of the right habitat conditions at the right time of year, but playas are not the most reliable habitat.

Other areas can also provide short-term nesting habitat, such as areas of high intensity grazing, oil and gas well pads, roads, recently cultivated areas, and recently burned areas.

### *Management Possibilities*

- Periodic burning, if timed correctly.
- Prairie dog colony development in desired areas.
- Reclamation with short-grass prairie species.
- Localized intensive grazing, if timed correctly.

### *Forest Service Sensitive Species*

- The mountain plover is now considered a sensitive species.
- The Forest Service still has a management commitment to protect and enhance the species and its habitat.
- As we improve our management of the plover's habitat, we move further away from the concerns that lead toward its proposal for "listing."

