

Snowy Plovers Nesting on the Mainland in Mississippi

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During May and June 1977, I observed Snowy Plovers (Charadrius alexandrinus) in the protected Least Tern (Sterna albifrons) nesting area on the beach in Mississippi City, Mississippi. On 16 May 1978, I again found Snowy Plovers in the same area. While marking Least Tern nests on 30 May 1978, I discovered a Snowy Plover nest with 3 eggs on an elevated sand "island" planted with beach grasses (Panicum amarulum and Cortaderia selloana). The nest (Fig. 1) was a depression in the sand, lined with small bits of shell, and situated amid the P. amarulum. The plover nest was much more sheltered by vegetation than were any of the Least Tern nests. I had observed a Snowy Plover near this hummock on several occasions (Fig. 2), and on 31 May, between 19:30 and 19:45, I watched a Snowy Plover skitter around the island several times, approach the nest, then run off quickly -- at least 3 times -- before it finally entered the edge of the tall grass and sat on the eggs.



Figure 1. Snowy Plover nest and eggs at Mississippi City, Mississippi.

The eggs measured as follows: (1) 32.3 x 23.3 mm, 8.3 g; (2) 32.4 x 22.8 mm, 8.0 g; (3) 33.7 x 22.8 mm, 8.3 g. On 5 June 1978, at 17:00, egg 3 had hatched and the chick was near the nest. Eggs 1 and 2 were pipped. The chick was still slightly wet and weighed 6.5 g. That day I watched 2 adult Snowy Plovers that were in the area of the nest; one was slightly darker in color than the other. The following day the nest was empty. I saw adult Snowy Plovers in the same general area until 5 August. At times I observed them giving a distraction display with tail spread and wings beating the sand. However, I was never certain that I saw any Snowy Plover chick after 5 June.

Snowy Plovers have been recorded nesting on Horn Island, a barrier island in the Mississippi Sound (Bent 1929), but I know of no other nest records for the Mississippi mainland. In Alabama the Snowy Plover has been recorded nesting on the deserted sand islands along the Gulf coast and rarely near settled areas (Imhof 1976). These plovers are also known to nest on the Texas coast and in northwest Florida, but not on the Louisiana coast (Lowery 1974).



Figure 2. An adult Snowy Plover near its nest at Mississippi City.

Snowy Plovers have been observed nesting with Least Terns on Mellum Island in the North Sea (Goethe 1940), in Orange County, California (Massey 1974), and on the salt plains in north-central Oklahoma and south-central Kansas (Hardy 1957). The Snowy Plover is currently on the Blue List (Arbib 1977), and Lowery (1974) considered it a "top candidate" for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service list of endangered species. It appears that this rare little shorebird has taken advantage of the refuge from human disturbance set aside for the more apparent Least Tern. It thereby provides added reason to maintain the protected areas.

I thank Wayne Weber and Virginia and Roy Ollivier who observed the birds and nest with me on 31 May and 5 June, respectively. Dr. Sidney McDaniel of Mississippi State University identified the beach grasses for me.

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