

NEW BREEDING LOCALITIES FOR THE SNOWY PLOVER IN WESTERN MEXICO

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The breeding status of the Snowy Plover (*Charadrius alexandrinus*) along the western coast of Mexico is only partially known. On the western coast of the peninsula of Baja California it was documented thoroughly by Palacios et al. (1994). Along the Gulf of California coast of the peninsula there are only two known or suggested locations (Page et al., 1995), and few places seem to be suitable. The continental Pacific coast of Mexico has salt flats associated with coastal lagoons, which could provide breeding habitat for this species. However, the plover's breeding distribution here has not been completely assessed, and the only known breeding locations are the delta of the Colorado River (Mellink et al. 1996), Playa Ceuta, Sinaloa (X. Vega pers. comm.), and Oaxaca (Binford 1989). It has been thought that other breeding locations along the western coast are likely (Binford 1989, Howell and Webb 1995). While searching for Gull-billed Tern (*Sterna nilotica*) colonies along the western coast of México in 2003 and 2004, we noticed evidence of Snowy Plover breeding at three previously unknown locations, which we report here (Figure 1). After encountering a Snowy Plover, we surveyed the area using binoculars and spotting scope. At each of these sites, we spent between 2 and 5 hours. Our data represent basically breeding records, but numbers of breeding pairs in each area cannot be estimated.

Laguna Pericos, Marismas Nacionales, Nayarit. This lagoon was created when sea water was drawn through the Pericos Channel to enhance production of shrimp in the area. At its eastern edge (22° 26' N, 105° 34' 55" W), near a small, active salt works, there are several small salt flats of a few hundred square meters each, intermixed with patches with herbaceous halophytic vegetation and some scattered shrubs. At one of these we found two chicks and one adult male engaged in distraction behavior on 10 May 2004. At another such saltflat there were two other pairs of adult Snowy Plovers, but we could not locate their eggs or chicks. The northern part of Marismas Nacionales seems to have at least hundreds of hectares of saltflats, part of which may be suitable for the breeding of Snowy Plovers. However, inventorying the total population in this area might be difficult, as access is hindered by mud and waterways.

Laguna Cuyutlán, Colima. Laguna Cuyutlán is the only large complex of wetlands along roughly 1150 km of Mexico's Pacific coast between Marismas Nacionales, Nayarit, and the center of the state of Guerrero (Mellink and de la Riva 2005). It has extensive salt flats on its northern and northeastern shores, covering hundreds of hectares. Much of these salt flats is occupied by centuries-old communal salt-extraction ponds ("salinas").

On 20 May 2003 we saw one Snowy Plover running on a salt flat adjacent to Salina San Buenaventura (19° 00' 57" N, 104° 10' 44" W) but could not locate any nest. On 11 May 2004 we found four pairs of Snowy Plovers in an area of 50 × 50 m of abandoned salt pans. We located the three-egg nest of one of them. The nest was on a little gravel mound, and the eggs were lying on a gravel lining. We also found a chick outside this 50 × 50 m plot. Least Terns (*Sterna antillarum*) were also nesting on this flat in both years. This saltflat, total area about 2 ha, is bordered by active salt

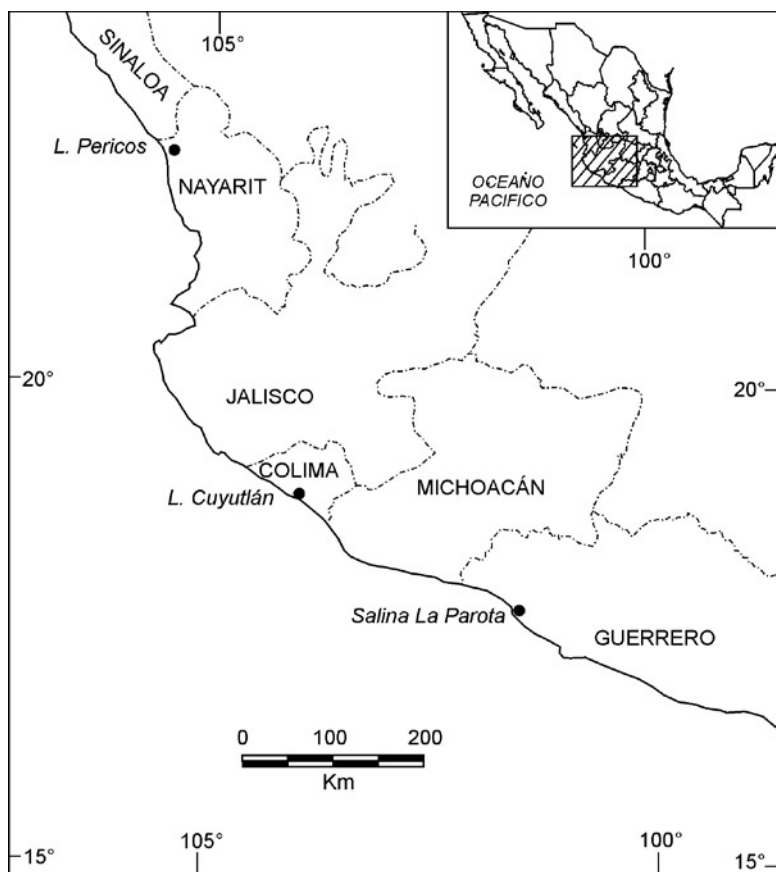


Figure 1. The southern Pacific coast of Mexico showing three previously unknown locations of breeding Snowy Plovers.

ponds on its eastern and northeastern side, open water and patches of emergent halophytes on its southern side, and a fringe of mangroves on its northern side. It is likely that Snowy Plovers nest on other salt flats of this lagoon.

Salina La Parota, Guerrero. This salt flat ($17^{\circ} 26' 24''$ N, $101^{\circ} 12' 31''$ W, apparently also known as “El Cuajo”), also used for the extraction of salt, covers several hectares and is surrounded by low tropical forest. On 23 May 2003 we saw two adults with a chick. When approached the parents engaged in strong distractive behavior. Three other adults ran in pursuit of each other, one of them performing distractive behavior.

It is very likely that Snowy Plovers nest at locations in western México additional to those found by us or previously reported. Extensive surveying of mud and salt flats, which can be derived from cartography to a certain degree, should be the best approach to obtain a complete inventory of sites. However, time and budget issues

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might prevent such an approach. Alternatively, focusing on the sites of salt-extraction operations, especially the major salinas, might offer a low-budget approach. These sites can be obtained from the literature (Ewald 1985), the association of salt producers, or asking locally at coastal lagoons and estuaries.

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