

# Pulling for plovers: Group heaves weeds from sandy habitat of endangered bird

Volunteers remove invasive sweet clover by hand from Riverton Sandy Bar on Lake Winnipeg



Bird Studies Canada biologist Christian Artuso hauls a big hunk of sweet clover and weeds from the shore side at Riverton Sandy Bar on Lake Winnipeg. (Joanne Smith)

An uninvited visitor has made a stretch of Lake Winnipeg's shoreline undesirable for birds, prompting a group of volunteers to take matters into their own hands — and gardening gloves.

More than a dozen people met Friday to pull invasive plants from the beaches of Riverton Sandy Bar, an Important Bird Area and peninsula located west of Hecla Island along the western shores of Lake Winnipeg.

Joanne Smith, the "eyes and ears for the birds" and so-called caretaker of

the Important Bird Area (IBA), said invasive plants such as sweet clover continue to sprout and spread along the sandy shores and need to be removed, as they occupy what would otherwise be piping plover habitat.



Two per cent of North America's common tern population can be found nesting in the Riverton Sandy Bar area every summer. (Bill Perks)

"I don't think weed pulling is a very exciting thing for most people," Smith said. "It is just like a carpet out there, but it's actually really easy to pull."

The stretch of beach and two sand islands in Riverton provide nesting habitat to one per cent of the world's ring-billed gull population and two per cent of North America's common tern population.



A pair of piping plovers nested in Manitoba again this summer - the first

known case in six years. (Christian Artuso/Bird Studies Canada)

The piping plover — a small, round, sparrow-sized shorebird that is endangered in Canada — used to hunker down and breed on beaches in the Riverton area every summer. But there hasn't been any record of the shorebird on the Riverton Sandy Bar since 2004.

Shorebirds like the plover often set up shop and lay eggs out in the open on the beach. But if there is too much activity in the area — say, from boaters or people riding ATVs — the birds take to the wing and may decide against returning to the area for another summer.



The Riverton Sandy Bar area is designated as a special conservation area, as shorebirds use its shores to nest every summer. (Joanne Smith)

Paired with artificially high water levels maintained on Lake Winnipeg, human disturbance on the beach has led to erosion and destruction of shoreline habitat.

"During years when the lake level is low, ATVs can actually drive out onto the

sand bar. That's a big thing that [Manitoba Sustainable Development] and the IBA are concerned about," Smith said.

Disturbing the soil and sand has presented an opening for sweet clover to come in and colonize the beach, choking out open sandy surfaces that are ideal for certain shorebird species.

A 2001 plan laid out conservation goals for the area, stating "if project funding is limited, encroachment by woody vegetation should be considered the highest ranking threat to avian nesting habitat along the Sandy Bar."

That encroachment is what spurred the weed pull, which Smith hopes will become an annual tradition.

"It seemed like it was going to be quite an ordeal," Smith said. "We thought that even if it wasn't the best option, if it couldn't be totally removed, removal of as much of it as possible would be better than nothing."



Important Bird Area co-ordinator Tim Poole yanks out arms full of invasive vegetation.  
(Joanne Smith)



Volunteers stand over several big bags full to the brim with invasive plant species, such as sweet clover, that they pulled from the ground Friday. (Joanne Smith)

Smith has never laid eyes on a piping plover herself and said it's hard to say whether removing the weeds will lure the bird back to Sandy Bar.

Some are holding out hope it will be enough, as the first pair of piping plovers to breed in Manitoba in six years [was confirmed this past summer](#) in another, undisclosed location in the province.

"It's been a long time since they nested there," Smith said. "It can't hurt; it can only make the possibility greater if we make the habitat more inviting for the plover."



Fourteen volunteers pitched in at the event.

A previous version of this story wrongly stated that the last confirmed record of piping plovers at Riverton Sandy Bar was in 1991. In fact, Manitoba Sustainable Development confirms the endangered species was last seen in the area in 2004.