

Sharing our Shores is an Audubon program that helps elementary students learn how to protect threatened and endangered shore birds through science, conservation, and art. This innovative program focuses on the western snowy plover, a bird that is federally listed as “threatened,” and which roosts and nests in coastal sand dune habitats at beaches along the California coast.

Unfortunately, the plovers' habitat is shared by beach goers who are often unaware of the tiny birds who nest and forage amongst people and their dogs. While loosely-fenced off areas provide some protection to the birds, it is up to the beach goers to respect these boundaries. Education is key, and here is where young people can help.

Several Audubon chapters in California have adopted Sharing our Shores; with the help of San Diego Audubon, Buena Vista Audubon implemented this program in 2015 in partnership with North County San Diego elementary schools. The program combines a classroom lesson with a field trip to a local beach.

Students first receive in-class lessons on the biology and conservation of shorebirds, focusing on the western snowy plover. Then the students draw signs to alert the public to not disturb protected plover habitat. The winning signs are selected by BVAS volunteers and installed at South Ponto and South Cardiff Beaches, the sites of the field trips.

The next step is a beach field trip, which allows the students to see the snowy plovers and their habitat, and to engage in activities to learn more about these shorebirds. This includes observing plovers through binoculars, looking for plover food in kelp (plovers dine on invertebrates which live in piles of kelp), and learning about camouflage and other traits that plovers use to protect themselves against predators.

Sharing our Shores benefits both shorebirds and children in many ways:

- The colorful and creative signs that the students create help alert the public to avoid plover nesting and roosting sites, and, because they were created by children, are more likely to make an impression on beach-goers than governmental signs.
- It empowers children to become advocates to protect shorebirds. The children see their signs displayed at beaches and know that their artwork is performing an important function for threatened wildlife.
- Children have an opportunity to be outside and to interact with nature; studies have shown that being able to engage with nature is tied closely to healthy childhood development.