



# Populations and Politics of a Plover

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The Mountain Plover (*Charadrius montanus*) is a species that inhabits cold, xeric-shrub landscapes of the western United States where it breeds in low-density, scattered populations primarily in Colorado, New Mexico, and Wyoming. To the east of this landscape, the plover is found most predictably on prairie-dog (*Cynomys* spp.) towns within western prairies from northern Montana into Nuevo Leon and San Luis Potosi. These landscapes also historically supported large herds of bison (*Bison bison*). With near eradication of bison and decreased prairie-dog presence on the landscape, the eastern breeding range of this plover became fragmented and generally of poorer quality. Thus, in contrast to westerly xeric landscapes, the current population of plovers in prairie landscapes is now restricted to fragments within the Oklahoma panhandle, north through the southwestern corner of Kansas, most of eastern Colorado, the southwestern corner of Nebraska, and eastern Wyoming and Montana (Knopf and Wunder 2006).

First collected by John Kirk Townsend along the Sweetwater River of Wyoming in 1834 and subsequently named the Rocky Mountain Plover by John James Audubon, this species of relatively nondescript plumage received little conservation attention for 150 years. It was never described as historically abundant, and only scattered references to the species appeared in the literature—much like comments are lacking about any non-charismatic species on the western frontier of America in the 1800s. Despite occasional collections of a few birds or clutches of eggs, one specific comment about plover occurring in high densities was that of an early bison hunter from the early 1870s who had killed about 200 in an hour near Dodge City, Kansas (Sandoz 1954). Those likely were from flocks of migrating birds that then flew directly south to winter in South Texas. Today, we believe that most migrants move more to the south along the Front Range of Colorado then swing west across southern New Mexico and Arizona to California and then north into the Central Valley of California. Historical records of migrating plovers are almost nonexistent within the Great Basin (Knopf and Wunder 2006).

Forty years ago, Graul and Webster (1976) estimated a continental population of 214,200–319,220 breeding Mountain Plovers, with 20,820 in the “stronghold” of Weld Co., CO. Conservation concern for the species was first expressed when the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) raised questions about population declines from historic levels (Leachman and Osmundson 1990). Unpublished guesses as to the contemporary population of plovers at that time oscillated around 6,000–10,000 birds, much reduced from the his-