Despite the predictions of inclement weather, only part of Friday was rained out. We had luck before it got nasty, spotting such warblers as Black-and-white, Prothonotary, Black-throated Blue, and American Redstart, all life birds for me. Had I seen it, the Worm-eating Warbler Pete agitated with his pishing also would have been a lifer. I was thrilled to meet trip leaders Louise Zemaitis and Mark Garland, after seeing so much of their work in birding publications. They, like Pete, had an enthusiasm for wildlife that permeated our group as they explained about the habits of wood warblers and the beauty of dragonflies.

When the rain started, we retreated to a classroom by the lighthouse for a crash course on hawks and falcons. Thereafter, the weekend only improved. Saturday and Sunday were balmy. Although migrants were scarce at Higbee (Pete figured they were either inured to his pishing or had continued south after the rain ended), the tea-kettle song of the Carolina Wren was omnipresent. The idyllic meadows near the beach gave us a splendid view of a Merlin hunting dragonflies, then feasting on them, on an exposed, denuded tree branch. A drive north to Two Mile Landing produced a treasure trove of lifers for me, including one that Pete said Roger Tory Peterson saw for the first time there – the Tricolored Heron. Perhaps there was hope for my birding future! Just as productive was Jake's Landing, where Saltmarsh sharp-tailed and Seaside Sparrows responded to Pete's pishing. Saturday was rounded out by a warbler slide show presented by Louise at CMBO headquarters.

Our third and final day of birding was possibly the best. At South Cape May Meadows a Great Egret, untroubled by two dozen birders just a couple of yards down the dirt path it stood on, hungrily gobbled an eel. Shovelers, teal, a Lesser Yellowlegs and a Solitary Sandpiper made use of the marsh as a Carolina Wren sang from somewhere in the reeds. Down a ways a Palm Warbler, hopping on the limbs of a bush, exhibited its yellow vent for us. Pied-billed Grebes swam and dove in the water while a barely visible Sora sneaked through the vegetation. A fitting close to the trip was the sight of a Piping Plover, its sleepy eyelids slowly closing, sitting on the beach at Stone Harbor Point (a court battle had recently halted dumping on the bird's nesting grounds). ■

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DISPATCHES FROM THE BEACHFRONT

■ **CHRISTINA KISIEL**

On a pleasant May morning, I walked down the path to reach the nesting site we had designated Ocean City North, and my heart sank when I saw the wet, flooded sand that just yesterday had been dry and home to a nest containing four Piping Plover eggs. The new and full moons in May and June are usually pretty treacherous for plovers because they create higher than normal tides. When these tides are coupled with a storm, the results can be disastrous for the little birds, sweeping their eggs out of the simple, shallow depression in the sand that serves as their nest. Although the loss of any nest is heartbreaking, it is a frequent occurrence for many pairs on their first attempt of the season, and the birds will usually spend a few days regrouping and then try again. In this case, the pair of adults pulled themselves together and in a matter of days the female laid a second clutch.

A few weeks later I stared with dismay out my window as we were pounded by an extremely late nor'easter. Many people enjoy a spring storm, but for me they have lost their allure. Instead of cozying up with a loved one as the rain pounded outside, I wondered and worried how many nests would be lost. The second clutch often represents the birds' last try. If they don't succeed with this clutch, some will not have the energy to try for a third.

I was not working the next day, but could not resist a quick trip to the nesting site to see how the pair fared. As I walked towards the nest, my heart lightened as I saw that the high tide mark was well below the exclosed nest (exclosures are cages we place around nests to protect them from predators). But as I got closer, I realized something was wrong. One of the adults should have been on the nest but there wasn't one there. When I got close enough, I saw that not only were the birds missing, but the eggs were too! What happened? The tide had not come up high enough to wash them away, and the exclosure was intact, so no predators had gotten them. I thought back to the strong wind the night before – could the eggs have been buried? Excitedly, I opened the exclosure and carefully dug in the area where the nest had been. About four inches down I hit pay dirt – the eggs, all four intact and unbroken!

Generally, if a nest gets covered by a small amount of sand the adults will dig the eggs out, but four inches was much too deep for the birds (who only stand seven and a half inches tall) to have excavated by themselves. I knew that eggs could withstand being submerged in saltwater for short periods of time, but did not know what would happen if they were buried, because eggs need to "breathe." Maybe the sand was porous enough so that the embryos had not suffocated. I reasoned that if I rearranged the eggs into a makeshift nest, smoothed out the area, fixed the exclosure, found the

adults, and somehow convinced them to return to the area and start incubating, there might be some hope. With all these "ifs," it was starting to seem impossible. But there is one characteristic that unites all endangered species biologists, and that is hope.

With that in mind I recreated the nest, sealed up the exclosure, and went off in search of the adults. I found them about 200 feet away, behind a dune. They were milling around and seemed unaffected by my presence. This lack of concern was problematic because the birds were already acting like they no longer had a nest. Usually, when birds have a nest or chicks and an intruder enters their territory, they bombard it with alarm calls and broken wing displays, in which the adult pretends it is injured to distract a predator. But these two birds continued to forage among the dunes, barely giving me a glance. I wondered if their behavior was reversible? If they saw their nest again, would they revert back to parental roles? Or had they already "switched off" nesting behaviors?

I slowly walked behind the birds so that they would not fly away but walk towards their nest to avoid me. As we got closer to the exclosure, I held my breath – what would happen? The male (identified by his neck band) led the way and simply walked past the nest as though nothing were different. The female (also identified by her neck band) nonchalantly walked past, but then stopped and looked towards the nest. Suddenly her entire demeanor changed and she frantically ran towards the nest and began fussing with the eggs. Within a minute she had settled back on the eggs and commenced incubation. I was thrilled!

One thing a beach-nesting bird biologist quickly realizes is that the field season is a roller coaster ride; one second you are up, the next you are down. And a few days later, the roller coaster took a steep drop when this reconstructed nest was washed out by a high tide. The female had now laid eight eggs, expending an enormous amount of energy. It was getting late in the season, so we wondered whether the birds would renest or not. A few days later the site was deserted and no birds were in sight. We thought we had our answer. Ever searching for the positive spin, we consoled ourselves that at least we learned that plovers can reassume incubation after an extended interruption.

Piping Plover chicks are responsible for feeding themselves while the adults help defend them from danger.
PHOTO BY BILL DALTON

But as the days went on, we found a new nest in an area no plovers had been in before. After closely observing the patterns on their neck bands, we were excited to confirm that it was the pair from Ocean City. To our delight and relief this third clutch hatched and three cotton-ball-sized chicks entered the world. Piping Plover chicks are precocious, which means they can walk a few hours after hatching, and are responsible for feeding themselves while the adults help defend them from danger. Twenty-five days later (the date at which a chick fledges, or is able to fly) there was one chick left. With its siblings lost to unknown causes (likely predators), this chick symbolized all that the adults had endured in the past few months: migration up the Atlantic coast to the nesting grounds, fights over territory and mates, loss of two nests, relocation to a new nesting area, and finally the loss of two chicks. For this pair, their success was embodied in this one little fledgling that stood less than a foot high and weighed no more than twenty-five pennies. The future of the species weighs on its wings. It's a heavy burden for us to ask this little bird to carry, but it and its inherited tenacity are all we have. ■

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