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For the birds

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FIGURE EIGHT ISLAND | With a bird scope balanced over his shoulder and binoculars dangling around his neck, David Webster skirted the large sand tubes near the southern tip of Figure Eight Island and headed toward the back side of the private island.

After spotting a flock of common scoters on the ocean side of Figure Eight and some great black-backed gulls near the mouth of Mason Inlet, blissfully ignoring the heavy construction equipment nearby, Dr. Webster eyed a cluster of birds resting on the far side of the inlet.

"How many pelicans do you think are out there?" the University of North Carolina at Wilmington biology professor asked his assistant Katrina Roman, a former student.

Three hundred, she suggested after a scan through her binoculars.

"That's about right, I'd say," Dr. Webster said after another look at the cluster of resting pelicans and gulls.

Not the biggest grouping the team had seen, but a sizeable flock nonetheless, he added.

Ms. Roman recorded the information, Dr. Webster picked up his scope, and the trek around the island's southern spit continued.

Every day as part of the Mason Inlet relocation project, at least one member of Dr. Webster's four-person team walks the northern and southern ends of Wrightsville Beach and Figure Eight Island looking for birds.

The focus of the monitoring program — one of many requirements of the relocation project and one costing New Hanover County \$50,000 —

is to help determine what impact relocating the wandering inlet will have on migratory and nesting shorebirds, particularly the piping plover.

"We really need to know more about how those species use that type of habitat, and how their use of it might change in response to activities that may affect the habitat," said David Raybon, a biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

If the diversity of birds that frequent Mason Inlet declines after the relocation project, that data could influence the timing or requirements tied to future dredging operations meant to keep the inlet in place.

"If I had to guess if it did happen, I think it would rebound very quickly," Dr. Webster said just moments after eyeing a Savannah sparrow in some thickets. "Barrier islands are very dynamic."

But because inlets aren't relocated every day, no one really knows what to expect, Mr. Raybon said.

"And because we don't have a sufficient amount of pre-project data, the daily monitoring allows us to gauge how they react during work on site," he added.

Dr. Webster admits he feels spoiled when his job requires spending long stretches of time on the beach.

But the monitoring is physically demanding and time consuming, taking up to seven hours a day.

"The first thing you learn when doing something like this is not to walk on the soft sand," Dr. Webster joked as he skirted a soft sandy spot on the Banks Channel side of Figure Eight.

"And you quickly learn to always look behind you because sometimes

something sneaks in," he added as gulls resting in the path of a dump truck returned to the same site just seconds after it passed.

While Dr. Webster and the other members of his team record almost all of their bird sightings, including several shorebird species on the cusp of receiving federal protection, it is the plovers that are the real focus of the monitoring program.

Coastal North Carolina is unusual in that its inlets and tidal flats play host to both populations of piping plover.

The Great Lakes piping plover population, which numbers only about 30 pairs, uses the state as a stopover on its migrations south.

And the Atlantic Coast population, numbering around 1,000 pairs that range from Canada's maritime provinces south, uses North Carolina to winter while other individuals visit to nest during the summer months.

Anytime a plover is spotted, it's a major event.

The location is pinpointed with a global-positioning system — and then the fun begins, Dr. Webster said.

Because all of the Great Lakes and most of the Atlantic plovers are banded, generally with one metal and one colored band, it is important to identify each animal if possible.

But trying to read a tiny band with the diameter of pencil lead on the legs of a 6-inch bird isn't easy, especially when the plovers usually won't cooperate by turning toward you or standing still.

"If you see a piping plover, add 30 minutes because we'll have to chase them around the beach trying to see their bands," Dr. Webster said smiling. "And it can take three or four sightings to get its identification down."

Each plover sighting is e-mailed to a host of interested parties, including the Canadian Wildlife Service.

Although only a few weeks into the monitoring, Dr. Webster said the team has determined that there are three Atlantic plovers wintering around Mason Inlet and another pair hanging around Rich's Inlet on the north end of Figure Eight.

Two of the Mason Inlet plovers are banded, which has allowed Dr. Webster to determine that one of them was tagged last June 11 on a coastal island in Quebec.

"What we're finding, surprisingly, is that the plovers seem to be fairly tolerant of these (inlet relocation) activities," Dr. Webster said, standing next to one of the giant sand tubes that forms a stockpile area for sand that will eventually be used to fill in the current inlet. "But we really don't know enough about them right now to say that for sure."

He added that the plovers are only foraging now, and that any possible impact on their nesting tendencies — of vital importance in the attempt to boost the species' population — won't be known until later this year.

Daily monitoring of the islands will continue until the relocation project wraps up, expected sometime in mid-April. The monitoring will then become weekly unless nesting plovers are found, in which case daily patrols will continue until the nests are abandoned, Dr. Webster said.

The monitoring could remain a requirement throughout the project's 30-year life span, but Mr. Raybon said that probably will be determined by what the data shows.

"White belly, brown back and fairly yellow," Dr. Webster said after pausing in the future inlet corridor, oblivious to the nearby dredge, and peering through his binoculars at a flock of birds partly obscured by marsh grass.

"I would be inclined to go Yellowlegs again," he said, referring to some Greater Yellowlegs — a type of wading shorebird — Ms. Roman had spotted nearby. "But if you aren't sure, don't guess. That's one of the cardinal rules of this game."

After trudging 50 yards up the shoreline toward the southernmost homes on Figure Eight, Dr. Webster stopped, took another scan with his binoculars and made the positive identification.

"Yep, Greater Yellowlegs."

The stopping, studying, starting and stopping again had probably taken 15 minutes.

"You can't rush this job," Dr. Webster said.

Besides, he added, he still gets excited about coming out because he never knows what he's going to see.

"That's the difference between someone who goes to work because they have to, and someone who goes to work because they love to," Dr. Webster said. "I love coming to work."

