

Snowy Plover Identificaton Tips- counting the right plover.

Various species of plover can be observed along the Gulf Coast of Florida year-round. Only two species nest in Florida, Snowy Plover and Wilson's Plover, whereas the other species of plover are migrants and/or winter residents. While more scarce, migrants and winter residents (Black-bellied Plover, Piping Plover, and Semipalmated Plover) can still be found during the late-spring and summer months. Other than Snowy Plover, the most likely plover that would be encountered during the annual Florida Snowy Plover count would be Wilson's Plover. Additional information is provided on separating this species from Snowy Plover including nest and chick identification.

Big Birds.

Wilson's Plovers (left) are a little larger overall and the huge bill helps separate this plover from Snowy Plovers. Black-bellied Plovers (right) are enormous compared to a Snowy Plover. Both photos show birds in wintering plumage, in breeding plumage they show bolder black markings. Wilson's nest commonly in Florida. Black-bellied Plovers only winter in Florida, but can be here year-round.

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Orange Legs.

Piping Plovers (left) and Semipalmated Plovers (right) are easy to distinguish from Snowy Plovers since these two species both have orange legs. Both photos show birds in wintering plumage, in breeding plumage they show black markings on the head and neck. These two species do not breed in Florida, but can be present year-round.

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Sexual Dimorphism.

Differences between males and females can be subtle. Females (left) are slightly drabber than the male (right), this refers mainly to the bold markings on the head and neck. Notice the female's markings are a little paler and smaller. Although highly variable, most females are paler than this example.

© Breeding-plumage SNPL taken by Chris Burney



Snowy Plover Identificaton Tips- counting the right plover (continued).

Together.

It is not uncommon to find Wilson's and Snowy Plovers occupying the same stretch of coastline, however they generally use different sections of the beach. Side by side, the differences in coloration and bill size are marked. These two individuals (Wilson's on the left and Snowy on the right) are both in non-breeding plumage.

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Bill size and shape.

Portraits of Snowy Plover (left) and Wilson's Plover (right) illustrate the enormous difference in bill size and shape between the two species. Wilson's Plovers need the large stout bill to feed on bigger prey items such as fiddler crabs.

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Collar.

In breeding plumage, another helpful characteristic that will help you separate Snowy Plovers (left) from Wilson's Plovers (right) is the dark collar around the neck. Snowy's have an incomplete collar, essentially two dark patches on either side of the neck, while Wilson's Plovers have a complete band across their chest. Note that both species can have an incomplete collar in non-breeding plumage (see above).

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Nests.

Nest placement is probably the best key in helping differentiate a Snowy Plover nest from a Wilson's Plover nest if the adults are not around. In general, Wilson's nest within dunes amid sparse dune vegetation, while Snowy's nest in more open parts of the beach.

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Chicks.

Hatchlings usually have attentive parents nearby which makes identifying the similar-looking chicks much easier. Snowy Plover chicks are slightly paler with a distinctive black line extending behind the eye.

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