SUCCESS ON THE SAND

Piping Plover Management

by Jonathan Regosin

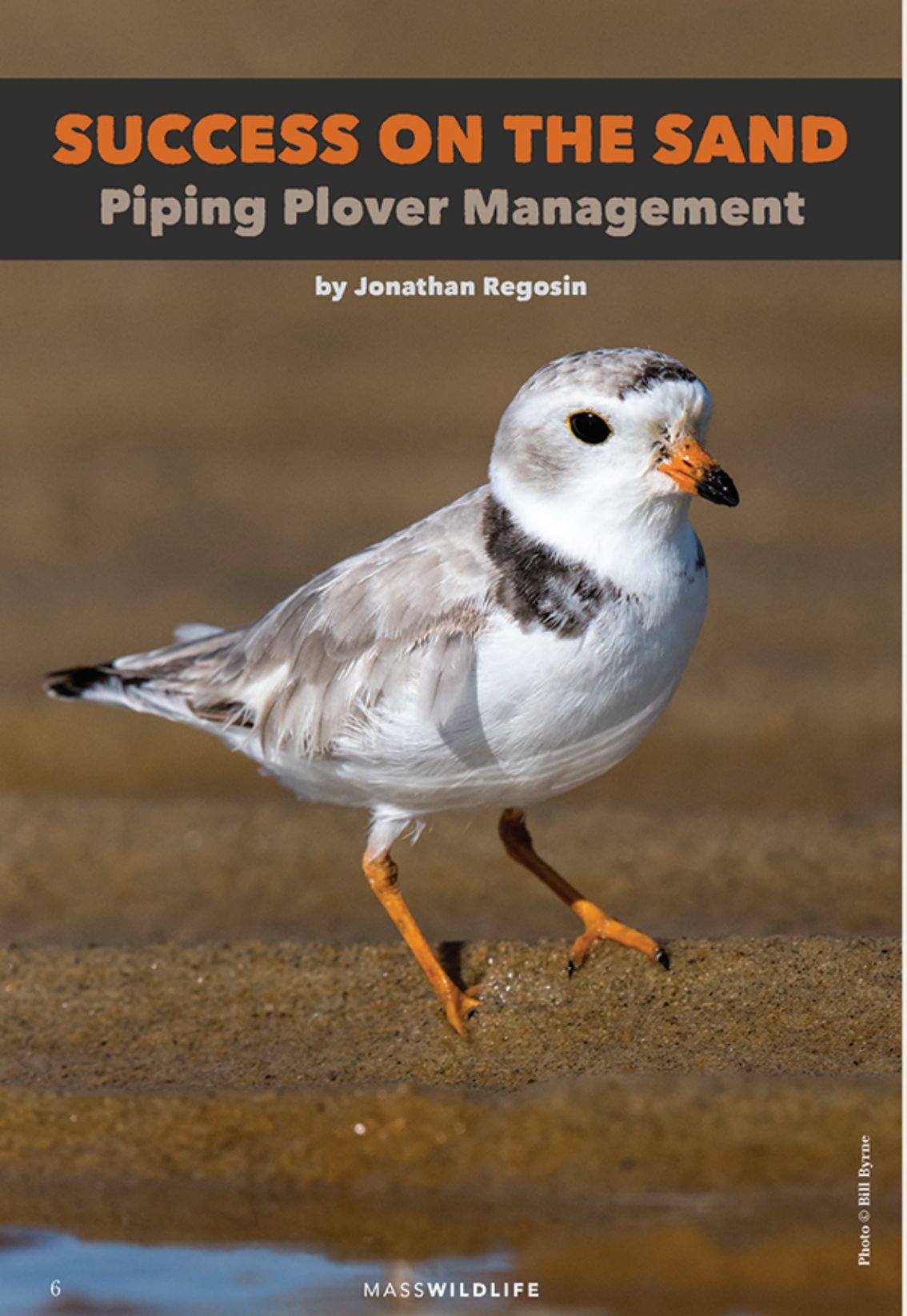

Photo © Bill Byrne

A small pale shorebird sits motionless in a shallow depression on a Massachusetts beach, while wind-whipped beachgrass scours fluid patterns in the sand. A watchful gull pauses overhead. It floats on the wind, intently searching for the slightest movement, before catching a gust that propels it down the shoreline. It shrinks to a pinpoint and vanishes into blue. A vibration rattles one of the four speckled eggs that lay beneath the attentive shorebird. She rises and inspects her clutch. Moments later, the tip of a tiny black beak breaks through the eggshell and into our world. The chick wriggles forward and comes to rest; half in its shell and half on the sand. The process repeats itself three times over the next day and a half. Each chick ventures out on the sandy moonscape to feed itself within hours of hatching—four little fuzz balls on stilts, each facing a challenging and changing world. Under their parents' heedful eyes, the chicks struggle to evade predators and eke out an existence on the sand, while facing the ever-present threat of storms and high tides that can shatter their world. Refuge is sought under their mother's wings.

Nearby, beachgoers apply sunscreen, children build sandcastles, and multi-colored beach umbrellas dot the landscape. This is the story of the Piping Plover. It is also the story of Massachusetts' residents, and how changes in our population, lifestyles, and land use inadvertently led to the decline of the plover and how successful conservation action taken over the past three decades to manage and recover plover populations threatened to unravel with an erosion of community support—and how diverse interests came together to reverse this trend.

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