

Vehicle Management Plan for the Communities of Gurnet and Saquish, Plymouth

Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife

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Gurnet and Saquish are communities in the town of Plymouth, MA. They are located at the southern end of Duxbury Beach, a 6 mile-long barrier beach. The majority of the barrier beach is part of the town of Duxbury and is owned by the Duxbury Beach Reservation (DBR). Gurnet and Saquish are largely private, with approximately 546 lots and 393 owners, including several lots owned by the Town of Plymouth. Access by land to Gurnet and Saquish is along King Arthur Rd. (owned exclusively by DBR), which runs along the length of Duxbury Beach south to the Duxbury-Plymouth town line. Gurnet and Saquish property owners have a deeded right of access across DBR property.

This narrow barrier beach supports important populations of nesting Piping Plovers and Least Terns. These rare species are protected by the federal Endangered Species Act and the Massachusetts Endangered Species Act. Their nesting and foraging habitat is protected by the Massachusetts Wetlands Protection Act.

With ever-growing demands on our beaches, there are fewer places like this for these vulnerable birds to raise families, feed, and rest. Plovers and terns lay their camouflaged eggs in shallow nest scrapes on sandy and gravely beaches above the tide line. Chicks leave the nest within hours of hatching. Plover chicks range hundreds of yards along the beach and tidal flats in their round-the-clock search for food, moving back and forth between the oceanside and bayside. Tern parents deliver fish to chicks, which are less mobile than plover chicks.

Plovers and terns are at-risk from vehicle travel on King Arthur Rd. and the tidal flats at Gurnet and Saquish. Chicks are tiny, flightless (for the first month of their lives), blend into the sand, and may hide in tire tracks. Plovers are at the greatest risk due to their high mobility, road-crossing behavior, and dependence on tidal flats. Occurrences of plovers being unintentionally injured and killed have increased over the years, probably due to both the growing plover population and increasing number of vehicles. The tidal flats at Gurnet and Saquish, where plovers feed, are subject to substantial traffic from owners accessing their homes and owners, renters, guests, and trespassers who are recreating on the flats.

Because plovers and terns are very vulnerable and protected by law, every effort must be made to avoid injuring or killing them. The *Guidelines for Barrier Beach Management in Massachusetts* (MA Barrier Beach Task Force, 1994) consider as “essential” those vehicles used to access private dwellings that are not otherwise accessible. The *Guidelines for managing recreational use of beaches to protect piping plovers, terns, and their habitats in Massachusetts* (Blodget and Melvin, 1993) say the following regarding essential vehicles:

“Essential vehicles ... should only travel on sections of beaches where unfledged plover or tern chicks are present if such travel is absolutely necessary and no other reasonable travel routes are available. Essential vehicles should travel through chick habitat areas only during daylight hours,

except in emergencies, and should be guided by a qualified monitor who has first determined the location of all unfledged plover and tern chicks. All steps should be taken to minimize number of trips by essential vehicles through chick habitat areas....”

DBR has traditionally managed traffic along the road during daylight hours, stopping traffic when plovers cross the road. During the summer of 2019, there were lengthy traffic delays caused by plovers remaining in the road and four Piping Plovers were killed or injured. The concerns resulting from these incidents led to stakeholder meetings, which included property owners, DBR, the towns of Plymouth and Duxbury, and state and federal agencies.

To MassWildlife’s knowledge, there is no other community on the Atlantic Coast where hundreds of property owners access property by driving through plover nesting habitat supporting a substantial number of plovers (28 pairs in 2019). The unique situation at Gurnet and Saquish requires a thoughtful, community-based approach to reducing risk to birds along the road. Following initial, large informational meetings, a smaller stakeholder working group was formed. The purpose of the working group was to:

- educate all parties about the beach, the community, the birds, and the regulations and guidelines that protect them, and
- work towards reducing risk to birds on the road, which will also reduce legal risk to property owners.

Over the course of approximately-monthly meetings from October 2019 to March 2020, the working group gained an understanding of the important issues surrounding vehicle use on the barrier beach. Property owners requested that the group address issues pertaining to King Arthur Rd. first, and the tidal flats at Gurnet and Saquish second; the latter topic was not discussed sufficiently and will require future meetings. Considerable time was spent discussing how to minimize trespass at Gurnet and Saquish.

Ultimately, MassWildlife felt that the most practical path forward for reducing residents’ vehicle impacts on birds was to develop a Vehicle Management Plan (VMP) with owners. **The VMP identifies strategies for minimizing harm to birds.** To maximize effectiveness of the VMP, the group developed a suite of communication strategies (brochures, signs, meetings, etc.) for reaching out to the various users of the barrier beach to educate them on how to minimize harm to birds.

MassWildlife seeks compliance with the VMP strategies by all property owners, and asks that they pledge their willingness to comply by filling out an online pledge form. MassWildlife will notify the stakeholder group when the online form is available.

It is important for all property owners to understand that they are important partners in plover and tern recovery. Each bird makes a difference. Please encourage your community and visitors to become bird-friendly drivers.

VEHICLE MANAGEMENT PLAN

Please take the following steps to protect birds from vehicles and adhere as closely as possible to the essential vehicle guidance in the Guidelines (see above):

- **Reduce driving as much as possible.** Reducing the number of vehicle trips is the most effective way to reduce impacts on birds. Carpool or walk whenever you can and avoid multiple trips by combining errands into one trip.
- **Do your best to avoid driving at night.** Plovers are active all night and it is very difficult or impossible to see them on the road in the dark.
- **Respect and follow the instructions of Duxbury Beach staff managing road traffic.** They are there to protect the birds. They are subject to their own organization's rules as well as state and federal regulations, so please be patient and considerate with them.
- **Limit your guest list and encourage guests to carpool.** Keep your guest list limited and updated. Get a free vehicle sticker/tag from the Gurnet Saquish Corporation. Consider meeting your visitors offsite and driving them to your property if it will avoid trips by multiple vehicles or if you expect your guests to have trouble keeping an eye out for birds on the road.
- **Give yourself a little extra time to get to your destination and carry any necessary medications with you in case of delays.** You may have to wait for chicks to cross the road. Do not attempt to drive past the birds, shoo, or otherwise harass them off the road. In the case of broods that regularly spend time in the road, DBR has limited permission to herd chicks off the road in recreational use areas according to a set schedule, but this authorization would not allow property owners to do so.
 - **If you see chicks in the road and they remain there for >20 minutes, please call DBR at (781) 399-5324** and your call will be forwarded to the next available on-duty staff. If a monitor is available, DBR will assist G-S traffic by herding chicks off the road at the next scheduled time. Scheduled times are generally: 7 am, 9 am, 11 am, 2 pm, 4 pm, 6 pm, and 8 pm. NOTE: times may vary depending on staffing. Please be patient until DBR staff arrives.
- **Keep your eyes open for birds in the road.** This is especially important because DBR can no longer constantly monitor each and every brood of chicks during daylight hours, as they have done in the past. Plovers and terns are really hard to see, especially tiny chicks. They are often very active, but may be motionless, hiding in tire ruts or debris.
- **Drive slowly.** Go no faster than 5 mph in designated "chick zones." It will be much easier to see birds when you're driving slowly, and much easier to stop when you need to.

- **Keep vehicles off the tidal flats.** Vehicles damage habitat and can harm or kill plovers and terns. If you can access your house without driving in the intertidal zone, please do so. Recreational driving should not occur on the tidal flats.
- **Make sure guests, renters, and contractors understand the "rules of the road."** Everyone has a role in protecting the birds. Owners will be the most effective communicators of this information. Outreach materials developed by the working group can help.
- **Report trespassers to police.** The working group identified trespassers as contributing to vehicle traffic, reducing the quality of life, and blocking emergency egress at Gurnet and Saquish. It is important to get the message out that trespassers are not welcome. Let law enforcement handle this: they are willing to help. Make note of license plate numbers and call the Plymouth Police Department at **508-830-4218** (non-emergency calls).