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## **9. PARKS: Emergency restrictions imposed at Golden Gate beaches to minimize snowy plover disturbances**

**Arthur O'Donnell, *Land Letter* editor**

One of the longest-running disputes at the National Park Service's Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA) flared up again this month, as park officials imposed emergency restrictions on beach access to protect two sites used by western snowy plovers. In particular, owners of dogs that were previously allowed to run and play "under voice control" at Ocean Beach and along Chrissy Field on San Francisco Bay, must keep their dogs on leash in two portions of those areas. Other visitors to the beaches were asked to stay away from sites in the sand dunes just off the water's edge.

"This is not a ban," said GGNRA spokeswoman Chris Powell. "We put seasonal restrictions in place."

However, the season is an extended one -- lasting from July until May, to accommodate the breeding patterns of the migrating shorebirds.



A dog runs freely at Crissy Field in the GGNRA, with Alcatraz Island in the background. Photo by Arthur O'Donnell.

Although the birds, listed in 1993 as threatened under the Endangered Species Act, do not nest at GGNRA, they spend up to 10 months of the year foraging in mud flats, salt ponds and dunes along the bay and outer beach. According to GGNRA, about 100 plovers out of the West Coast population of 2,300 birds can be found in the vicinity.

In recent years, there have been lingering questions about whether the western snowy plover should continue to be protected under ESA and the economics of affording such protections. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in April decided to retain threatened status for the birds, although last autumn, it had severely cut down the size of the bird's critical habitat after a consultant's report estimated it would cost \$200 million over 20 years to protect them ([Land Letter](#), Sept. 29, 2005).

Free-roaming dogs are considered a nuisance to the plovers, and the conflicts between dog owners and bird advocates has turned into a kind of ideological war in San Francisco. While off-leash dogs are generally not permitted in GGNRA, an exception had been made for limited areas as part of a 1979 policy, covering about 1 percent of GGNRA's 80,000 acres.

When park officials tried to change that policy to conform with overall NPS rules making all areas of the park subject to on-leash requirements, dog advocates sued, winning a federal district court ruling in June 2005, that upheld the 1979 policy and restored off-leash activities at Chrissy Field and Ocean Beach.

In effect, the new seasonal restrictions have cut the off-leash area by about half, and they were initially misinterpreted in local media reports as a change in overall policy regarding dog activities. Some environmental groups told reporters that long-standing negotiations over dog activities had been terminated by NPS. Though not true, it resurrected some of the ill will among interested parties that has never really gone away.

Nor has the sense that dogs are adversely affecting the plovers.

According to GGNRA's Powell, surveys of the bird habitat taken after the 2005 court ruling have shown "there was a significant increase in off-leash dog use, causing disruption and harassment of plovers."

Still, the process of achieving a negotiated settlement continues, with members of a stakeholders committee meeting regularly to assess on a site-by-site basis, what kind of pet activities may be allowed along beaches within the GGNRA. The area under study runs more than 60 miles from Stinson Beach in Marin County as far south as Pacifica in San Mateo County.