

**SPECIES OF THE MONTH**

# MOUNTAIN PLOVER

## APRIL 2026

Misnamed, the Mountain Plover (*Anarhynchus montanus*) is typically not found in mountains, but breeds in the high grassland plains east of the Rocky Mountains from Montana to New Mexico and in western Texas and western Oklahoma south to central Mexico. Often called the “bare ground plover”, during breeding season it relies on habitat with >30% bare ground, often utilizing highly disturbed sites, including recently burned or heavily grazed areas, prairie dog colonies, or agricultural lands where crops are just emerging. Arizona nesting was confirmed in shortgrass prairies in Apache County and possible nesting in Navajo County in the 1990s, but an Arizona Field Ornithologists (AZFO) survey in May-June 2025 did not find any in Apache County.

Most Mountain Plovers winter in the Central, Imperial, and San Joaquin valleys of California. Smaller numbers winter locally in northern Mexico, southern Arizona, and southern Texas. In Arizona, they forage in barren farm fields and sod farms, primarily in Yuma, Pinal, and Cochise counties and to a lesser extent in Maricopa, La Paz and Pima counties. They may arrive as early as August and linger into March.

They primarily feed on ground-dwelling invertebrates and winged invertebrates perched on the ground. The plovers typically forage in groups during the day and roost at night on the ground in loosely spaced flocks at sites where they foraged. They often roost in shallow depressions in the ground. They migrate in small flocks, although flock integrity is poor, as individuals captured together from a flock are seldom relocated together.

In the past 50 years, the entire Mountain Plover population in North America may have declined as much as 50%, and the Arizona Game and Fish Department (AZGFD) considers it a Tier 2 Species of Special Conservation Need. Declines may be due to conversion of grazed and mixed-grass prairies to taller stands of grasses and crops. The largest group reported in Arizona was 250 at a farm in the Sulphur Springs Valley, Cochise County, on 20 January 1995. The high count for 2025 was 125 in an agricultural field in Yuma County on 16 January. In 2011 and 2012, the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service conducted surveys in California and Arizona of wintering Mountain Plovers. In Arizona, at 24 sites in 5 counties in 2011, 176 plovers were counted. The following year 120 were found at 22 sites in the same counties. Recently, AZGFD has taken the lead in learning more about the status of Mountain Plovers in Arizona and collaborated with AZFO in conducting a survey of 7 locations in 4 counties, 30 January to 2 February 2026. The total was at least 125. AZGFD plans to continue its surveys of both wintering and potential nesting Mountain Plovers in Arizona.

The Mountain Plover is not difficult to identify. Unlike other North American plovers, it has a clear white breast in breeding plumage. In immature and nonbreeding plumage, its breast is dusky. It is slightly smaller bodied than the Killdeer (*Charadrius vociferus*), which is often in the same fields, but it has distinctively longer legs and a more erect posture giving it a taller appearance.



Mountain Plover, Sulphur Springs Valley, Cochise County, 1 January 2025. Photo by Steven Tracy