

The presence of pets in dune ecosystems is incompatible with the conservation of coastal birds

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An investigation by the Department of Microbiology and Ecology of the University of Valencia published in the *Ibis* magazine warns about the impact of human activities –mainly dog walking– on one of the threatened bird species that reproduce in these ecosystems, the Kentish plover. The study calls for the adoption of measures that separate both uses and allow the coexistence between the recreational use of beaches and the conservation of birds.

Researcher from the University of Valencia Miguel Ángel Gómez-Serrano has just published research addressing the consequences of human activities on beaches on the reproduction of one of the threatened [birds](#) that reproduce in these ecosystems, the Kentish plover (*Charadrius alexandrinus*).

This species of wading bird, named Bird of the Year by SEO/BirdLife in 2019, is closely linked to coastal dune ecosystems, where it reproduces by installing its nest directly on the sand of the [beach](#). Since their breeding season extends from March to July—sometimes even until August—a good part of this period must be shared with other beach users: fishermen, bathers, walkers and, increasingly, the dogs that accompany their owners in these tasks.

Miguel Ángel Gómez-Serrano is carrying out a long-term study on the consequences of human activities on the reproductive biology of the

Kentish plover on Mediterranean beaches, which are among the most affected by the high human influx. The work published at *Ibis*, one of the magazines with the greatest impact in the field of research on birds, observes the behavior of plovers while they incubate their eggs when they are disturbed by the proximity of people, dogs and vehicles, distinguishing between the different access roads to these sources of disturbance (beach shore, dunes, roads, promenades, etc.). The studied beaches are located in the provinces of Castellón and Valencia.

The main results of this research show that the response of birds varies depending on the place on the beach where the disturbance occurs and the presence or absence of dogs. The study detects that, when crossing the beach through areas with dunes, people frighten 47% of the birds that are incubating, while they frighten only 13% when they do so on the authorized paths. When it comes to people accompanied by their pets, the behavior of birds changes drastically, fleeing in most cases—94% in dunes and 80% on roads. "The dogs resemble the potential predators of these birds—such as the fox, for example—and the birds interpret their erratic movements from the shore to the dunes as if it were a hunting attitude," comments the author of the article.

The beaches are one of the favorite natural environments for dog walks. However, there is a high degree of ignorance about the impact that this activity can have on the natural environment both at the management and user level. This fact is favoring the proliferation of coastal stretches enabled for bathing and walking pets. "The problem is not whether dogs access the beaches or not, but when and where they do so. Most municipalities consider that this is a demand that is incompatible with the most touristy beaches, which is why they tend to station these sectors for pets in the more natural dune ecosystems, where conflict with birds is guaranteed," comments Gómez. "The trend is, furthermore, to authorize this activity sooner and earlier, even in the middle of spring, thus coinciding with the [breeding season](#) for birds," he adds.

The study calls for the need to regulate the entry of [dogs](#) on the beaches. "It has been detected that birds can become accustomed to human presence, a circumstance that makes the coexistence between the recreational use of beaches and the conservation of birds possible, but it is necessary to guarantee an effective separation of uses, that is, the leisure and the conservation of the [dune](#) ecosystem."

More information: Miguel Ángel Gómez-Serrano. Four-legged foes: dogs disturb nesting plovers more than people do on tourist beaches, *Ibis* (2020). [DOI: 10.1111/ibi.12879](https://doi.org/10.1111/ibi.12879)

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