Common Ringed Plover at Tommy Thompson Park, Toronto, Ontario. *Photo: Paul Prior*

Common Ringed Plover at Tommy Thompson Park: New to Ontario

Paul Prior

Whether they will admit it or not, when most birders head to their local patch, they are hoping for something other than the usual bird species; they would like to find something out of the ordinary. I am lucky to live just a 15 minute bicycle ride from one of the best birding spots in the city of Toronto, and I have to confess that whenever I cycle down to the base of Leslie Street Spit —Tommy Thompson Park (TTP) — there is always that little nagging idea that surely there is a "good" bird on hand, just waiting to be seen. On 20 August 2016, it was no different in that regard, and as I had been doing since the middle of July, I planned to concentrate my initial efforts around the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority's wetland creation project in the hopes of seeing some shorebirds.

Figure 1. Map of Tommy Thompson Park. *Photo: TRCA*

I arrived at the base of The Spit at about 06:30 and cycled straight out to Cell 2 where the only birds of note were a couple of Stilt Sandpipers (*Calidris himantopus*) feeding at the edge of Cell 2 and so I headed on out to check the shrubs along Cell 3 and the woodland at the base of Peninsula B (Figure 1). I didn't have a huge amount of time and so finding these areas rather quiet, I decided to cycle back along the Endikement Road (on the east side of the Cells) intending to stop in at the Baselands. As I biked past Cell 2, at about 08:15, I stopped to scan the edge and relocated the two Stilt Sandpipers from earlier in the morning. I snapped a couple of photos and continued scanning. Shorebirds that year were tending to congregate on the low central island, but my attention was drawn to what I thought was a very strongly marked Semipalmated Plover (*Charadrius semipalmatus*) on a

smaller exposed shoal about 100 m out from the road, about 50 m from shore. At first, I thought this bird must have caught my attention simply because it was a brightly plumaged returning adult male that had not yet started losing any of its breeding finery. With no other Semipalmated Plovers close by to compare at the time, I was at a loss to put my finger on exactly what it was about this bird that made it look so special, and then it called!

I had spent much of the first 15 years of my long birding addiction trudging over coastal marshes and shorelines along the English Channel, and the call really should have been instantly pinned down as Common Ringed Plover (*Charadrius hiaticula*) — but I've been living in southern Ontario since the early 1990s and so the softer rolling "purlee" of this bird was not unequivocally recognized. It was certainly not the call of a Semipalmated Plover and although Common Ringed Plover came to mind straight away, given that this was the first I'd heard in over 25 years, I did not feel as confident as an expat British birder should have.

I set to work getting as much photo documentation as I could — video (and therefore audio) as well. Handy as it is, I am afraid my Sibley bird ID app did not help much with the necessary diagnostic features. It occurred to me then that a friend had forwarded a recent posting of a Common Ringed Plover sighting in Quebec, just the previous week, but what feature did I need to clinch the identification? After about 10 minutes, I was joined by my fellow TTP stalwart, Noam Markus, and I pointed out the plover, indicating that I was close to being convinced that it was something of a mega! I managed to get some of the bird's calls on video and then it flew the short distance to the main grassy island where it joined a couple of Semipalmated Plovers. We walked out along the little peninsula of land to get slightly closer looks, and here we were joined by Ed O'Connor and Mike Dizonno, two regular TTP birders. I was the only one that had any previous experience with the species and I was determined to convince the others. None of us had immediate access to any detailed literature, and without a scope, it was proving difficult to make out any of the really definitive features. The call and my gut feeling was all I had to go on.

Then Noam, with his trusty zoom camera managed to get a photo of the plover's feet — using digital magnification, it became apparent that there was some webbing between the toes. Surely not! Ed and Mike commiserated with me and went about their day's birding, leaving me to stew over this new info, but I was sure something was wrong: I could vaguely recall reading somewhere that although Semipalmated Plovers do indeed have obvious palmation between either two or three of their toes, Common Ringed Plovers should show reduced but partial palmation. I felt the photo proved nothing. Furthermore, the bird was now hanging out with a Semipalmated Plover and there was a definite difference in size, shape, bearing and in the paler shade of its fawn or beige upperparts. Things started falling into place for me: this was surely a Common Ringed Plover.

I tried calling a couple of birding friends to get the word out but neither was answering. It was now about 09:40 and I needed to head home. From the

Common Ringed Plover at Tommy Thompson Park. Close examination shows several diagnostic features: longer and more even bill, lack of eye ring, slightly flaring supercillium and broader breast band than on Semipalmated Plover. *Photo: Jean Iron*

edge of Cell 2 to my front doorstep is a good half-hour bike ride and so I did not reach home until almost 10:15. I am somewhat challenged when it comes to posting on Ontbirds and so the times when I have been lucky enough to happen upon a noteworthy bird sighting, I have relied on Jean Iron to put the word out. I gave her the details and told her I would upload my video to YouTube, and in the meantime perhaps she could post the sighting on Ontbirds for me. Jean obliged, doing a great job getting the word out nice and fast (by about 11:20, I think) and she included the link to the YouTube video. Within the hour I heard that Jean Iron, Ron Pittaway, Glenn Coady and Howard Shapiro were all happily looking at the bird precisely where I had left it.

The location of this mega-rarity was — despite the long hike for those without a bicycle — pretty convenient, at least inasmuch as observers not needing to disturb the bird. For much of its six day stay, the plover was to be found on the exposed grassy island in the middle of Cell 2 and, therefore, there was never any issue with overzealous birders and photographers stressing the bird. I gather a few hundred birders made the trek out to Cell 2, including a few listers from the States; having said that, I only ever saw a maximum of about 20 birders at any one time viewing the plover. I last saw the bird at about 15:35 on 25 August, despite the attentions of the local Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*), and the presence of a family group of Cooper's Hawks (*Accipiter cooperii*). On this day, a heavy rainstorm breezed through the area and persuaded many of the shorebirds to move on, but the Common Ringed Plover was still present on its little island after the rain had passed.

Editor's Note

The Common Ringed Plover is a Eurasian species with a breeding range extending from Greenland, Iceland and northern Europe across Russia to Siberia in the east. In North America, it breeds in northern Nunavut (adjacent to Greenland) and western Alaska (adjacent to Siberia). It has also been observed in June and August in the northern Yukon (eBird 2018, Richards 1988).

Records of migrants have been reported from spring (May) and fall (July, August, September, October) from Newfoundland, Quebec, Nova Scotia, Maine, Massachusetts, New York, North Carolina, Illinois, California, Washington and Alaska (eBird 2018). The state/province with the most records during migration is Newfoundland where it has been seen in 10 of the past 18 years. It appears to be an increasing southbound migrant. Over 20 separate individuals have been reported since 1980 (Clarke and Brown 2007, eBird 2018). In 2017, there were five to seven different birds seen (B. McTavish, pers. comm.). All the records in Newfoundland except one have been from the months of July to September with the peak in August. Newfoundland may receive the most birds because it is closest to and on a near straight-line south from its Nunavut breeding areas.

Additional photos and videos of the Common Ringed Plover record from Tommy Thompson Park can be found at http://www.jeaniron.ca/ Shorebirds/2016/ringedplto.htm and on YouTube. The record was accepted by the Ontario Bird Records Committee (Burrell *et al.* 2017). Bruce McTavish is thanked for his comments on its status in Newfoundland.

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