

Mongolian Plover: New to Canada

by
R.D. McRae

What will likely remain as one of the rarest birds to be seen in Ontario in recent years was the Mongolian Plover (*Charadrius mongolus*) at Presqu'île Provincial Park, Northumberland County on 4 May 1984. This occurrence establishes the first Canadian record for this species (Weir 1984; Wormington 1985; Earl W. Godfrey, pers. comm.).

From the evening of 3 May until the afternoon of 4 May the weather was unsettled, with constant drizzle and occasional heavy rain, north winds at 15 kmph and a high temperature of only 12°C. Since this kind of weather frequently 'grounds' shorebirds, I checked the beach at Presqu'île for new arrivals. When I got there at 1400h there were thousands of gulls, mostly Ring-billed (*Larus delawarensis*) and Bonaparte's (*L. philadelphia*) but shorebirds were scarce.

The first rare shorebirds seen were two Willets (*Catoptrophorus semipalmatus*) (three more were found later), which by plumage characteristics and larger size I identified as belonging to the western race *C.s. inornatus*. At 1420h I set up my scope to get a better view of a small flock of Killdeer (*Charadrius vociferus*)

about 150m away. I didn't notice the Mongolian Plover standing nearby, as it was facing directly away from me, but as soon as it turned around, the immaculate white throat and brilliant rusty-red breast were extremely obvious.

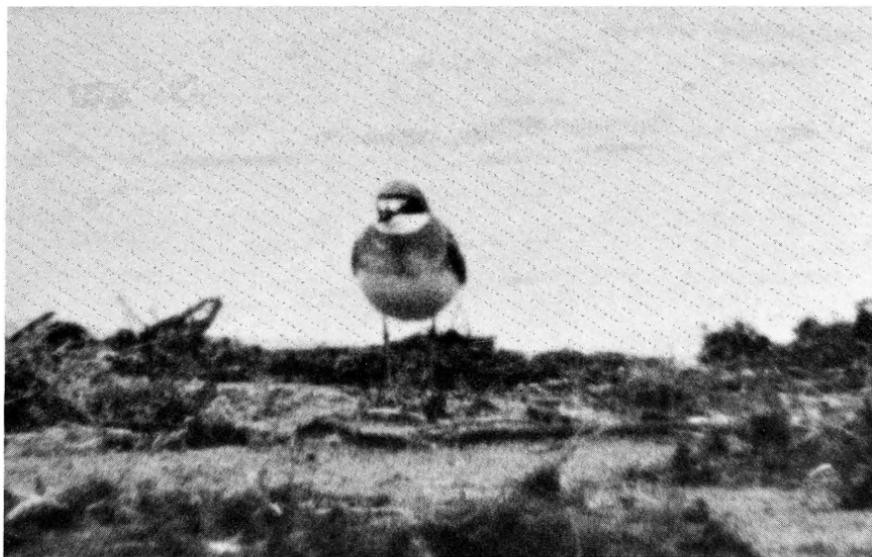
I watched the bird for about two minutes, then went to get my camera and contact other birders. I met John and Joan Thomson of Aurora in the parking area, and alerted them to the bird's presence. When I returned 30 minutes later, the Thomsons had been unable to find the bird but ten minutes later we located it about 200 m from the earlier site. For the next hour, John and I took photographs in which the bird, although distant, is quite identifiable (Figures 1 and 2). I left again to get film and phone more people; then remained on the beach until dusk at 2020h, when the bird went to sleep.

About 40 people saw the plover that afternoon but it was not present at dawn the next morning when about 150 people were waiting. It probably left during the night, as many of the other shorebirds, including the five Willets and a Baird's Sandpiper (*Calidris bairdii*)— all new arrivals on 4 May — were also gone.

R.D. McRae, Box 98, Brighton, Ontario K0K 1H0



*Figure 1. Mongolian Plover, Presqu'ile P.P., 4 May 1984.
Note the long legs, wavy faint line on side of breast and the long bill.
Photo by R.D. McRae.*



*Figure 2. Mongolian Plover, Presqu'ile P.P., 4 May 1984.
Note the fine black line bisecting the white forehead patch, shape of black
mask and forehead bar, crisply defined white throat and long legs. Photo
by R.D. McRae.*

Description

The following description of the Presqu'ile bird includes some aspects of the plumage which differ from information presented in several field guides.

In size and shape the bird was most similar to a Semipalmated Plover (*Calidris semipalmatus*) except that the legs were about 15% longer and the bill was noticeably longer – perhaps by 50%. The crown, back and upper surface of the wings were grey-brown and unmarked. The belly, undertail coverts and wing linings were white. The tail was not seen well but appeared to be similar in pattern to that of a Semipalmated Plover but not as brightly coloured. The legs were dull grey, just slightly darker than those of the Willets with which it occasionally associated. Four small grey-brown bars were present on the sides of the breast near the “wrist”. By far the most striking features of the bird were the bold face and breast patterns. The throat was pure white bordered by a fine black line. The entire breast and nape were bright rusty-red and obvious from any distance. The supercilium was also rusty but this did not stand out well. The forehead was white and was vertically bisected by a fine black line. The unmottled black mask extended from the base of the bill to the auricular area and was thickest from the eye to the ear. A thin black bar going up from each eye bisected the white forehead patch and the grey-brown crown. The eye was dark and difficult to see against the black mask. No white eye-crescents were present as is often illustrated. (Peterson 1980, Farrand 1983, Scott 1983) The rusty colour shown in several guides below the black mask was absent. A feature which may have been unique to

the Presqu'ile bird was a fine, wavy light line on the sides of the breast which is not mentioned in any of the books I consulted. This feature could have been a result of an incompletely developed breeding plumage, an aberration, or an overlooked feature of the breeding plumage.

The Mongolian Plover is an Asian shorebird (for a complete description of breeding and winter ranges, see Cramp & Simmons [1983]) with four recognized subspecies. In the field, birds can be separated into groups – *C.m. pamirensis* and *C.m. atrifrons*, which have a small white forehead patch and no black border to the throat, and *C.m. stegmanni* and *C.m. mongolus*, which have larger forehead patches vertically bisected by a fine black line and a black border around the throat (Prater *et al.* 1977). Based on field notes and photographs, the Presqu'ile bird clearly belongs to the second group.

Behaviour

As stray birds are often under great stress, their behaviour in coping with an unfamiliar environment can be of special interest.

When first seen, the plover was very active, making frequent short flights and moving constantly. The plover did not feed during the first two hours of observation. It met with hostility from other species, most notably Killdeer, with at least 15 aggressive encounters seen in the first two hours. Whenever the plover came within three metres of a Killdeer, regardless of which species approached, the Killdeer

would assume a horizontal stance with neck extended and run towards the plover. In response, the Mongolian would fly a short distance, land, then tilt its body rapidly in a bobbing motion for a few seconds, then run around erratically. On three occasions the plover was "swooped at" by sub-adult Red-winged Blackbirds (*Agelaius phoeniceus*) when it approached to within 1 m.

By 1630h the sky had cleared and bird activity, in general, had decreased. By this time the plover had begun to favour an unoccupied area of "tide-line" debris about 4 m from the water's edge. There it began to feed in the plover pattern of run, stop, run, stop and pick, etc. The only food items that were visible were thin worms about 3 cm in length.

Status in North America

In recent years, Mongolian Plovers have been found annually in western Alaska, where they are known to breed. Outside Alaska the species is very rare. All records from the contiguous United States previous to the Presqu'ile bird are listed below:

1. 22 April 1975, one adult male, Grand Isle, Louisiana (Littlefield *et al.* 1977)
2. 11-17 September 1977, age and sex uncertain, Bayocean Spit, Tillamook Bay, Oregon (Mattocks *et al.* 1978)
3. 16-21 October 1979, "winter plumage" South Jetty, Columbia River, Oregon (Mattocks *et al.* 1980)
4. 15-19 September; 3 October 1980, juvenile, Moss Landing, California (Evans *et al.* 1981)

5. 7-13 August 1982; 26 July-2 August 1983, adult, Santa Clara River Mouth, Ventura Co., California (McCaskie 1983) These two records are thought to involve the same individual returning for a second year (J. Dunn, pers. comm.)

All North American records, outside Alaska, are from the west coast in fall, except the Louisiana and Presqu'ile, birds which were spring migrants.

Possible Origin

It is always interesting to speculate about the origin of stray birds, but it must be kept in mind that anything said is *only* speculation.

An Alaskan or Siberian nesting Mongolian Plover that survived the error of going down the "wrong" (i.e. east) side of the Pacific Ocean in the fall, could overwinter in Mexico and come north with other, North American, shorebirds in the spring. This could explain the Louisiana sighting, but perhaps not adequately explain how one could get as far east as Presqu'ile.

The presence of five Willets of the western race and a migrant Baird's Sandpiper in spring, on the same day as the plover, may be more than a coincidence. Those three species arrived on the same day and were gone the next morning. The other shorebird species showed no such change in composition. I had the impression the three species were travelling together.

Although wind is overstressed in explaining vagrancies, it provides a plausible explanation for the

Presqu'ile sightings. Steady 90 kmph winds with gusts up to 110 kmph were blowing from the west all day on 30 April. These strong winds changed the shape of several gravel spits in the park and blew away about 30% of the beach! This group of western shorebirds may have been displaced from a Great Plains route eastwardly by the wind, arriving at Presqu'ile several days later.

Alternatively, 1) the plover may have been travelling independently of any other shorebirds and arrived at Presqu'ile on a northward route from Mexico; or 2) it may have been travelling northwesterly with western Willets from their Atlantic coast wintering grounds and been slightly north of that main migration route on the southerly edge of the Great Lakes, or 3) any combination of the above.

Acknowledgements

My thanks go to Alan Wormington, who developed the black and white film, and to Bob Finlayson who printed the photographs. Jon Dunn and Paul Lehman provided helpful advice regarding the species' status in Alaska and the west coast. Thanks are due also to the staff of Presqu'ile Provincial Park who so kindly put up with my hysteria during the day! And finally, I would like to express thanks to my good friend, John Reynolds, who provided me with invaluable advice while I informed him of the birds presence over the phone, namely "Doug, get a hold of yourself and take pictures!"

This observation was made

while employed by the Ministry of Natural Resources as the "Spring Birder" at Presqu'ile.

Eds. Comment: The second Ontario record set on 4 May was the 3 hr 45 min (approx. 550 km) car trip from the Visitor's Centre at Point Pelee National Park to Presqu'ile Park made by a keen Ontario birder to see the plover.

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Last Month's Breeding Bird Atlas Mystery Map: Mark Gawn and Virgil Martin correctly guessed Gray Jay as the species depicted by last month's Breeding Bird Atlas.

Christmas Bird Counts 1985/86

If you are thinking of organizing a new Christmas Bird Count for this year's Count period (18 December 1985 - 5 January 1986), the National Audubon Society has the following instructions (*American Birds* 38:847): Those contemplating the organization of a new count must submit their proposal to *American Birds* by October 15, 1985. The proposal should include a map clearly showing the proposed count circle, and the center of its 15-mile diameter, and should also include the locations of any nearby count circles. No overlap with a previously established count is allowed. The only counts that are not restricted to a circular area are

counts by boat or those taken from aircraft. We strongly prefer a minimum of ten field participants on every count, since a group smaller than this cannot adequately cover a circle of 15 miles in diameter. If you are considering establishing a new count, and cannot muster ten or more people, then it might be better to add your manpower to a neighboring count. With a proposal for a new count, we also need an indication of the experience and expertise of the participants. Application should be sent to:

Ms. Lorna Salzman
Christmas Bird Count Editor
National Audubon Society
950 Third Ave.
New York, N.Y. 10022