

ABOUT THE COVER: BLACK-BELLIED PLOVER

Various groups of birds are appreciated for different reasons: warblers for their brightly colored plumage, thrushes for their musical songs, hawks for their spectacular migrations. But for devotees of shorebirds, it is something different—an indefinable mystique. For some, the diligent inspection of the coloration of minute feather-edgings or determining the length and curvature of a bill presents a challenging identification problem that is totally absorbing. But beyond that, there is about these birds the aura of wildness, of the distant unknown. Many shorebirds breed in the Arctic, an area generally unfamiliar to local observers. The "wind birds," as Peter Matthiessen calls them, journey between their tundra nesting grounds and distant wintering areas, pausing in Massachusetts for only brief periods in favored localities to feed and fatten before continuing their migration.

Of the thirty or so species that occur in Massachusetts, perhaps none is more the quintessential shorebird than the Black-bellied Plover. A medium-to-large-sized charadriid, it occurs commonly in coastal locations, is conspicuous in time-honored shorebird areas, is strikingly patterned and readily identified. The call note is a mellow, plaintive, treble whistle, easily learned and once learned, not forgotten. The sound invokes the essence of wildness, even when heard in the most urban environment.

An adult in full alternate, or breeding, plumage has evenly black underparts extending beyond the legs. The head and neck are mostly white, and the back is marbled black and white. Winter birds are overall grayish in tone (hence, the British name, Grey Plover) with paler flecks scattered liberally over the upperparts. In flight they are readily identified in any plumage by the white tail, white wing stripe, and black axillars, or "armpits." Adults in transitional plumage are mottled black and white on the underparts and are often referred to as "speckle-bellies."

In Massachusetts Black-bellied Plovers are found almost exclusively along the coast. At low tide they feed along extensive sand and mud flats. Unlike many sandpipers that tend to pick steadily, this typical plover runs several feet, stops, looks, picks, and then runs again. This manner of feeding coupled with a robust body, large head (hence "beetlehead," the name bestowed by market gunners of a former era), and short thick bill serve to identify them even at great distances. During high tide they retreat to coastal marshes or pools or areas near dunes. By nature they are very wary, seemingly always alert and ready to sound the alarm at the first sign of danger.

In coastal Massachusetts this plover is a spring and fall migrant, but the spring movement is rapid. A few begin filtering in during the latter half of April with numbers slowly building into mid-May. The bulk of the migration then

moves through rapidly during the last third of May. Returning migrants, probably nonbreeders, begin appearing in mid-July. From then until early November, the migration is very protracted, with a peak of adult birds occurring in mid-to-late August and a second peak comprising both adults and juveniles occurring in late September. After November, numbers are greatly reduced, but usually a few hardy individuals attempt to survive the winter, especially on Cape Cod. The Black-bellied Plover has an extensive winter range reaching from coastal mid-Atlantic states south to Brazil. Richard A. Forster

MEET OUR COVER ARTIST

Bird Observer is delighted to have another of Paul Donahue's pictures on the cover. Paul, a native of Winchester educated at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, began his career as ornithologist/artist with several years of internship at Manomet Bird Observatory. He has been a birding tour guide and traveled extensively in North America and Ireland and over much of Central and South America. Since 1972, he has spent about half of each year in South America. He spent four years in bird-related travel (two years in Peru), netting and painting birds, especially shorebirds. He was for six seasons a resident naturalist at the Explorer's Inn, a lodge in the Tambopata Nature Reserve in the upper Amazon basin of eastern Peru, where he tape-recorded bird vocalizations and worked on a long-term survey of the avifauna. Paul's last several field seasons at Tambopata have been spent, literally, up in the rain forest canopy. He has constructed observation platforms as high as one hundred and twenty-five feet above the ground in the canopy of twenty large, emergent trees. The platforms are reached via climbing ropes and rope ascenders. Paul's canopy studies will continue over the next several years and will lead to a series of paintings of birds of that habitat.

Paul is author or coauthor of a number of papers on the distribution and behavior of neotropical birds and published (with Jan Pierson) in 1982 *Birds of Surinam—An Annotated Checklist*. His paintings have appeared in *Wilson Bulletin*, *American Birds*, and other publications.

In addition to tropical birds, Paul's favorite subjects are shorebirds and raptors. We have printed on this month's cover a black-and-white photograph taken by the artist of one of his shorebird paintings. Paul now lives for part of the year in Machias, Maine 04654 (P.O. Box 554). Dorothy R. Arvidson