

Mongolian Madness: Mongolian Plover at Charlestown, Rhode Island, July 24 – 26, 1999

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July 24, 1999, was a typical summer morning on the Rhode Island coast: sunny but not too warm, with heavy dew and a nice breeze off the ocean. With Mary Jo Murray, a long-time birding friend in the area, I arrived at the Charlestown, Rhode Island, Breachway on Ninigret Pond at about 9 a.m. Arriving on the falling tide, we crossed the channel and briefly scanned with binoculars. Immediately, I noticed a reddish bird — maybe a Red Knot, I thought, but since the distance was too great to be sure, I unzipped my scope cover to take a closer look. The bird didn't look quite right. Setting up her scope, Mary Jo agreed: this was something we had never seen before.

Of course, my field guide was in the car, on the other side of the channel. Mary Jo came more prepared and pulled out her new third-edition National Geographic guide. The bird had the overall shape of a plover but was slightly larger than a Semipalmated Plover, with longer legs and a more elongated appearance. Its behavior was also plover-like as it ran intermittently across the flats. I asked Mary Jo to look up Mongolian Plover (*Charadrius mongolus*); we looked at the picture, then back into our scopes, and our blood pressure must have gone off the scale. We spent the next ten or fifteen minutes studying the bird and reassuring ourselves that we had correctly identified it. It was small to medium-sized, rather plain brown with a bright chestnut breast. Its head and neck were chestnut brown; its forehead white with a distinct black mask. Based on the brief write-up and picture in the National Geographic guide, we called our find an “unequivocal” breeding-plumage male Mongolian Plover. Once we had recovered our breath and our wits, we agreed one of us should call to notify others. Since Mary Jo was local and knew most of the area birders and their phone numbers, back through the water she went to herald the news.

My job, which at the time seemed the easier of the two, was simply to keep an eye on the bird. But I found there is nothing easy about staring at one bird for long periods of time: your mind wanders, you look at other birds in the same telescope field, just for diversion. While I was checking another suspicious bird, the plover disappeared. Not much later, Mary Jo returned, somewhat frustrated that she called many people and never reached a real person. With a few other birders who were in the area, we searched the area until early afternoon. The bird was clearly not there.

Where would a self-respecting Asian vagrant go at dead low tide? Some other mudflat offering better pickings, presumably. So we headed off to check other local spots. On the way, I called Barbara Drummond, who put the news out on the MASSBIRD e-mail list and activated the telephone hotline; spreading the word that the bird had flown and we were trying to relocate it.

After checking Quonochontaug, Mary Jo recalled Davis Finch's words: “When in doubt, return to where you first observed the bird.” I headed back to the Breachway. On my way back through the channel, I passed Paul Buckley, who asked if we had ruled out

Greater Sandplover. That was my introduction to the Sandplover family. The Mongolian Plover is also known as the Lesser Sandplover and resembles its close relative, the Greater Sandplover (*Charadrius leschenaultii*). At 3:30 p.m. I relocated the bird in the same section of the mudflat where we first saw it. Prepared this time, I called Mary Jo and Barbara Drummond immediately and then was able to study the finer points of the bird's appearance.

Its head was rounded, with a white forehead bisected by a thin, black mid-sagittal line. There was a white supercilium over each eye. Above the forehead was a narrow black band, and above that, a narrower buffy area. The crown and nape were a taupe brown color with a band of buffy rufous approximately an inch in width across the back of the neck. The back was taupe brown with slightly lighter, almost buffy feather edges. The neck and throat were white with a thin black line separating the white from a broad chestnut breast-band that extended onto the flanks. The legs appeared black in low light but were more grayish with a green tinge in good light. The leg length from "knee" to foot seemed a bit longer than the upper portion of the leg. The bird's bill was black, about as long as the distance from the base of the bill to the eye, and pointed but somewhat stout in shape.

When it flew, this bird's feet did not project beyond the end of the tail, and a narrow, uniform white line could be seen on the wing. The underwings were white. Based on the carriage of the feet in flight, the thin black line separating the white throat from the breast-band, the extension of the rufous breast-band onto the flanks, and short bill, Greater Sandplover was ruled out. The mid-sagittal line on the white forehead suggested that the bird probably belonged to the race *stegmanni* from Kamchatka and the Chukotsk Peninsula area of eastern Siberia. Mongolian Plovers breed in scattered areas, mainly at fairly high elevations, across central and eastern Asia, wintering on coasts from southern Africa to Australia. The *mongolus* group of this widespread polytypic species, including the race *stegmanni*, occupies the eastern portion of the species' breeding range. While Mongolian Plovers turn up from time to time on the West Coast and in Alaska (where it has even bred), this attractive shorebird has only occurred once before in the Northeast – in New Jersey in 1990 (see Walsh et al., *Birds of New Jersey*, New Jersey Audubon Society, Bernardsville, NJ, 1999).

The next day dawned with coastal fog, but undaunted, I headed back to the Breachway, arriving at 6:45 a.m. Already, a long line of birders with scopes could be seen. Al Richards had both hands in the air (a sign our bird club uses to show that we are looking at the bird). All morning long, birders continued to make their way through the thigh-high water to see this rare Siberian visitor. The fog came and went, adding further challenges to visibility, but with patience, everyone was "getting the bird."

There was ample opportunity to study the plover and its behavior. It seemed to prefer the small puddles rather than the drier mudflat. When it walked, it moved fairly slowly and methodically, sometimes bobbing a bit. When feeding, it seemed oblivious to most of the other birds, though it became very aggressive toward Semipalmated Plovers when sandworms were concerned. Throughout the day we observed the bird feeding, resting, bathing, and preening.

The Rhode Island birding community performed heroic service, arriving at 5:30 a.m. to relocate the bird the following morning and guiding visiting birders across the channel. It was an incredible team effort by the many who saw the bird and then stayed to help others get to see it. Needless to say, a vigorous social scene rapidly evolved. Friends from throughout the region were reunited, names from MASSBIRD were connected with faces, and there was a jovial, almost giddy feeling in the air. Cameras were snapping, videos were running, and scenes for both were staged. Though an exact count was never taken, it was estimated that somewhere between 200 and 300 birders paid homage to the Mongolian Plover that Sunday in July.

At 7 a.m. the next day (Monday, July 26), it was cloudy and cool on the flats. The plover was much more active this morning, flying back and forth between several small pools. His appetite for sandworms seemed to have been replaced with a yen for insects, and he constantly tapped one or the other foot on the sand to stir up flying prey. The bird vocalized only a few times, fairly quietly, sounding somewhat like a Ruddy Turnstone.

The trail of visitors continued, though in smaller numbers than the day before. The tales of the channel crossing grew taller, and birders seemed to arrive wetter: the "crossing guards" of the day before had returned to their jobs, leaving many birders to navigate the channel on their own. This infamous channel crossing was a memorable part of the experience. Rhode Island birders have been doing it for years, know where the sandbars are, and can negotiate it without getting too wet. Mary Jo had led me through many times so I hardly gave it any consideration. But unsuspecting waders, especially at high tide, can plunge into deep water, optics and all. Many birders arrived over the weekend and departed with tales to tell — and watermarks to prove them.

At 1:10 p.m., on Monday the 26th, the plover disappeared briefly, only to return ten minutes later. Bill Drummond, recently returned from a trip to the Northwest Territories, then arrived and was to be one of the last people to view this striking rarity. Around 3 p.m. a well-dressed man (clearly not in birding attire!) made his way to the flats. He represented the *South County Independent* (a southern Rhode Island weekly newspaper) and had come to find out what all the excitement was about. The plover was to make the paper's front page. At 4:15 p.m., with thunderstorms threatening, Mary Jo, Mike Tucker from Rhode Island Audubon, and I left the area. Birders heading out at 5:45 p.m. passed others returning from the birding area who indicated that the bird was still there. But these newest arrivals would be the first to be disappointed: the plover had departed.

However, during its three-day stay, the bird was extensively photographed, videotaped, and sketched to document its occurrence so far from home. It was estimated that a total of 300 to 400 birders from all the New England states, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Washington, D.C., Maryland, Virginia, and Florida, and perhaps elsewhere made it to the Charlestown Breachway to see this beautiful bird. I can hardly wait for my next birding adventure with Mary Jo: who knows what we may find? 🦋

Linda Ferrareso has been birding for over ten years. She is active in the Brookline Bird Club, where she is Membership Secretary, on the Conservation Committee, and a trip leader. Linda has traveled extensively and has co-led a number of bird trips in North America.