

# ABOUT THE COVER

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## Mongolian Plover

Nothing causes a surge of adrenaline in a birdwatcher more than finding a truly rare vagrant bird, and in New England a Mongolian Plover (*Charadrius mongolus*) is just such a bird. Some authorities call this species Lesser Sandplover, a fact that focuses attention on its similarity to the Greater Sandplover (*C. leschenaultii*). The Mongolian Plover is an Asiatic species that regularly occurs as a migrant in extreme western Alaska, as well as casually along the Pacific Coast south to California. The species has also irregularly nested in northern and western Alaska. Elsewhere in the United States, the Mongolian Plover is an accidental vagrant that has only twice appeared on the Atlantic Coast, once in New Jersey (1990) and once in Rhode Island (1999).


The Mongolian Plover is slightly larger than a Semipalmated Plover and is quite striking in breeding plumage. Both sexes display a more or less ruddy or cinnamon head and breast coloration that sets off a plain white throat. Males possess a black mask and a thin black line that extends above the white of the forehead. Most male Mongolian Plovers also possess a thin line of black separating the white throat from the ruddy breast, a feature that, along with a more extensive reddish breast band, helps to distinguish them from the similarly plumaged male Greater Sandplover. In winter plumage the two species of sandplover are very similar; even the shorter, stubbier bill of the Mongolian Plover is a difficult characteristic to determine unless both species are seen together. The plumage of juvenile Mongolian Plovers resembles that of adults in winter.

Mongolian Plovers are polytypic, with five subspecies generally recognized. The species has a disjunct breeding distribution across Siberia south to Tibet, Kashmir, and central China, a distribution that no doubt has contributed to the evolution of subspecific differences. Interior subspecies winter along the Indian Ocean south along the East Coast of Africa, and the more eastern Siberian populations winter from China to Australia.

Mongolian Plovers usually breed close to streams from tree line up to 16,000 feet on sandy steppes and tundra areas with sparse vegetation. Their calls have been variously described as *tik-it*, *pip-ip*, *chitik* or *chiktic*, *tirrit-tirrit-tirrit* or *tirrir-it*, and have sometimes been likened to the calls of Ruddy Turnstones. On the breeding grounds males produce a *kruit-kruit* call, both on the ground and in flight. In addition, they have an aerial display that includes calling *tekr-ryuk* while flying in broad circles with a slow, gliding flight; on the ground, they perform a wing-lifting display. Males often build one or more "dummy" nests, but the real nest is a shallow scrape on the ground lined with leaves or stems. The usual clutch is three eggs. There is disagreement among ornithologists over the division of parental duties in this understudied plover. Both sexes develop brood patches but some authorities contend that only the female incubates and broods, while others report that the male also participates in this task. Whenever potential predators approach the nest the male performs a wing-drooping, tail dragging distraction display. Incubation is reported to last 22-24 days. The precocial young feed themselves

soon after hatching, even though one or both parents accompany them until the four to five-week fledging period is complete.

In winter Mongolian Plovers forage mostly along tidal flats and estuaries, as well as in salt pannes and salt marshes. They also occasionally feed on sandy beaches, in mangroves, or on upland airfields. Although they sometimes stalk marine worms that are in burrows, their usual foraging method is a run-stop-peck procedure, feeding by sight rather than by probing. Like many other small plover species, they sometimes rapidly vibrate their feet in sand or mud, presumably to disturb prey. On the breeding grounds, their diet is comprised of terrestrial insects, but in winter small mollusks, amphipods, and a variety of other small crustaceans and marine worms make up their diet. Even though they are mostly solitary when foraging, at other times they regularly associate with other shorebird species.

Little is known about the conservation status of this species when it is in its remote highland habitat; however, the rigors of undertaking extensive migrations undoubtedly take their toll. Like many species having long migration routes, Mongolian Plovers appear with some regularity in far away places. Perhaps someday one will thrill the Massachusetts birding community! 

William E. Davis, Jr.

## About the Cover Artist

Dan Lane has been a birder and interested in bird art since the age of five. He grew up in the New York suburbs of New Jersey, but his love of birding, particularly his interest in tropical American birds drove him to travel the continent and beyond. Dan recently received a master's degree from the ornithology program at Louisiana State University and is now a research associate of the LSU Museum of Natural Science. He has participated in four LSU research expeditions to study the avifauna in remote areas in South America. One of the highlights of his first trip to Peru, in 1996, was the discovery of a species of barbet new to science. Dan and coauthors will shortly submit the species description to *The Auk*. Recently, Dan has been busy illustrating Academic Press' *Ecotourist Guides to Ecuador* (to be published in February), and *Ecotourist Guides to Peru* (to be published by the end of 2000), two plates for Paul Johnsgard's *Trogons of the World*, and the T-shirt for this year's Rio Grande Valley Birding Festival (a Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl). Dan also leads birding tours for WINGS. It was on just such a tour to Alaska in June 1999 that he made the field sketches of a breeding plumaged Mongolian Plover that provided the material for this cover illustration. 