

ABOUT THE COVER

Semipalmated Plover

The Semipalmated Plover (*Charadrius semipalmatus*), whose name derives from the partial webbing between its toes, has a vast breeding and wintering range and can be abundant on Massachusetts shores during migration. It is a small, large-headed plover, brown above and white below with a prominent black breast band highlighted by a white collar and breast. It has orange-yellow legs and a short, stubby orange and black bill. In flight it shows a narrow stripe of white running the length of its wings. In breeding (Alternate) plumage it has a black mask highlighted by a white forehead patch. Although this vivid pattern is striking and conspicuous when we view the bird on a beach or mud flat, it is surprisingly cryptic when the bird is sitting on its nest surrounded by pebbles (Figure 1). The Piping Plover is much paler, lacks the black mask, and usually has a broken breast band. In coloration the Semipalmated Plover more closely resembles the Snowy Plover, but in the latter the breast band is reduced to black side patches. The Wilson's Plover is noticeably larger and has a huge bill.



Figure 1

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The Semipalmated Plover is monotypic and with the Common Ringed Plover forms a superspecies. Its breeding range encompasses all of Alaska and east across sub-Arctic and Arctic Canada to Newfoundland. It winters primarily along the coast, in the east from Virginia south through the Caribbean, Central America, and in South America as far south as Argentina, and in the west from California to Chile. It is a medium to long-distance migrant that migrates usually in single-species flocks either during the day or night. In Massachusetts the northern migration reaches peak numbers in mid-May and is considered a common to abundant spring migrant. Its

southern migration peaks in early August; it is considered a very abundant migrant in fall. In spring males migrate earlier than females, the reverse is true in fall, and juveniles migrate south later than adults. Sizable concentrations occasionally occur, with as many as 5,000 reported from Monomoy and 4,000 from Quincy.

Semipalmated Plovers are monogamous with pairs often remaining together for years. They breed first at age 2-3, and produce a single brood per year. They are often site-faithful, returning to the same area or territory each year. They are very versatile in breeding habitat choice, nesting in tundra, areas of well-drained gravel or shale, rocky beaches, dry sections of bogs, open sites near sub-Arctic lakes, ponds, rivers, and marshes, and have been known to nest on rooftops. The male courtship display song is described variously as *kee-weepr-r-r-r-r-r* or *chu-weet* and is given during the aerial display over the male's territory involving slow, deep, wingbeats sometimes described as "butterfly" flight. Other descriptions of calls and song include *tyoo-eeep*, *kerwee*, *kweet*, *chuWEE*, and *too-ee*. Agonistic displays include charging a territorial intruder head down, wings partly open, or standing with tail erect.

Males defend a nesting territory and make scrapes that females try out and presumably make the final decision about nest location. The nest is usually a shallow scrape in a sandy or gravelly area, lined with any available material—anything from moss, leaves, and grass, to glass fragments and charcoal. The usual clutch is four drab-colored eggs blotched with darker tones. These can be quite cryptic if the nest is surrounded by gravel (Figure 2). Both parents incubate, sharing the task about equally, and both have a pair of large brood patches. Incubation lasts about twenty-four days, and the chicks hatch synchronously and are precocial, leaving the nest during the first day and foraging on their own. The chicks are initially tended by both parents,



Figure 2

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including brooding for the first five days, but the female deserts the family after about two weeks. If approached by a predator, parent birds often give a distraction display with tail fanned, wings partly open, attempting to lead the intruder away from the chicks or nest (Figure 3). Males will defend feeding territories, attacking birds as large as Hudsonian Godwits. Chicks can fly in about 3-4 weeks.



Figure 3

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Semipalmated Plovers are largely visual foragers, running and pecking prey from substrate. They are mostly diurnal foragers but sometimes forage at night, especially when the moon is full. In migration and on wintering grounds they forage mudflats, salt marshes, ploughed agricultural fields, beaches, sloughs, and the edges of ponds, lakes, rivers, and lagoons. They have been reported to foot-stir the water, presumably to scare up prey. They eat a wide variety of invertebrates including crustaceans such as amphipods and copepods, polychaete worms, small gastropods and bivalves, insect larvae and beach flies.

Semipalmated Plovers are subject to nest predation by ravens, raptors, arctic foxes, and other mammals, but their high-latitude tundra breeding grounds give them some protection against human intruders. Their northern nesting makes, them, however, vulnerable to cold weather. At present they are not threatened in any part of their breeding or wintering range, and currently some protection is extended at major migration stopover sites by the Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network, and plans to extend this network to other sites should lead to increased protection. No decrease in numbers of individuals at stopover sites has been noted, which suggests that population numbers are relatively stable. Because of the vast extent of their breeding and wintering areas, accurate population numbers are unknown, and estimates range from about 20,000 to 240, 000 individuals, relatively small numbers

compared with some shorebird species, a pattern shared with the other small North American plover species. There is great deal about the biology of these elegant little plovers that is not known, including the factors that control population dynamics. 🐦

William E. Davis, Jr.

About The Cover Artist

The work of noted wildlife artist Paul Donahue has appeared many times on the cover of *Bird Observer*. Some of our readers may also have enjoyed the experience of visiting the rain forest canopy walkway at the Amazon Center for Environmental Education and Research off the Rio Napo in the Department of Loreto in northeastern Peru. This canopy walkway, the world's longest, is the creation of Paul Donahue and Teresa Wood. Paul can be reached at PO Box 554, Machias, Maine. 🐦

Bulletin of the Essex County Ornithological Club, 1919

THE INCREASE OF STARLINGS

A bird which promises to become as prominent in the bird life of the cities of Essex County as the English sparrow is the Starling, first introduced into this country from Europe about thirty years ago.

The increase and spread of this species in our county during the past five years has been phenomenal, and the fall of the present year (1919) finds huge flocks gathered in many localities with the evident intent of wintering with us.

Last summer for the first time I noticed several pairs nesting in the Elm trees of Salem Common, and since early spring I have constantly heard their notes around my home on Washington Square.

In late September on the grounds of the Salem Golf Club in North Salem, I saw a flock of these birds which must have contained many thousand individuals, for I counted over one hundred on a very small area, and the ground for hundreds of feet beyond was literally black with them.

In Topsfield, on November 16th, I saw two separate flocks each of which I conservatively estimated at one thousand birds, and I have heard many reports of similarly large gatherings.

It will be most interesting to watch the progress of this species and to try to gauge its value. Let us hope it will prove to be a desirable alien.

R.L.

[Ralph Lawson, Secretary of the ECOC]

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