

# CONTINENTAL BIRDLIFE

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## Dotterel at Ocean Shores, Washington

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On 8 September 1979 Susan Hills and I observed a Dotterel *Eudromias morinellus* near the base of the Point Brown jetty, Ocean Shores, Grays Harbor County, Washington. It was resting on open sand among scattered herbaceous plants, the only nearby bird a Horned lark *Eremophila alpestris*. Earlier in the day small groups of American Golden Plovers *Pluvialis dominica*, Killdeers *Charadrius vociferus* and Whimbrels *Numenius phaeopus* roosted in the same area.

The bird was first seen at 1710 PDT as we drove by it. My first impression was of a Buff-breasted Sandpiper *Tryngites subruficollis* because of the buffy appearance of the breast of the facing bird. As soon as I looked at it through my binoculars I saw the light band across the breast and recognized it as a Dotterel. We watched it for about 30 minutes through a 20X spotting scope, and I was able to obtain recognizable photographs by resting my camera and 500mm lens on the spotting scope, although conditions were considerably less than optimal, with a driving wind and hard rain. Twelve other observers were rounded up from the general area, all of whom got to see the bird; no one was heard complaining about the weather conditions!

The bird appeared a bit smaller than an American Golden Plover, individuals of which we had seen repeatedly on the same day, but it could have passed for that species at a distance because of its general size, shape and coloration. At times it stood up a bit straighter than is typical of a golden plover, but at other times its stance was similar. It bobbed occasionally like a yellowlegs and ran in typical plover fashion several times, although more rapidly than I considered typical of other plovers. It was very cryptic when it stopped, especially when it squatted down at intervals. We did not see it feed, probably because it was disturbed by our presence. After we left, the bird was flushed (Mark Egger, personal communication), and it flew rapidly away low over the sand, then returned to the same spot a short time later. Many observers looked for it in vain the following day, beginning at dawn, so it was probably about to depart on its way south when we observed it.

The bill was black and rather petite, more narrow and pointed than in other plovers of the area. The legs were fairly bright yellowish-brown. The crown was heavily marked with fine whitish streaks on a brown ground color, rather like a Brewer's Sparrow *Spizella breweri* in the negative. There was a dark smudge in front of the eye and a dark line behind it. A contrasty white line began over the eye and extended around the nape to meet its opposite, the line becoming suffused with rich buffy orange toward the rear. The rest of the head was plain buffy brown. The eye stripe was the brightest mark on the bird and an excellent field mark, as was the line across the breast. The back was heavily streaked dark and light gray, the streaks parallel to the body axis. The wing coverts were streaked dark and very light brown, the streaks diverging posteriorly. The light edgings contributed to a highly patterned effect, clearly indicating a juvenile or first-winter bird.

The hindneck and most of the underparts were light buffy brown, reminiscent of a Buff-breasted Sandpiper but not so bright. The fine (1-2mm wide) whitish band across the breast curved like a smile extending from either side at the anterior edge of the back and wing streaking. Just before and after the breast band the feathers had indistinct dark tips, producing a scaly pattern. The posterior underparts paled to whitish toward the rear, the white confined to an oval patch on the belly and under tail coverts. The wings, which extended to the tail tip when folded, were whitish underneath, with no obvious markings on the wing linings nor indications of a wing stripe. I did not see the bird fly.

It called once — a soft "put, put" — but was silent for the remainder of our extended observations, even when it was flushed by subsequent observers. It responded with extended neck and high-level alertness when a passing Killdeer called, and I was impressed that it had responded to a call perhaps it had never heard nor been programmed to recognize.

Dotterels are rare to casual in western and northern Alaska during the breeding season (Kessel and Gibson 1978). Hills and I were unable to find any at Wales, Alaska, during the summers of 1978 and 1979, although the birds had been seen there in previous years. This is not surprising for populations of a species at the very edge of its range.

In migration Dotterels have been found in the fall on the Pacific coast of North America. One was collected at Shemya in the Aleutian Islands on 17 September 1977 (Kessel and Gibson 1978). The bird was called an "immature male," presumably indicating a juvenile. South of Alaska there are two previous records for North America. An adult female was collected at Westport, Grays Harbor County, Washington, on 3 September 1934 (Brown 1934, 1935). I have examined this specimen, #9085 in the Washington State Museum. It is in fresh winter plumage but with outer primaries still in molt. A juvenile stopped at the Farallon Islands, California, from 12 September to 20 September 1974 (Henderson 1979).

Thus all four fall migrant Dotterels on the Pacific coast of North America were recorded in the narrow period 3-20 September. It is of special interest that one of the four birds was an adult, as it is the juveniles of most species that wander off course when they are making their first migration. For example, virtually all individuals of the common Pectoral Sandpiper *Calidris melanotos*, the uncommon Baird's Sandpiper *C. bairdii*, the rare Sharp-tailed Sandpiper *C. acuminata*, and the casual Ruff *Philomachus pugnax* that are seen in Washington are juveniles. In all these species, the adults do not usually deviate from their autumn migration routes, which do not pass through this region. The normal pattern is for adult shorebirds to precede

the juveniles, and the adult Dotterel from Westport fit that pattern, being 5 days earlier than the earliest record of a juvenile.

A rather substantial storm occurred at Ocean Shores on the day of the present sighting, with strong westerly winds. In addition, the weather on the coast of Washington was unsettled during the preceding week. It is tempting to conclude that such weather phenomena play a part in the occurrence of Siberian shorebirds on the Pacific coast of North America. However, the Pacific Ocean is very wide indeed at the latitude of Washington, and it may be more likely that these birds started down the Pacific coast of Alaska than that they were blown across the ocean by westerly winds.

It is of some interest that two of the Pacific coast birds associated with flocks of Killdeers (Brown 1934; Henderson 1979). The Dotterel is a shorebird of relatively dry and open habitats and should be looked for in the haunts of Killdeers, American Golden Plovers and Buff-breasted Sandpipers, any of which I suspect it would flock with.

#### LITERATURE CITED

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Juvenile or first-winter Dotterel *Eudromias morinellus* at Ocean Shores, Grays Harbor County, Washington, 8 September 1979. Second Washington state record. Photo by Dennis Paulson.