

WERE LESSER GOLDEN PLOVERS *PLUVIALIS FULVA* REGULAR WINTER VISITORS TO FRIESLAND, THE NETHERLANDS, IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE 20TH CENTURY?

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Jukema, J. 1987. Were Lesser Golden Plovers *Pluvialis fulva* regular winter visitors to Friesland, The Netherlands, in the first half of the 20th century? *Wader Study Group Bull.* 51: 56-58.

Oral reports of eleven, formerly professional, catchers of Golden Plovers *Pluvialis apricaria* from Friesland, The Netherlands, suggest that these people were catching considerable numbers of Lesser Golden Plovers *Pluvialis fulva* in the first half of the 20th century. Their descriptions of body size, plumage, calls, flight behaviour and timing of occurrence show great consistency, and are in full accordance with the literature about the species. Lesser Golden Plovers (often called the "little dusky plovers") were caught at the start of long periods of frost, fairly early in winter, during days when common Golden Plovers had (almost) all left the area for more southerly wintering sites. It is not clear why there have been no recent catches or sightings, nor how it has been possible that such large numbers (100's at least) have occurred so far from the area where they are now reported to winter.

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Catching Golden Plovers *Pluvialis apricaria* with special nets, "wilsternets" (Koopman and Hulscher 1979), was the part-time profession of a few 100 people in the northern part of The Netherlands up to the 1950s. In the winter months the catching of plovers, which were sold as food, was a valuable source of extra income. Today, Golden Plovers are caught for recreational and scientific purposes only, by the 40 permitted holders who are still alive in the province of Friesland. Golden Plovers are no longer allowed to be killed. As a fellow "wilverflapper", ringer and member of the society of Golden-Plover-catchers ("Het Friesche Vogelvangersbelang"), I have been actively catching Golden Plovers during the last 10 years. I have also talked a lot with the old generation of "wilverflappers". It is clear from the stories that the old "wilverflappers" have a great deal of field knowledge about different types of Golden Plovers, their behaviour and the timing of their occurrence in Friesland. Most of the types of Golden Plover can be identified as common Golden Plovers in different physiological states (e.g. moulting, wintering). However, the most distinct type they describe closely resembles the Lesser Golden Plover *Pluvialis fulva*, now considered a distinct species (Connors 1983). This discovery led me to do a series of standardized interviews with eleven old "wilverflappers", in order to find out whether or not Lesser Golden Plovers may have been a common quarry in the first half of the 20th century. This note is a summary of a more extensive documentation, published in Dutch in the journal *Vanelius* (Jukema 1987).

I interviewed eleven "wilverflappers" from all over the province of Friesland. Their average age was 71 years (range 62-80 years). Rather than report on the different interviews, here I will summarize their remarks on body size, plumage, flight behaviour, calls, body condition and occurrence, of what they often describe as the "lytse swarte wilster" (the little dusky golden plover). Their descriptions of the "lytse swarte" (henceforth called the "little dusky") showed a remarkable degree of correspondence, especially in view of the fact that the catchers have no training in identification, and also in view of the relative isolation in which these people worked.

Body size

All catchers believed that the "little dusky" was much smaller than the Golden Plover. This was obvious from a distance, and even more so with the bird in the hand. Their small size made them susceptible to escape from the wilsternet, with its wide meshes. One catcher estimated them to be a third smaller than the Golden Plover, another catcher thought them 20-25% smaller. These factors relate to overall sizes, and seem to agree well with the published descriptions (Hayman, Marchant and Prater 1986).

Plumage

In comparison with the Golden Plover, the "little dusky" was much darker, especially on the undersides of the wings, and the breast and belly. This led some catchers to try and "clean up" the belly of captured birds: to remove the ash from the plumage! Other catchers thought the dark undersides were due to the birds' originating from black mudflats or peatland. The plumage of the back is described as also being darker than that of the Golden Plover, but with more conspicuous "golden" dots. Their back-plumage was in general thought to be more glossy. Some catchers called the "little dusky plovers" "swarte petsjés" (black caps) in view of the light stripe above the eyebrow contrasting with the black cap. Their dark undersides made them poorer live decoys than Golden Plovers, whose attractiveness consisted of showing the light and conspicuous underparts when flapping the wings on the "wip", a stick in the ground (see Koopman and Hulscher 1979 for details). In contrast, some catchers considered the skins of "little dusky" as being particularly good for making stuffed decoys, in view of the glossy and dotted backs, and, in general, heavier plumage.

Flight behaviour

The "wilverflappers" agreed that the "little dusky plovers" were stronger fliers than Golden Plovers, flying in tighter and more rapidly manoeuvring flocks. One catcher was reminded of flocks of Dunlins *Calidris alpina*, a wader species which he also found relatively difficult to catch. However, other catchers thought the "little dusky" were easier to catch than Golden Plovers, in view of their habit of forming tight groups, so that more birds could be captured by one fling of the net.

Calls

Although the calls of the "little dusky" were considered different from those of Golden Plovers, no catcher could accurately describe the difference, apart from it being more "nasal".

Body condition

"Little dusky plovers" were much fatter than the Golden Plovers caught at the same time of the year. Their fat layers even led to problems when preparing them for a meal: the best way was not to roast them, but to grill them on a spit so that all the fat could drip out!

Timing of occurrence

"Little dusksies" were only caught after mid-December, most often after the start of a frosty period, during the time the ditches became frozen and the Golden Plovers left the Friesian meadows for the south. Catching "little dusksies" indicated that the plover-season was nearing its end. One catcher living near the former Zuiderzee reported them as also occurring inland in midwinter during periods of high spring tides which forced them, together with Dunlins, onto the fields.

The descriptions provided by eleven independent catchers/observers, although relating to old observations, show great consistency and are in perfect agreement with the descriptions of Lesser Golden Plovers available in recent books of reference (e.g. Glutz von Blotzheim et al. 1975, Hayman et al. 1986). For this reason I am now convinced that considerable numbers of Lesser Golden Plovers must have been caught in Friesland, and hence, that they must have been reasonably abundant winter visitors. The largest reported daily catch totals were 145 (ca.1955), 133 (as late as 1972), 48 (year unknown) and 12-15 (1950). This is the only numerical data on abundance. There are no real quantitative data which might show if, and when, Lesser Golden Plovers became scarcer in our province. However, all "wiltsterflappers" reported that the abundance of "little dusksies" has declined since the 1950's. It is not clear to what extent this is due to a reduction in catching activity, especially in the midwinter periods when it becomes cold and unpleasant for catchers to be out in the field. Yet the

increasing number of highly proficient field ornithologists in recent years have failed to notice Lesser Golden Plovers. This may indicate that Lesser Golden Plovers have indeed become rare over the last 30 years.

Whatever their former abundance in the north of The Netherlands, these Lesser Golden Plovers were far out of their winter range as we now know it (Figure 1). The breeding distribution of Golden Plovers and Lesser Golden Plovers overlaps in west Taimyr, W.Siberia, so it could be that formerly Lesser Golden Plovers of the westernmost breeding grounds followed the route of the sympatric Golden Plovers to the wintering areas in the southwest. If so, an increased rarity in The Netherlands may reflect the disappearance of these westernmost breeding populations in Taimyr.

Lesser Golden Plovers occur more frequently in coastal habitats than Golden Plovers. Plovers, as visual feeders, are particularly susceptible to changes in the activity of their intertidal prey, which often lowers when it becomes cold (Pienkowski 1978/79). The fact that they only appeared in the Friesian meadows after a few frosty days, or, in the case of the former Zuiderzee, during winter days with higher than normal tides, suggest that they may have normally been foraging in the tidal areas of Zuiderzee and Wadden Sea, and moved to the meadows only when decreasing food availability forced them to do so. The high fat loads which the Lesser Golden Plovers in Friesland were reported to carry, must perhaps be interpreted as a winter "insurance" energy reserve. Apparently Lesser and Golden Plovers had different winter-reserve strategies, the Lesser relying more on its (larger) energy reserves, the Golden Plovers immediately migrating south to milder areas.

If Lesser Golden Plovers were once "normal" winter visitors to The Netherlands, they must have migrated through north and north-eastern Europe (unless they crossed these areas in one long flight). I know of no reports of migrants from this area, nor do I know of any evidence to indicate changes in either the breeding distribution or abundance, or the migration pattern of Lesser Golden Plovers. The exact extent of the past occurrence of Lesser Golden Plovers in The Netherlands may never be known. Although the evidence suggests that Lesser Golden Plovers are now very scarce, it is possible that wintering flocks do still occur undetected. Suggestions and further information are welcomed!

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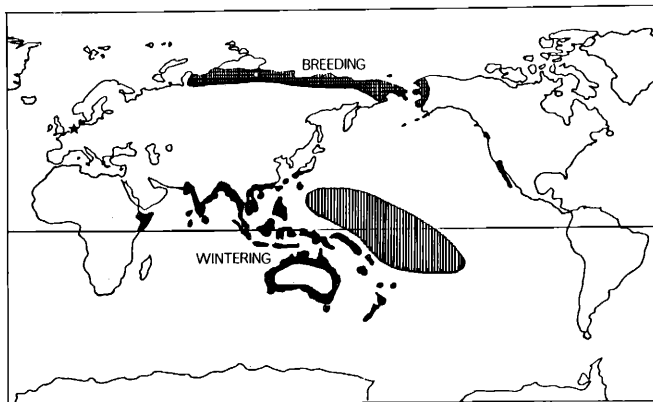


Figure 1. Map showing the current breeding (cross-hatched) and wintering distribution of Lesser Golden Plovers *Pluvialis fulva* (after Hayman et al. 1986). The hatched part of the wintering area indicates the numerous islands in the Pacific where Lesser Golden Plovers winter. The star indicates the study site.

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REVIEWS AND ABSTRACTS

LANE, B.A. 1987. *Shorebirds in Australia.* Nelson, Melbourne. 187pp, with 19 plates by Jeff N. Davies. Price: Aust.\$49.95.

At first sight this large-format book with its attractive cover photograph made me believe I had been sent one of those "coffee-table" books that are long on brightly colour pictures, but very short on useful information. If *Shorebirds in Australia* is a "coffee-table" book, then Australian coffee-tables must support far meatier fare than their British counterparts. Once you open the book, all but one resemblance disappears, since the book is crammed with fascinating information. The only similarity is that it is intended for a much wider audience than just dedicated wader-workers.

Shorebirds in Australia presents the results of the major survey carried out between 1981 and 1985, organised by the Royal Australian Ornithologists Union, as their Wader Studies Programme. This aimed at determining the distribution, abundance and migration routes of shorebirds in Australia. Over 700 amateur and professional bird-watchers and ornithologists took part. It was undertaken as part of Australia's obligations under the Japan-Australia Migratory Birds agreement, signed in 1984, which obliges these countries to research and conserve their shared bird populations.

For those of us more used to the wealth of information gathered in the last 50 years on shorebirds in western Europe, it is important to remember that almost nothing was known of the distribution and migrations of shorebirds in Australia until very recently. Only in the mid 1970s did large-scale ringing of waders begin, coincident with the migration to Australia of an ex-Chairman of WSG, Clive Minton. Co-ordinated wader counts began only in the late 1970s. The history of wader studies in Australia is reviewed by Parish *et al.* in *Wader Study Group Bull.* 49, Suppl.. The burgeoning of studies only recently, coupled with the low human population density and remoteness of many parts of Australia, makes *Shorebirds in Australia* an even more impressive achievement.

The book begins rather unusually, with a chapter entitled The Distribution of Shorebirds in Australia. This begins with a summary of the overall findings of the study, and is followed by a brief introduction to some of the factors that influence the distribution of shorebirds in coastal and inland habitats in Australia. Over 2 million migratory shorebirds visit Australia. About 80% of these occur in just 3 regions: part of the north-west coast in western Australia, part of the Gulf of Carpentaria in northern Queensland, and the south-east coast and lakes of South Australia. Two further general chapters follow this summary, and both are interestingly written for

a wide audience. The first, contributed by Peter Dann, covers the feeding ecology and behaviour of shorebirds in Australia. This is necessarily rather fragmentary, but amply demonstrates how much basic information remains to be discovered about shorebird feeding biology in Australia.

The next chapter is a fascinating review of shorebird migration and movements. This focuses on what has recently been discovered about Australian shorebird migration, but sets this into the wider context of shorebird migration worldwide. It is split into 4 sections, the first covering where Australia's migrant shorebirds breed. Although most migrants that reach Australia breed in northern Asia, from the Gobi Desert northwards, there is one intriguing exception. The Double-banded Plover *Charadrius bicinctus* breeds in New Zealand and is the only east-west migrant to reach Australia, where it overwinters in the south-east. A second section describes the ways in which shorebird migration is studied, focussing on how counts, ringing and morphometrics, and radar studies, have been used. Radar studies in western Australia have been particularly effective in determining northwards migration routes and strategies. Australia is a very large country, and so how shorebirds move around once they have reached the country is just as important as how they get there. Counts suggest that many shorebirds usually associated with coastal habitats move through inland habitats in autumn, crossing the continent to overwinter on the southern coasts. In contrast, few birds seem to stop in inland Australia when migrating northwards in spring. The changing and sometimes unpredictable availability of inland wetlands is a major feature affecting the annual cycle of many Australian shorebirds. Its effects are particularly fascinating on another group of Australian shorebirds, those that breed there. Several species, notably the Red-necked Dotterel *Erythrogonys cinctus*, the Black-fronted Plover *Charadrius melanotus*, the Banded Stilt *Cladorhynchus leucocephalus* and the Red-necked Avocet *Recurvirostra novaehollandiae*, breed abundantly in inland wetlands. Most breed in the regularly occurring wetlands around the edge of the continent, but also make large-scale movements to take advantage of inland peripheral wetlands when they periodically fill. This behaviour is especially marked in the Banded Stilt.

The main bulk of the book is the species accounts, and these are preceded by a brief outline of the ways in which the massive amount of information was collected. National co-ordinated counts achieved much coverage of the more (human) populous south and east, but aerial surveys and expeditions were needed to the more remote parts of the north and west coasts. Most counts in the north had to be made