

Snowy Plover: New to Ontario

by
Bev Collier and Jon Curson

On the afternoon of 4 May 1987 Curson was walking east along the south shore of Long Point, Regional Municipality of Haldimand-Norfolk, towards "the cuts", a large area of shallow water and exposed mud where Lake Erie breaches the south beach. Curson noticed a small pale plover about 100 m ahead. The bird was, at that time, approximately 0.5 km west of the first "cut". He initially presumed it was a Piping Plover (*Charadrius melodus*), but closer inspection showed it to be a male Snowy Plover (*C. alexandrinus*), a species he was familiar with from Europe, where it is known as Kentish Plover.

Curson did not have a telescope. In order to get close enough to get a full field description, he crawled on hands and knees through the sparse vegetation on the top of the dune, until he was within 25 m of the bird. He watched the plover from 1510 to 1530 h (EST), then headed back to the Long Point Bird Observatory (LPBO) to alert other observers. He returned approximately one hour later with Dave Beadle, Simon Mount and Dave Shepherd. George Pond and Martin

McNicholl soon joined them. Despite searching for one and a half hours, they were all unable to relocate the bird. At 1930 h (EST), as dusk was approaching, George Wallace found the plover again, approximately 300 m east of the original location. He, Katie Thomas, Bob Curry, Barry Jones and John Olmsted were able to get good views before the light faded.

Early the next morning the bird was observed well and photographed at the original location by several observers. At mid-morning the plover flew into the cuts and, although it returned to the south beach a few times, it proved more difficult to find. The bird was not seen after 5 May until it was relocated on 9 May, again on the cuts. A search on 10 May was unsuccessful and, as far as we are aware, 9 May was the last date of observation.

Description

The following description is based on Curson's notes, made immediately following the observation.

Size and Shape

Although no other birds were alongside for comparison, it was

Bev Collier and Jon Curson, c/o Long Point Bird Observatory, P.O. Box 160, Port Rowan, Ontario NOE 1M0



Figure 1: Snowy Plover, 4–9 May 1987, Long Point, Haldimand-Norfolk. Photo (5 May) by Alan Wormington.

judged to be about the size of a Semipalmated Plover (*Charadrius semipalmatus*). It appeared slimmer than a Semipalmated Plover, with a more horizontal stance, proportionately longer legs, a slightly longer and thinner bill and a flatter crown, giving it a rather “square headed” appearance (Figure 1).

General Appearance

A decidedly pale plover, it was pale sandy brown above and pure white below, with distinct black patches on the ear coverts and sides of the upper breast and a black stripe on the forehead, separated from the eye by a white supercilium. The dark, bold colouring of these head and breast

markings distinguished the bird as a male (Figures 1 and 2). The thin black bill and dark greyish-black legs were also distinctive. It fed in typical small plover fashion, running in short bursts and abruptly seizing prey from the surface of the sand. It flew twice and showed a pale brown rump, the colour of the mantle, and a darker brown tail. Both rump and tail showed white outer edges. There was a faint, conspicuous white wing bar.

Head

The shape of the head was “squarish” due to the fairly flat crown (as opposed to the rounded crown of the Semipalmated Plover). There was a narrow black band on the upper part of the forehead and a

black patch on the sides of the face formed by a black eyeline (behind the eye only) continuous with black ear coverts. These black patches were clearly defined. The lower part of the forehead, lores and supercilium were white. The white supercilium separated the forehead band from the eye. The supercilium extended to the rear edge of the black face patch. The crown, from behind the black forehead bar to the nape, was pale sandy-brown, as were the sides of the neck. There was a narrow whitish collar separating the sandy brown crown from the upperparts. This showed best when the bird raised its head, extending the neck.

Upperparts

The mantle, rump and wings (excluding the primaries) were the same uniform pale sandy brown as the crown. This colour was approximately that of the surrounding sand and was much paler than that of a Semipalmated Plover. The primaries and the tail were darker brown. In flight, both the rump and tail showed white sides, and the secondaries were darker brown like the primaries. On the sides of the breast there was another very distinct black patch, longer than it was broad, extending on to the underparts.

Figure 2: Snowy Plover, 4-9 May 1987, Long Point, Haldimand-Norfolk. Photo (5 May) by Alan Wormington.



Underparts

The whole of the underparts was gleaming white, apart from the black patches on the sides of the upper breast. The white extended on to the white of the lores and head and also around the nape as a narrow white collar (Figure 2).

Bill

The entirely black bill was longer and slimmer than that of a Semipalmated Plover.

Legs

The legs were proportionately longer than those of a Semipalmated Plover. At a distance, they appeared black but at close range they were seen to be greyish-black.

Eye

The iris was dark. There was no noticeable eye-ring, so at any distance the eye seemed to merge into the black face patch. This gave the bird a "stern" rather than "gentle" facial expression.

Call

No call was heard.

Discussion

This sighting constitutes the first record of Snowy Plover for Ontario. There are two specimens of this species, both of which reportedly originated from the province in the nineteenth century. One, taken at Toronto in May 1880, was identified by Ernest Thompson Seton, but the specimen

was subsequently destroyed (Godfrey 1986). The second, allegedly collected at Toronto on 6 July 1896 (James 1984), reported erroneously as 1897 by Speirs (1985) and Godfrey (1986), resides in the Royal Ontario Museum. The Ontario Bird Records Committee reviewed these old specimen reports and found them to be unacceptable (see James 1984). The 1880 report was rejected on identification and the lack of a specimen, while the 1896 report was rejected because the specimen was of questionable origin (James 1984). As such, Snowy Plover was not included on the 1984 Checklist of the Birds of Ontario (Wormington and James 1984). The Long Point bird constitutes the first record of Snowy Plover for Ontario.

Snowy Plover is a resident or partial migrant (withdrawing in winter from the extreme portions of its range) on the Pacific coast, ranging from central Washington to southern Baja California and along the Gulf coast from western Florida through Texas (Terres 1980). Migrant populations breed inland in Oregon, western California, western Nevada, Utah, eastern Colorado, southern New Mexico, southeastern Arizona, southwestern Kansas, northwestern Oklahoma and north central Texas (Peterson 1961; Terres 1980; DeSante and Pyle 1986). The Snowy Plover winters along the Pacific coast from northern Oregon south to Baja California

(Page *et al.* 1986) and along the Gulf coast from central Florida down both coasts of Central America to the Yucatan Peninsula (Pearson 1917; Peterson 1980; Terres 1980). It is vagrant in winter to the West Indies (Bond 1960; Meyer de Schauensee 1970) and as far south as Panama (Hayman *et al.* 1986) and Venezuela (Altman and Parrish 1978). The species is also considered a rare and irregular winter resident in Washington, Arizona and New Mexico (Page *et al.* 1986).

In North America, there are two distinct forms of the Snowy

Plover, the paler Gulf coast form of the Gulf coast and West Indies and the darker western form of the Pacific coast and inland U.S. The A.O.U. (1957) gives these forms subspecific designations, *C.a. tenuirostris* for the Gulf form, which it calls the Cuban Snowy Plover, and *C.a. nivosus* for the western Snowy Plover. Hayman *et al.* (1986:292) describe these two races as a single subspecies, *C.a. nivosus*. Wallace felt, based on his experience with both forms, that the bird seen at Long Point was more likely the darker western form.

Table 1: Status and extralimital records of Snowy Plover in North America. Vagrant status follows that of DeSante and Pyle (1986), except in Michigan, where Payne (1983) was followed.

U.S.A.

State	Vagrant Status	Date	Number and Location	Source
Idaho	ex. rare	—	—	DeSante & Pyle (1986)
Montana	ex. rare	24 August 1959	1 Red Rock Lake	Skaar (1969)
Wyoming	ex. rare	—	—	DeSante & Pyle (1986)
Nebraska	ex. rare	17 May 1903	2 (specimens) Lincoln	Bent (1929)
Minnesota	ex. rare	—	1 —	Eckert (1983)
		undated 1981	1 Lac qui Parle	Eckert (1983)
		'summer' 1982	1 Lake of the Woods Co.	Eckert (1983)
Missouri	ex. rare	—	—	DeSante & Pyle (1986)
Arkansas	ex. rare	—	—	DeSante & Pyle (1986)
Wisconsin	ex. rare	1 June 1934	1 (collected) Kenosha	Ford (1936)
Tennessee	ex. rare	—	—	DeSante & Pyle (1986)
Penn.	ex. rare	29 June 1886	1 (collected) Berks Co.	Wood (1979)
		17 May 1986	1 Erie (Presque Isle)	Hall (1986)
Indiana	hypothetical	19 May 1980	1 (sight record) Gary	Mlodinow (1984)
Michigan	hypothetical	23 May 1963	1 Escanaba	Payne (1983)

CANADA

Province	ex. rare	Date	Number and Location	Source
B.C.	ex. rare	—	1 Denman Island	Godfrey (1986)
		Apr/June 1972	1 Tofino	Hatler <i>et al.</i> (1978)
		12 July 1980	1 Queen Charlotte IIs.	Godfrey (1986)
		May 1985	1 Iona Island	Mattocks (1985)
Alberta	ex. rare	31 May 1975	1 Beaverhill Lake	Dekker (1975)
Sask.	ex. rare	May 1964	1 (specimen) Buck Lake	Wade (1964)
		June/July 1984	2 Old Wives Lake	Gollop (1986)
		July 1986	2 Old Wives Lake	Gollop (1986)

The literature contains a smattering of vagrancy records, which are summarized in Table 1. DeSante and Pyle (1986) describe "extremely rare" as having occurred ten times or less in a given state or province.

In Canada, the Snowy Plover has previously been recorded in three provinces (Table 1). There are four records from coastal British Columbia: Tofino, April to June 1972; Denman Island; Queen Charlotte Islands, July 1980; and Iona Island, May 1985 (Hatler *et al.* 1978; Mattocks 1985; Godfrey 1986). Until 1984 Saskatchewan's only record was a specimen collected at Buck Lake in May, 1964 (Godfrey 1986). In June or July 1984, two plovers were found on Old Wives Lake, in southwestern Saskatchewan (Gollop 1986). A nest discovered at this location in July 1986 established Canada's first breeding record. There is one record of the species from Alberta, where a bird was found at Beaverhill Lake on 31 May 1975 (Dekker 1975).

These records indicate that the Snowy Plover is not overly prone to vagrancy. Although it breeds regularly as far north as central Washington, at Leadbetter Point at the mouth of Willapa Bay (Wallace, pers. comm., 1987), there are only four sightings of this species from British Columbia. The species breeds along the Gulf coast of Florida as far south as Naples (Paul 1981). However, in the decade from 1970-1980 it was

recorded only three times in the Florida Keys (Atherton and Atherton 1980). It is considered casual on the Atlantic coast of Florida and has not been recorded on the Atlantic coast north of that state (A.O.U. 1983). Thus, coastal populations of Snowy Plover, i.e., both western and Gulf forms, appear highly sedentary. The specimen taken at Buck Lake, Saskatchewan was identified by Godfrey as belonging to the western form (Wade 1964). The A.O.U. (1957) cites casual records of the western form in Wyoming and Nebraska. Vagrant birds in Alberta and other U.S. locations also probably originated from the migratory inland population. Considering that our plover was thought not to be a Gulf coast form, we speculate that it too was a stray from the inland breeding population.

Virtually all of the Snowy Plover vagrancy records for which we were able to obtain dates occurred during the spring/early summer. The appearance of the Long Point bird conformed to this temporal pattern.

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank Martin K. McNicholl for his detailed critique of the manuscript and valuable reference sources. Terrie Woodrow provided a further reference. George E. Wallace was steadfast in his encouragement and editing advice.

Literature Cited

- Altman, A. and C. Parrish.** 1978. Sight records of Wilson's Phalarope, Ruff and other shorebirds from Venezuela. *American Birds* 32:309-310.
- American Ornithologists' Union.** 1957. Check-list of North American Birds. 5th Edition. Allen Press Inc., Lawrence, Kansas.
- American Ornithologists' Union.** 1983. Check-list of North American Birds. 6th Edition. Allen Press Inc., Lawrence, Kansas.
- Atherton, L.S. and B.H. Atherton.** 1980. Florida region. *American Birds* 34:152-155.
- Bent, A.C.** 1929. Life Histories of North American Shorebirds. Part 2. Dover Publications Inc., New York, N.Y.
- Bond, J.** 1960. Birds of the West Indies. Collins, London, U.K.
- Dekker, D.** 1975. Snowy Plover and other uncommon shorebirds at Beaverhill. *The Edmonton Naturalist* 3:5.
- DeSante, D. and P. Pyle.** 1986. Distributional Checklist of North American Birds. Volume 1: United States and Canada. Artemisia Press, Lee Vining, California.
- Eckert, K.R.** 1983. A Birder's Guide to Minnesota. Revised 2nd Edition. Cloquet Minnesota Newspapers Inc.
- Ford, E.R.** 1936. Cuban Snowy Plover in Wisconsin. *Auk* 53:79.
- Godfrey, W.E.** 1986. The Birds of Canada. Revised Edition. National Museum of Natural Sciences, Ottawa.
- Gollop, B.** 1986. Prairie provinces region. *American Birds* 40:1218-1219.
- Hall, G.A.** 1986. Appalachian region. *American Birds* 40:469-472.
- Hatler, F., R.W. Campbell, and A. Dorst.** 1978. Birds of Pacific Rim National Park. Occasional Papers of the British Columbia Provincial Museum, No. 20.
- Hayman, P., J. Marchant and T. Prater.** 1986. Shorebirds: an Identification Guide to Waders of the World. Houghton Mifflin, Boston, Massachusetts.
- James, R.D.** 1984. Ontario Bird Records Committee report for 1983. *Ontario Birds* 2:53-65.
- Mattocks, P.W., Jr.** 1985. Northern Pacific coast region. *American Birds* 39:340-344.
- Meyer de Schauensee, R.** 1970. A Guide to the Birds of South America. Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
- Mlodinow, S.** 1984. Chicago Area Birds. Chicago Review Press, Chicago, Illinois.
- Page, G.W., F.C. Bidstrup, R.J. Ramer and L.E. Stenzel.** 1986. Distribution of wintering Snowy Plovers in California and adjacent states. *Western Birds* 17:145-170.
- Paul, R.T.** 1981. Florida region. *American Birds* 35:932-934.
- Payne, R.B.** 1983. A Distributional Checklist of the Birds of Michigan. Miscellaneous Publications, Museum of Zoology, University of Michigan, No. 164. Ann Arbor, Michigan.
- Pearson, T.G. (Ed.)** 1917. Birds of North America. Garden City Books, New York, N.Y.
- Peterson, R.T.** 1961. A Field Guide to Western Birds. 2nd Edition. Houghton Mifflin, Boston, Massachusetts.
- Peterson, R.T.** 1980. A Field Guide to the Birds. 4th Edition. Houghton Mifflin, Boston, Massachusetts.
- Skaar, P.D.** 1969. Birds of the Bozeman Latilong. Published by the author. Bozeman, Montana.
- Speirs, J.M.** 1985. Birds of Ontario. Volume 2. Natural Heritage/Natural History Inc., Toronto.
- Terres, J.K.** 1980. The Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, N.Y.
- Wade, D.E.** 1964. Snowy Plover taken in Saskatchewan. *The Blue Jay* 22:95-97.
- Wood, M.** 1979. Birds of Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pennsylvania.
- Wormington, A. and R.D. James.** 1984. Ontario Bird Records Committee, Checklist of the Birds of Ontario. *Ontario Birds* 2:13-23.