

Seeing the World in a Bird

Rob Gough

It is early August, and right now, somewhere I have never been — on a hillside in the Arctic tundra — there is a bird standing. Its feet are treading lightly upon a boggy ground that I will never tread. Its eyes are seeing a vista that I will probably never see. Its lungs are filling with an air that is clean and crisp beyond that which mine have ever felt. The bird is enjoying days filled with sunlight that never ends.

But in just a few short days, our lives, this bird's and mine, will cross paths right here in Massachusetts. For tomorrow, this bird will lift off and set forth on an incredible journey beyond the horizon and across international borders. It will leave its birthplace beneath the endless sun and venture into a new world, a world where darkness is a part of every day.


Then one day, perhaps this Tuesday, I will be walking beside Joppa Flats near the mouth of the Merrimack River in Newburyport. The tide will be receding, and I will look out over the newly exposed mudflats glistening in the sun. At that moment, I will hear a high-pitched whistling call from the sky above. I will turn in the direction of the sound to see, after many hours of flight, the bird descending upon the mudflats. I will lift my binoculars to my eyes and see the bird begin to probe the mud for tiny invertebrates.

Perhaps I will identify it right away — attach a species name to it. Or perhaps I will need to study it carefully, taking note of its field marks, and flipping through the shorebird section of my field guide. But the inscrutability of many shorebirds is a small price to pay for their aesthetic appeal.

“The restlessness of shorebirds, their kinship with distance and swift seasons, the wistful signal of their voices down the long coastlines of the world make them, for me, the most affecting of wild creatures,” writes Peter Matthiessen, a nature writer and naturalist.

To me, shorebirds represent the ends of the earth — brief visitors from lands that I may never see. The Hudsonian Godwits that I will see on the mudflats within the harbor will have just nested on the coast of James Bay and will spend the winter in Argentina. The tiny White-rumped Sandpiper that will be feeding at the edge of a salt panne in the Parker River National Wildlife Refuge will have just arrived from somewhere near the top of the world — Arctic North America. When it flies away, it will be on its way to spend the winter in southern South America.

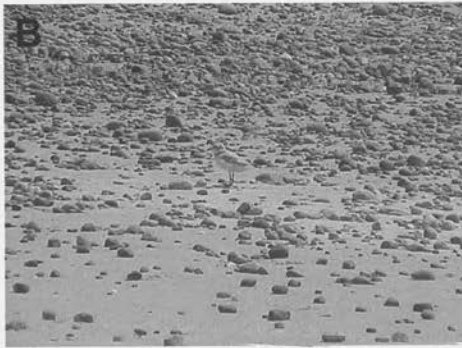
So strong is my affection for these shorebirds that they have become a part of my world. When they arrive near the end of each summer, they enter into my mind and heart. When they fly off, continuing their miraculous journeys, a tiny part of me goes with them to these far-off lands. I marvel at their restless spirit, their incredible will to survive, and their intricate tie to the seasons.

Low tide this Tuesday is going to be just before 1:00 p.m., and I know where I will be: Newburyport, Siberia, Arctic Canada, Guatemala, Tierra del Fuego 

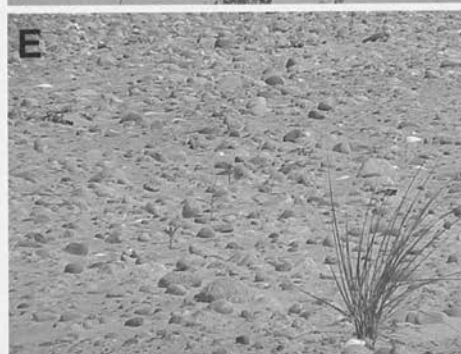
Rob Gough works in Salem, Massachusetts, as a Regional Coordinator for the Massachusetts Bays National Estuary Program. He also works as a freelance illustrator and graphic designer from his home in Newbury, Massachusetts. His drawing of a Piping Plover (*Charadrius melodus*) appeared on the cover of the June 2000 issue of *Bird Observer*. "Seeing the World in a Bird" was first published as part of the series, *Nature In Our Backyard*, in the Daily News, Newburyport, Massachusetts, August 4, 2000.

Alternate Photo Quiz: Piping Plovers on the Beach

Here are a series of images of Piping Plovers. Can you find the birds?



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The object is to find the Piping Plover(s) in each of these images. **A** is easy: the one bird is in sharp contrast against sand. The density of rocks in **B** makes it tougher. **C** is tougher, and so on. Warning: these images were taken in July in Massachusetts. The locations will be revealed in the next issue of *Bird Observer*.