

'Odd' nest site selection in Eurasian Golden Plovers in Iceland: is it caused by a particular kind of nest predator?

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Most waders nest on the ground amidst short vegetation on open landscapes. Their nests are usually no more than shallow scrapes lined with dry leaves and lichens. The Eurasian Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria* is no exception to this pattern, and typically nests on open moors or on tundra (Byrkjedal & Thompson 1998). Given the importance of nest losses in determining reproductive success of waders, the choice of nest sites presumably reflects major selective pressures.

Eurasian Golden Plovers breed commonly in Iceland (A. Gardarsson in Piersma 1986, G.A. Gudmundsson in Thorup 2004). They nest across the entire island, from coastal lowland moors to the tundra of inland slopes. During a visit to southwest Iceland from 30 May to 4 June 2002 we attempted to find as many Golden Plover nests as possible. Initially, our search image misguided us, as almost all nests discovered were in what we regarded as atypical locations.

Most of our observations were made southeast of Laugarvatn in the area of Mosfell. The topography here is undulating with ridges (30–100 cm wide and 30–50 cm high) separating lower areas of peatland. Although trees have been absent in Iceland for a long time, large areas have been replanted with conifers in deeply ploughed furrows. In this habitat of ridges and young conifer trees we found seven nests. Three were at the bases of young trees (Fig. 1a), three were under creeping willow bushes (Fig. 1b), and one was in a narrow ditch (35 cm deep and 20 cm wide, Fig. 1c).

A second series of five nests was found along a gravel road on a slope near Laugaras in an area called Sydra Langholt. One nest was located 2 m away from and 1.5 m below the road. Another was found on the narrow strip between the edge of the gravel and the fence 5 m away from it. The third (west of Hveragepdi in low lying grassland) was 3 m from the road and under a fence (Fig. 1d). The remaining two nests were found 30–50 m away from the road in low tundra vegetation on an open flat.

Thus, of the 12 nests, only two were located in what we would consider normal tundra habitat typical of the species (Byrkjedal & Thompson 1998). The remaining 10 nests were all in atypical situations where they were somewhat hidden by small trees, ditches or fences.

To avoid the attentions of nest predators, tundra plovers combine cryptic eggs and nests with cryptic behaviour. When threatened, they tend to leave their nests early and cautiously well ahead of an approaching predator (Byrkjedal & Thompson 1998). We were unable to determine whether the Icelandic golden plovers using "hidden" nests follow the same strategy, or whether they remain on the nest and rely on cryptic coloration. But what of the predators? Ground predators are scarce in southwestern Iceland and although this may explain why nests survive in situations that tend to invite inspection (i.e., by predators following lead lines and edges), it does not explain the unusual nest sites that we found. A potential new predator of wader nests in the region is the Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus*, which has increased in numbers during recent years (A. Petersen pers. comm.). It seems possible that these gulls are able to find and depredate typical wader nests in the open, but are less likely to find more concealed nests. Notably, Byrkjedal and Thompson (1998) mention that *apricaria* nests in southern Norway are occasionally situated "in deep heather to the extent that nests are hidden". We hope that the latter observation along with our findings will trigger follow-up studies on nest site selection of Eurasian Golden Plovers in Iceland and elsewhere.

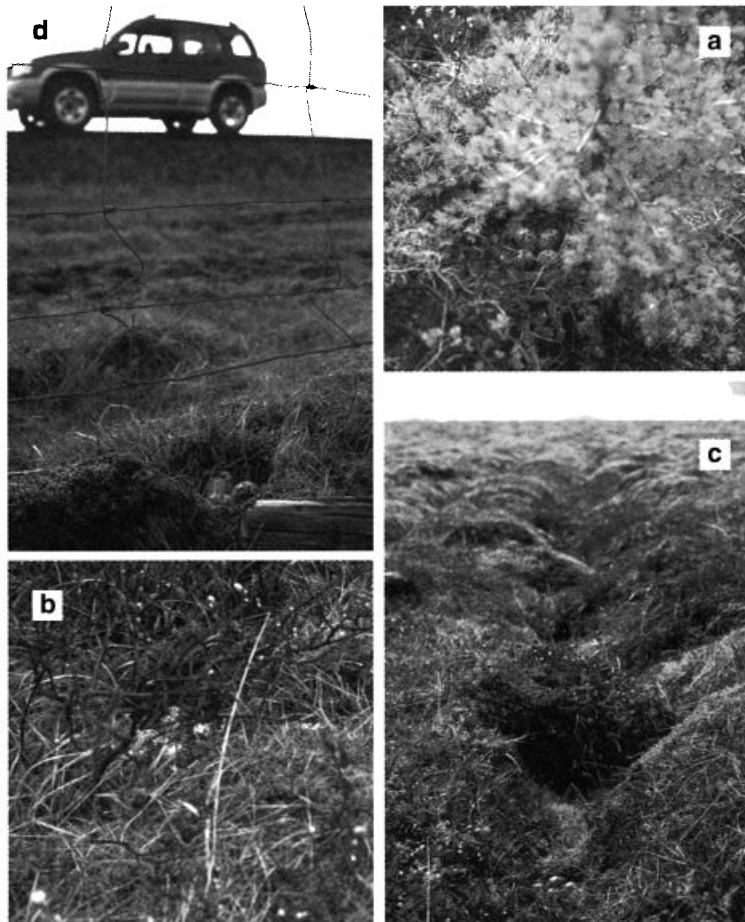


Fig. 1. Unusual nest sites of Eurasian Golden Plovers in Iceland: (a) at the base of a young tree, (b) under creeping willow bushes, (c) in a narrow ditch, and (d) under a fence near a road.

