

An influx of Common Ringed Plovers (*Charadrius hiaticula*) in southern Newfoundland in autumn 2006

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Abstract

The fall migration of 2006 saw the appearance of four Common Ringed Plovers (*Charadrius hiaticula*) in Newfoundland, Canada. This was twice the previous number of sightings for the province and an unprecedented influx for eastern North America south of the breeding range. This paper documents these records and highlights the features used to identify this cryptic and probably overlooked species.

Introduction

Common Ringed Plover, though primarily a Eurasian species, breeds in western Alaska, Greenland, and in Arctic Canada on the northeastern coasts of Baffin and Ellesmere Islands (Alderfer 2006). In eastern North America, Common Ringed Plover is rarely recorded outside of its known breeding range. Prior to 2006, there were only two records for the island of Newfoundland: an adult at L'Anse aux

Meadows (24–28 August 24 1980; B. Mactavish) and an adult at Bellevue Beach (14–16 August 2001; P. Linegar and others). The only documented records of the species from the Lower 48 United States are from Maine, an adult on the South Lubec Flats 26 August–5 September 2003 (Ellison and Martin 2004) and from Massachusetts (Veit and Petersen 1993).

During a four-week period (20 August–17 September 2006), four Common Ringed Plovers were observed at locations in southeastern Newfoundland: three adults in worn breeding plumage and one juvenile. All four birds were well documented with photographs, and two were seen by eight or more observers. The prevailing weather patterns in the days and weeks leading up to these records were characterized by strong northeasterly winds. Coincident with the plover observations were numerous records of Northern Wheatear (*Oenanthe*

oenanthe) in eastern Canada and the Atlantic coast of North America—another common breeding species in Greenland and Baffin Island.

Field encounters

The first Common Ringed Plover of 2006, an adult (probably male), was discovered on a tidal beach at Trepassey on 20 August (D. Brown, J. Harding); this individual continued to be seen sporadically through the following nine days. The second individual, an adult male, was found 29 August at Bear Cove, near the community of Renew's (K. Knowles, S. Dextor). This bird was well photographed and documented over the next hour but was not relocated. Almost three weeks later, on 16 September, a third Common Ringed Plover was discovered on a small boat slipway at St. Shott's (D. Brown, J. Clarke). This bird, an adult (and presumed female), was observed by a total of eight birders over the next few hours.

Juvenile (left) and adult Common Ringed Plovers, St. Shotts, Newfoundland, 17 September 2006. Photograph by Jared Clarke.



All three adult Common Ringed Plovers associated with Semipalmated Plovers (*C. semipalmatus*) and immediately stood out among their congeners by virtue of their paler, sandier upperparts, thicker breast bands, and distinct facial patterns, with more extensive white behind the eye. On average, the *psammodyroma* subspecies of Common Ringed Plover, which breeds in eastern North America, is larger and perhaps paler above than Siberian *tundrae* and European *hiatacula*, and these distinctions serve to set them apart still more from Semipalmated Plover (Paulson 2005). The most striking feature of the adult plovers was the thick, black breast band, most notable when the birds were standing and alert. While band thickness is variable between individuals, and its apparent thickness can change with posture in all belted plover species (Sibley 2000), a typical Common Ringed Plover shows a notably thicker band than a typical Semipalmated Plover. Finally, compared to the adjacent Semipalmated Plovers, these adult Common Ringed Plovers had a more contrasting dark face "mask," offset by an extensive white forehead patch and supercilium (the use of "supercilium" here indicates either a complete or a partial supercilium, one that extends only posteriorly from above the eye).

The features noted above were more than enough to merit further scrutiny, but they were not enough to confirm an identification of Common Ringed Plover (see Dunn 1993, Lakin and Rylands 1997, Alderfer 2006). Fortunately, closer inspection of the birds and excellent photographs allowed for confirmation of three additional characteristics: details of the facial pattern, orbital ring color, and lack of webbing between the inner toes. All three plovers exhibited a more contrasting mask than adult Semipalmated Plovers, including a broad ear patch (auricular) and adjacent area of black in the lower lores. This area of black remained evenly wide toward the bill, so that the lower edge of the black terminated precisely at the gape. By contrast, the dark in the lower lores of the Semipalmated Plovers appeared invariably more "pinched together," such that



Figure 1. Adult (probable male) Common Ringed Plover, Trepassy, 20-29 (here 20) August 2006. Note the pale brown upperparts, very thick black breast band, broad white supercilium extending well behind the eye, and lack of pale orbital ring (observed as black in the field). The lower edge of the dark "mask" meets the bill precisely at the gape. Photograph by Ken Knowles.



Figure 2. Adult male Common Ringed Plover, Bear Cove, Newfoundland, 29 August 2006. Note the very thick black breast band. The distinctive facial pattern includes broad black auriculars, offsetting an extensive white supercilium. The dark orbital ring and long, tapered bill are also typical of Common Ringed Plover. Photograph by Ken Knowles.

the white of the throat extended to a point above the gape and the junction of the black lores with the bill was thus always above the gape—a subtle but important distinction from Common Ringed in all plumages. A thick white supercilium extended prominently behind the eye (and in most cases also above the eye), bordering the black auriculars, in all adult Common Ringed Plovers. Adult

male Semipalmated Plovers typically have a faint whitish mark behind the eye; adult females may have a more extensive post-ocular mark (or partial supercilium) than males, but the auriculars are browner, creating less contrast than seen in an adult Common Ringed Plover. On each bird, the white forehead patch was large and tapered to a prominent point below the eye. This feature is typical of Com-

mon Ringed Plover but not of Semipalmated Plover, which generally shows a smaller forehead patch with a straighter rear border.

Photographs and scope views showed that all three birds had very inconspicuous dark orbital rings; adult Semipalmated Plovers have yellow-orange orbital

rings. More importantly, it was confirmed (and photographically documented) that all three birds had very minimal webbing between the inner toes and none at all between the outer toes. The most reliable characteristic for distinguishing between Common Ringed and Semipalmated Plovers is probably the more extensive webbing (palmation) between the front toes of Semipalmated (but especially the outer toes), which lends the species its name. Two of the adult Common Ringed Plovers were heard to give the diagnostic *tooo-lee* call on several occasions, a call that is more drawn out, melancholy, and flutelike than the rising *chu-wee* call of Semipalmated Plover.

Upon returning to study and photograph the adult Common Ringed Plover at St. Shott's on 17 September, the authors discovered a juvenile—thus a fourth bird. The identification of Common Ringed Plover in juvenal plumage has only recently been illuminated (Mullarney 1991), but it is now considered feasible and is treated in most North American field guides that treat Common Ringed Plover (e.g., Sibley 2000, Brinkley 2007). The bird's slightly larger size, paler upperparts, and thick broken breast band first drew our attention. We were able to get extremely close looks at the feet (60x scope views at less than 5 m), which confirmed the virtual lack of webbing between the outer toes and thus identification of the individual as a Common Ringed Plover. Unobstructed views of the feet were possible because the bird was standing on a wooden slipway, as opposed to a muddy or sandy terrain. Close inspection and numerous photographs also showed that the lower edge of the mask was not "pinched" and did indeed meet the gape, a feature indicative of Common Ringed in both juvenal and adult plumages. Whereas all the nearby juvenile Semipalmated Plovers were found to have pale or orange-yellow orbital rings, this individual had a uniformly black ring visible only at very close range with telescopes. This bird was later seen in close association with the adult Common Ringed Plover, the two even posing together for photographs (perhaps a first for eastern North America away from the breeding grounds; Frontispiece). Neither of the St. Shott's plovers was seen again.



Figure 3. Adult (probable female) Common Ringed Plover, St. Shott's, Newfoundland, 16-17 September 2006. **(3A)** This individual was notably larger and paler than nearby Semipalmated Plovers. Note the lack of visible orbital ring and how the lower edge of the mask (broad dark lower loreal area) meets the bill precisely at the gape. The white forehead patch (or frontlet) extends below the eye in a prominent point, typical of this species. *Photograph by Paul Linegar.* **(3B)** While often difficult to observe in the field, the virtual lack of webbing between the outer toes is diagnostic of Common Ringed Plover. *Photograph by Dave Brown.*

Discussion

Despite the few reports of the species away from its North American breeding range, Common Ringed Plover certainly occurs on the continent as a vagrant, and it seems very likely that this cryptic species occurs more frequently than the few extralimital records would suggest. Among flocks of Semipalmated Plover, adult Common Ringed Plovers appear paler above and larger overall, with remarkably thick breast bands and distinctive facial patterns. Such "candidates" should then be investigated further for a dark orbital ring (rarely faintly yellow [Alderfer 2006]) and the pattern of the lore-gape junction. Juveniles may also be identified by this "mask" pattern at the gape, by upper-part coloration, and by orbital ring coloration. The lack of webbing between the outer toes and unique call are diagnostic for Common Ringed Plover of any age. All of these features should be documented with photographs and video footage and/or audio-recordings, as they are subtle enough that they merit re-evaluation after the field encounter, both by the observer(s) and local records committees.

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Figure 4. Juvenile Common Ringed Plover, St. Shott's, Newfoundland 17 September 2006. **(4A)** Note the lack of visible orbital ring (clearly observed to be black in the field) and the lore-gape junction (the lower edge of the dark "mask" terminates at the gape). The thick broken breast band is typical of Common Ringed Plover. *Photograph by Jared Clarke.* **(4B)** Note the thicker yellow legs, broader chest, blockier head and overall bulky appearance of the Common Ringed Plover (rear) compared to Semipalmated Plover (front). *Photograph by Dave Brown.*