

# NOTES ON TWO MIGRANT WADERS NEAR AUCKLAND

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Such scant notice do Lesser Golden Plover (*Pluvialis dominica fulva*) and Turnstones (*Arenaria interpres*) receive in the ornithological literature of New Zealand that they would seem to be either rather rare or else rather elusive. As the two species are often found together along one stretch of coast where I have had opportunities for watching them, I have thought it worth while to collect these few notes together in the hope that other observers may be encouraged to keep closer watch in localities which are visited by trans-equatorial migrants. Messrs. H. R. McKenzie, C. A. Fleming and P. C. Bull have kindly put their notes at my disposal.

These observations have been made mostly in Manukau Harbour, between Wiri Creek and Puketutu Flats, where both species occur regularly in autumn; and in the Firth of Thames near Miranda, where both are curiously infrequent. In our spring (their autumn) the two species are scarce and hard to find; and in some years spring passes without their being seen at all.

## TURNSTONES.

These seem to arrive mostly by ones or twos or in very small flocks, from mid-September onwards. Some typical spring records are:—

Manukau 11 on 20/9/36 (C.A.F.)	Muriwai 2 on 17/11/41
1 on 26/11/41	Miranda 1 on 27/10/41
2 on 30/9/45	1 on 8/10/44 (H.R.M.)
16 on 14/11/45	3 on 5/11/44
Mangawai 7 on 24/11/40	

The behaviour of stragglers is worth noting. The single bird of 26/11/41 was firmly attached to a small flock of Golden Plover; that of 27/10/41 dropped out of the blue on to a beach where Stilts and Banded Dotterels were nesting and an immature Red-breasted Dotterel was summering. Its reception was not altogether cordial. It flew but was shortly attracted down by a fresh-water pool. Here more nesting Stilts showed signs of hostility. It flew again and disappeared in a southerly direction. The Turnstone of 8/10/44 had joined a flock of summering Wrybills and may have spent some months with them, for one was seen in the same company on 2/1/45. The two Turnstones of 30/9/45 were with the rare Dotterel (*Charadrius leschenaulti*) on the edge of a big pack of Godwits, recently arrived; ten days later the Dotterel was apart by itself, and the Turnstones, presumably the same two, were feeding among the Godwits on the falling tide.

It seems clear that most of our Turnstones and Golden Plover after arriving move south. (The two species have recently been reported together from the subantarctic islands.) However, a few linger near Auckland about midsummer. On 4/1/36 C.A.F. saw a large mixed flock in Manukau; and on 10/1/44 P.C.B. found 33 Turnstones and a flock in the same place a fortnight later contained 64 birds. By this time the northward movement of S.I. Pied Oystercatcher (*H. O finschi*) and Wrybill is in full swing, and some of these Turnstones may have travelled

from the south in their company. There are two January records for Miranda—three on 2/1/44, and one on 2/1/45.

There is a striking contrast at least in Manukau, between spring and autumn numbers of Turnstones. The biggest flocks are found in March and April. According to Buller, Cheeseman, in 1880, when Turnstones were "exceptionally abundant" in Manukau, encountered a flock of over a thousand; but the date is not given. No such numbers have been encountered in recent years, for which the biggest counts are:

1940	c.60	March 17th—28th
1941	c.65	March 9th.
1942	c.84	March 12th (c.80 were still present on April 8)
1943	c.75	March 1st.
1944	c.70	March 18th
1945	c.85	April 3rd.

By mid-April the flocks are smaller. e.g., 25 on 19/4/42; 50 on 14/4/43; c.36 on 17/4/44; and a few birds in poor plumage may linger into May. P.C.B. has the only recorded occurrence, 14 on 2/5/41; but none could be found on the next day or on subsequent visits. There are, therefore, no Manukau records between 3rd May and 20th September, nor is it for lack of looking. The autumn flocks usually contain a fair sprinkling of birds with the white heads of nuptial plumage, but there is a marked absence of sexual excitement and no sign of pairing. Probably the last birds to leave are immature and will only perform a partial migration, getting no further than the tropical islands of the Pacific.

In February or March Turnstone flocks of some size appear in this part of Manukau quite suddenly; and from then on till their departure day by day they follow the same ritual. With them Golden Plover are usually to be found, the two species feeding together along the line of the tide, loosely strung out and resting together at full-tide in a fairly compact flock. Their first choice for a resting-place is a lava-strewn foreshore where they are remarkably invisible. If disturbed by human interference or pushed off by a high tide, the flock moves 400 yards or so and settles on a mud-cum-sand flat thinly sprinkled with shells. Here again protective colouration is most effective, and on a dull day only a trained eye would spot them. Only as a last resort and most unwillingly, it seems, for they are quick to leave, do they make for a spit or some rocks which in autumn are dominated usually by great numbers of Godwits, Knots and Stilts. When driven from their second resting-place, they generally head back to the first, and if conditions have again become suitable, resettle there.

I have mentioned the behaviour of these composite flocks at full-tide in some detail because it is a performance which is repeated year by year down to the nearest yard. When they fly on to the second resting-place there is usually a wide expanse of flat on which they may alight; and yet the same small piece of it is chosen, I might almost say, without fail. The autumn association of Turnstones and Golden Plover is most marked. In Manukau, at least, the two species seem almost inseparable.

## GOLDEN PLOVER.

The few spring records would seem to show that these arrive rather later than Turnstones. My earliest date is 22nd October. The few available records are:—

Manukau	6 on 12/11/41	Firth of Thames	2 on 22/10/44
„	7 on 14/11/45	„	3 on 31/10/43
„	9 on 14/12/39		

Stead (Trans. Royal Society N.Z.) mentions that two Golden Plover flew on board his ship when he was crossing the Tasman in the third week of October, 1907. By themselves, Golden Plover are usually wild and wary. Two seen at Kaiaua on 31/10/43 on the west coast of the Firth of Thames were an exception. They were quiet and accessible, and evidently tired after their long journey, for they were seen twice in the same place with an interval of five hours between visits. It was not the sort of place where one would expect to find them, a rather exposed promontory with a beach of large rounded stones. They were never far from the water's edge. On the same day another Golden Plover was found on a freshwater pool. On this same pool on 20/10/44 two Golden Plover were forced down by a heavy rainstorm as they were passing down the coast. As soon as the weather cleared they moved on southwards. These are the only two occasions when I have seen Golden Plover in New Zealand on fresh water, although it must be conceded that this pool lies immediately behind the beach. Indeed, at the time of writing the tide had broken in and the pool is now brackish. On 14/11/45 a mixed flock contained 7 Golden Plover and 16 Turnstones.

After the new year, Golden Plover are more in evidence, but never in my experience are they as numerous as Turnstones. During the last six years I have counted many mixed flocks, the biggest containing about 100 birds, with the Turnstones outnumbering the Golden Plover by roughly 4 to 1. C.A.F. once saw a mixed flock of about 150 birds with Turnstone predominating. The largest party of Golden Plover I have seen contained about 28 birds; and the best counts over six years are 22 on 17/3/40; 28 on 23/3/41; 22 on 12/3/42; 16 on 15/2/43 (none were seen this year in March and April); 22 on 18/3/44; 15 on 20/3/45.

My earliest date for Golden Plover in nuptial plumage is 2/3/44, when out of a flock of 19, one was in almost full breeding dress and two showed the blackening of the throat and underparts well advanced. Birds showing black are always in a minority; but as their spring approaches, it is possible to note an increase in the proportion of "black" birds, i.e., 6 out of 18 on 7/4/41, 5 out of 10 on 14/4/42, 6 out of 12 on 3/4/45. On the whole, Golden Plover leave Manukau earlier than Turnstones. I have only one record after mid-April, three birds, which, to judge by their plumage, were immature non-breeders, on 17/4/44.

When Golden Plover are most abundant in the portion of Manukau Harbour under observation, Banded Dotterels (*Charadrius bicinctus*) are also present in considerable numbers. As the tide comes in, these regularly fly inland to pastures where the grass is short, or to arable, some half-mile from the shore. The same fields are frequented year after

year. During six autumns I have never known Golden Plover to desert the shore and go with them. I was, therefore, very interested when D. A. Urquhart, a member of the King's College Bird Club, told me that at Karaka on the south side of Manukau and about eight miles as the crow flies from Puketutu, he had been seeing larger birds among the Banded Dotterels which are in the habit of visiting the closely-cropped paddocks. In company with him I visited the locality on 10/2/46. When we arrived the tide was dead-low and the Banded Dotterels were busily feeding on the soft muddy flats of Pahurehure Creek, but within sight of the homestead, and well up on open rolling country three-quarters of a mile from the shore was a party of 12 Golden Plover, conspicuous dark blobs in a pale parched pasture. It was my first experience of *Pluvialis dominica* in such a habitat. I had come to think of our Golden Plovers, at least in Manukau, as almost exclusively birds of the tidal flats. But these birds in the Karaka pastures were on just the type of country where, in Britain, the slightly larger *Pluvialis apricaria* would be found. My informant had noted them several times between January 18th and February 5th, 35 being the greatest number seen. When we put up the twelve birds, they made for the shore, where later we found a typical mixed flock of 33 Turnstones and 25 Golden Plover, none of which showed signs of moulting into nuptial plumage.

P.S.—Since the above account was written (and sent for publication) the statement that in Manukau in autumn “the two species seem almost inseparable” has been corroborated in a rather surprising way. D. A. Urquhart assured me that he had sometimes seen with the Golden Plover in the Karaka paddocks over half a mile from the shore, birds that were smaller and rather black, and he believed they were Turnstones. On 3/3/46, at his invitation, I again visited the locality. When we arrived, the tide was full. A mixed flock of 15 Golden Plover, 40 plus Turnstones and 2 Banded Dotterels was quickly found near the homestead. (The main body of Banded Dotterels was later found in another paddock.) One Golden Plover was in almost complete breeding dress, and some were unevenly marked with black about the lower breast. (cf. supra. 2/3/44.) But what was perhaps most interesting was that several of the Turnstones were not content with merely resting there. They were seen to move away from the main flock and start feeding, flicking over the sheep-droppings just as if they were foraging among the tide-wrack on the seashore.

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BLUE DUCK (*Hymenolaimus malacorhynchus*) in Bay of Plenty.—  
I saw three on 23/2/46 in Takaputahi River (flows into Motu River), 20 miles north of Toatoa, which is 20 miles east of Opotiki. The river here is almost inaccessible and is a swift stream cut in the rock in a continuous gorge, at an elevation of about 800 feet. The ducks were comparatively tame. They swam about in an inquisitive way and preened themselves on the boulders. Their plumage looked fresh and attractive. A local settler said the Blue Duck population on a three-mile length of the Takaputahi River in his neighbourhood was 20 to 30 and in spite of new clutches each year the number remained stable, for what reason he could not say.—Norman Potts.