

## RINGED PLOVER IN THE FIRTH OF THAMES

By JOHN & BETH BROWN, H. R. MCKENZIE and R. B. SIBSON

A Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula* which reached the Firth of Thames probably in the southern spring of 1970, is now known to have spent the ensuing summer on the Miranda coast. When first found at full tide on the afternoon of 6/12/70, it was squatting among thin vegetation on an old flattened shellbank at Taramaire. Nearby were about 45 Wrybills, 19 Curlew Sandpipers, 8 Red-necked Stints, 1 Broad-billed Sandpiper, 1 Large Sand Dotterel; and one other small sandpiper which was subsequently identified as *Calidris bairdi*; so that there was ample scope for making comparisons. At least two pairs of New Zealand Dotterels *C. obscurus* were holding breeding territories not far away; but Banded Dotterels *C. bicinctus*, of which several pairs formerly bred along this stretch of coast, were missing.

As was only to be expected, there was at first some doubt about the identity of the stranger. Darker and smaller than *leschenaulti* and about the size of a female *bicinctus* it had a strikingly patterned head; a dark breast band; a complete white collar narrower at the back; a short stubby bill; yellowish orange at the base and black towards the tip. When it stood up its legs were seen to be orange yellow. So different was it from other small plovers or dotterels normally seen in New Zealand, that it was clearly either a Ringed Plover *hiaticula* or a Little Ringed Plover *dubius*. But the pattern of the markings on the head and the white wing stripe which it showed when put to flight at once ruled out *dubius*; and confirmed that yet another arctic migrant could be added to the New Zealand list.

H.R.McK. took notes on the facial pattern — forehead white, with narrow dark band over the base of bill and broad dark band above the white; rather faint eyestripe over and to back of eye; chin and throat white; crown grey; below eye a dark area, not black.

The dominant colour of the back and upper wing surface was an even darkish brown; underparts were white and a white bar tipped the tail. From observations made on several subsequent sightings it was believed to be not a first year bird but a sub-adult female.

It is now generally agreed that the Ringed Plovers of Europe and Asia fall into two subspecies, *hiaticula* and *tundrae*, of which *hiaticula* has spread across the north Atlantic and breeds in Greenland and northeast Canada. The very closely related Semipalmated Plover *C. semipalmatus* of north America, though often treated as a full species, is now known to interbreed with *hiaticula* in Baffin Land (8). *Semipalmatus* is not common in Alaska (2) and old *semipalmatus* records for north-east Siberia have been disproved. The Long-legged Ringed Plover *C. placidus* which has a more southerly range in eastern Asia is rather surprisingly treated by Dementiev and Gladkov (3) as a subspecies of *hiaticula*; but Vaurie comments that it is so distinct that it must be allowed to retain full specific status.

Though typical *tundrae* are smaller and darker than *hiaticula*, some Russian ornithologists have been unwilling to grant that they

are subspecifically distinct; and the situation is complicated because it appears that specimens of Ringed Plovers from north eastern Siberia differ from *tundrae* and are virtually indistinguishable from typical *hiaticula* of western Europe and the British Isles.

The Ringed Plover is sometimes cited as a species which exemplifies 'leap frog-migration.' Whereas those Ringed Plovers which breed in the temperate climate of western Europe are rather sedentary or move hardly further south in winter than the Mediterranean, the northern breeders (*tundrae*) are highly migratory and seasonally travel thousands of miles. The winter quarters of *tundrae* are in Iraq, Arabia and Africa as far south as the Cape. In autumn Ringed Plovers from northeast Asia travel southwest passing to the north of India to cross Asia and winter especially in eastern Africa. To India they are described as a "straggler or very rare winter visitor"; and Ceylon is credited with few authentic sightings (9). The Ringed Plover is not recorded from Malaysia.

From time to time, as happens with other strongly migratory species from Siberia which normally head southwest towards Africa, e.g. Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava*, Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe*, off-course wanderers reach Australia or the islands immediately to the north. A Ringed Plover was reported from Australia as long ago as 1865. Since then at least two more have occurred; and one which was collected has been proved, on careful examination of the feet, not to be *semipalmatus*. Elsewhere in the south-west Pacific two reported sightings of Ringed Plover have come from the Rewa estuary, a magnet for arctic migratory waders near Suva, Fiji. So far these sightings lack confirmation. Any Ringed Plovers which have reached New Zealand or south-eastern Australia have travelled virtually due south instead of taking the normal south-westerly route (v. map).

On the day of its discovery the Ringed Plover was studied at close quarters not only by the writers but also by Barbara Burch, Gillian Eller, Brigid Pike, Joan Trollope, N. M. Gleeson, T. R. Harty, D. A. Lawrie and some boys from the King's College Bird Club.

From later sightings which are now to be listed, it is known to have spent the rest of the summer at Miranda and the last reported sighting may indicate that it was intending to overwinter a little further south in the Firth of Thames near Waitakaruru where the main wintering flock of Wrybills is usually to be found.

13/12/70. 7.15 a.m. Weather calm; birds undisturbed; conditions excellent. John P. Croxall, John Jenkins, Barbara Parris, Joan Sibson and R.B.S. were in position before full tide and were able to examine at leisure much the same gathering of small waders as had been noted a week before. It was agreed that the Ringed Plover was too vividly marked to be a first-year bird, but was probably an adult (or sub-adult) female in winter plumage. The presence of a single Baird's Sandpiper was confirmed. J.P.C. had once been lucky enough to see one in Wales! Other small arctic migrants noted were: Curlew Sandpiper 22; Red-necked Stint 10+; Broad-billed Sandpiper 1; Large Sand Dotterel 1.

20/12/70. Full tide about noon. Ringed Plover still present in the same place and in much the same company. The heat and glare on the shell were not helpful. One small sandpiper or 'peep' not seen before was a puzzle. J.A. and Beth Brown, R.B.S.



[J. A. Brown

FIGURE 1 — Ringed Plover at Miranda, Firth of Thames, December 1970.



[J. A. Brown

FIGURE 2 — Ringed Plover at Miranda, Firth of Thames, December 1970. A summering Wrybill is squatting in the background.

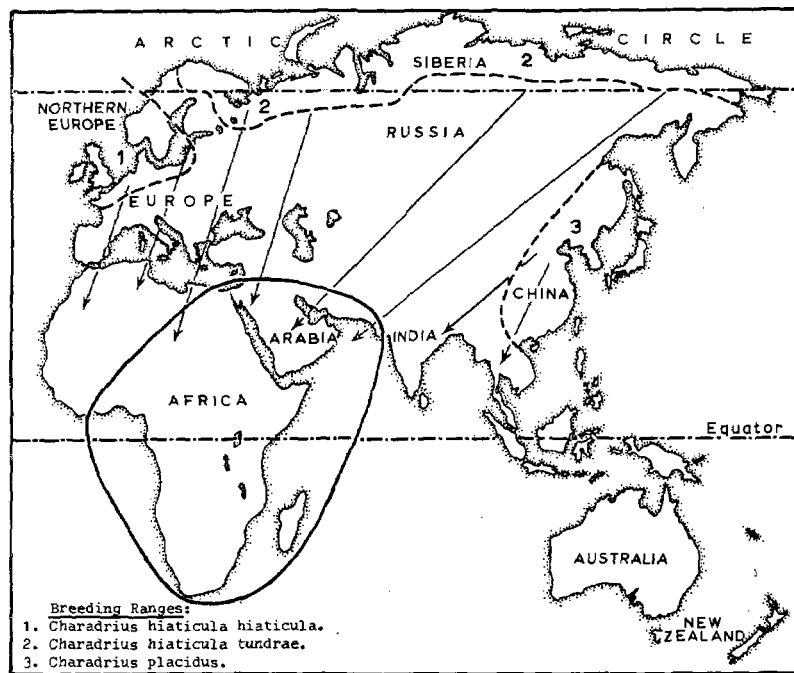


FIGURE 3 — Arrows mark direction of normal autumn migration. The main winter quarters of *tundrae* are marked by a ring. After Salomonsen, Dorst, Dementiev and Gladkov.

1/2/71. Big tide. Among the shellbanks near the old lime-works, the Ringed Plover stood conspicuously apart on a ridge. Other small arctic waders were not so easily spotted among 2,000 or more Wrybills; and precise counts were well-nigh impossible. The Ringed Plover stayed near the Wrybills and was not in the least attracted to a loose flock of c.50 Banded Dotterels, which kept their distance, away from the main concentration of small waders. Once again the Ringed Plover's behaviour at high tide was most accommodating, so that it was well seen by Dr. and Mrs. J. H. Seddon, Simon Towle, H.R.McK., Joan Sibson and R.B.S.

28/2/71. A very big tide at 9.30 a.m. had brought not only thousands of shore-birds but also a multitude of observers to the mouth of the Miranda Creek. Again the Ringed Plover stood out plain to see, together with two Large Sand Dotterels on the fringe of some 3,000 Wrybills. Apart from the waders, 18 Little Terns *Sterna albifrons* had flown in from the southern shore of the firth, which is their more favoured haunt (Notornis 10, 91-92).

6/3/71. Rather a modest afternoon tide; but a very satisfying mixed assemblage of the smaller arctic waders included 1 Ringed Plover, 2 Large Sand Dotterels, 16+ Curlew Sandpipers of which nine were well-reddened, 4+ Red-necked Stints. Again the Ringed Plover showed no inclination to join the 50+ Banded Dotterels.

This was a King's College Bird Club trip led by R. N. Buttle and R.B.S.

29-30/3/71. Ringed Plover present and just loafing in a large flock of Wrybills. H.R.McK.

29/5/71. The Ringed Plover was located by Sylvia Reed and B.B. near Kairito Creek. It and a single Red-necked Stint were attached to a comparatively small breakaway flock of c.250 Wrybills. This date seems to provide conclusive evidence for over-wintering. If the Ringed Plover does not travel south with the main body of Wrybills in spring, it may well be found again at Miranda during the summer of 1971-72.

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- 5 1961 Bannerman, D. A.: Birds of British Isles Vol. 10.
- 6 1962 Dorst, Jean: Migrations of Birds.
- 7 1964 Clancy, P.A.: Birds of Natal and New Zealand.
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## SHORT NOTE

### JOTTINGS ON WELCOME SWALLOWS IN NORTHLAND

#### *Runaruna (Hokianga County)*

In 1967/68 there were nine occupied nests in a limited area near my home at Runaruna. In 1970/71 there were fifteen occupied nests in the same area.

On 25/10/70 I found two nests attached to vertical surfaces; both were made of mud, straw and rootlets, lined with sheeps' wool and feathers, and each containing one dead juvenile Welcome Swallow. One of the chicks was about ten days old and had died in the nest; the other, fully fledged, was hanging below the nest with one foot entangled in the sheeps' wool. From the amount of excreta in the nest it seemed that the parents had continued to feed the chick for a few days after it could normally have flown. Insect remains in the excreta included *Tipulidae* (Diptera) and *Carabidae* (Coleoptera).

#### *Aupouri Peninsula (Mangonui County)*

A survey made during the January 1971 Study Course showed that most bridges in the area have now been occupied, and that other sites, i.e. buildings, covered water-tanks, jetties, old boats, over-hanging cliffs and shallow caves are being increasingly used. One nest, in a culvert at Houhora, was attached entirely to the inner side of festoons of Kikuyu grass (*Pennisetum* sp.) hanging over the entrance.

Miss E. Madgwick tells me she has seen a nest attached to an old sack hanging over a rafter in an open shed at Pukepoto, and also one nearby, in a corrugated iron tank lying on its side; both were used successfully in the 1969/70 breeding season.

#### *Nest Materials*

Nests made of the sandy muds available in the Far North appear to be less durable than those further south which are constructed of clay muds. This is less noticeable in nests attached to culverts and buildings than in nests under bridges, which are exposed to vibration from passing traffic.

My thanks are due to Mr. A. T. Edgar for his help with this note.

— R. S. COWAN