



The Hart Beat



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Plovers, such as this Piping Plover finding a meal on Bunche Beach in Lee County, Florida, have a wardrobe that changes with the season, location and thier age. (photo 5)

FLORIDA'S PLOVERS



(1) Snowy Plover

"You can find them right on the beach about a quarter mile north of the south end parking lot." We have been searching for Snowy Plovers for several years now, each time we travel to the west coast of Florida in the winter. And we have heard many such strong suggestions of good locations on previous occasions, including this particular trip, none of which ever panned out. But this time the source was Lillian and Don Stokes, of the Stokes Field Guides fame (see: stokesbirdingblog.blogspot.com/), whom we met on the boardwalk at Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge on Sanibel Island on Florida's Gulf Coast. "In fact, eleven of



(2) Snowy Plover



(3) Piping Plover



(4) Piping Plover

**(5) Piping Plover
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(6) Semipalmated Plover



(7) Semipalmated Plover



(8) Wilson's Plover



(9) Black-bellied Plover

them were seen at one spot just yesterday," they said. Armed with more site specifics, we set out immediately for the location. As we separated to increase our search coverage, Jewel found them first and came rushing back to get me. "There are five or six of them, right there, and they are so well camouflaged in the sand that I almost stepped on one." Alas, what Jewel failed to note in her haste and excitement, was the orange legs on each of the birds. Piping Plovers! A very common mistake made by many birders, including one earlier that very morning who told us he had seen many Snowy Plovers on Bunche Beach as we were walking out that very beach. He even showed us a very nice photo he had taken of a "Snowy Plover," which was indeed a very nice Piping Plover shot. We also found many Piping Plovers there, but no Snowy Plovers.

But all was not yet lost, for as we continued searching among the Piping Plovers on the Sanibel beach, we found one Snowy Plover sitting tucked in amidst the flotsam on the drier part of the beach, quite confident in his invisibility. (photo 1) When another beach walker, despite my warning, almost stepped on him, he did briefly rise providing a portrait photo op (photo 2) before quickly settling back down. There were undoubtedly more in the area, but rather than disturb them from their mid-day siesta, we decided to go have a late lunch/early dinner. One was all I needed for this article. Polarized sunglasses were essential tools for finding the bird on the bright beach in the harsh hot sun. (That last comment was for all of my northern snow-bound readers.)

While Snowy Plovers are year round residents of some Gulf Coast Florida beaches, the Piping Plover is strictly a winter visitor. It is easy to see why its pale winter complexion (photo 3) causes confusion with the even paler Snowy Plover, but the orange legs, compared to the Snowy's gray legs, and the slightly heavier bill and slightly heavier body profile, are distinctive differences. As the Piping Plover gets ready to return north to court and breed, it begins to develop black forehead and neck markings that further distinguish it. (photo 4) And when the Piping Plover engages in a tug of war with a beach worm, it almost always wins. (photo 5, above) I love the precautions the authorities take on New Jersey beaches in the summer to protect nesting Piping Plovers. They not only rope off the nesting area, but also post signs with ominous appearing pictures of large Dog Ticks and the warning "Tick Infestation Area." Now I suspect a sandy beach is the last place any self-respecting Dog Tick would ever be found, but no doubt many a beach walking dog is drawn closer on a tighter leash when those signs are encountered, and of course, the nesting plovers are not disturbed by curious Snoopys.

Semipalmated Plovers are the most common and the most wide-spread of the smaller plovers. They winter extensively on both coasts of the United States, from New Jersey to Texas in the east, and Baja Peninsula to Oregon in the west. They are a darker brown (photo 6) than the Snowy and Piping Plovers and have a more distinct neck band in all plumages than either the Snowy or Piping Plovers. As the Semipalmated Plovers moult into their fresh breeding plumage in the spring they develop a black neck band and head pattern that is quite striking. (photo 7) A close inspection of the left foot of the Semipalmated Plover shown here will disclose the small amount of webbing at the base of the toes that gives the "Semipalmated" its name.

The Wilson's Plover is the largest of the four small similar Florida winter plovers. It is one of the five bird species (Phalarope, Plover, Snipe, Storm Petrel, and Warbler) named for Alexander Wilson, who is regarded by many as the



(10) Black-bellied Plover



(11) Black-bellied Plover in flight



(12) Killdeer

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"Father of American Ornithology," (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Wilson) well before John James Audubon, Roger Tory Peterson, or today's David Allen Sibley. Found in south Florida year round, it extends its breeding range only slightly farther north as far as South Carolina. Its heavier, all black bill and bulkier profile, make it easy to separate from the three smaller plover species already discussed. (photo 8) It is not uncommon to find Piping, Semipalmated and Wilson's Plovers all in close proximity to each other on some winter Florida beaches.

"Why is it called Black-bellied Plover? There isn't a hint of black on the bird." is a question we often hear on Florida birding field trips. (photo 9) In winter, in Florida, we only see the basic, non-breeding, plumage of the bird. When the Black-bellied Plover dons its formal, courting, get-ready-for-breeding finery, usually on its way to the northern most regions of Canada and Alaska, where it completes the continued survival of the species cycle, it sports a stunning change of appearance, with, indeed, a full black belly, as per its name. (photo 10) It does have one black diagnostic feature, however, which it wears year round: large black spots in the armpits, (which photo, because of its poor quality, I reluctantly display, as it is the only such photo I have). (photo 11) These "black armpits" separate the Black-bellied Plover from all other similar plovers, i.e. American Golden, Pacific Golden and European Golden, of which, only the American Golden Plover, rarely, ever occurs in Florida, and again, only in the winter. They all have white armpits.

The most widespread, largest, and perhaps, most common of the plover species in Florida is the Killdeer, which gets its name from the call it makes, which does, indeed, sound like it is saying, "Killdeer, Killdeer, Killdeer." While range maps show them just about everywhere in the United States, those same maps show the southern edge of their breeding range just about in the middle of the Treasure Coast of Florida. They are found on beaches, mud flats, farm fields, meadows, the lawns here in our condo complex, just about everywhere you might look, although I haven't seen one yet mixed in with the Ring-billed Gulls and Boat-tailed Grackles at the Publix parking lot, but I wouldn't be surprised if one showed up there. They love to nest in gravel, (here in a commercial Garden Center in 2009) where their eggs blend in with the small stones. (photo 12) Also see: stlucieaudubon.org/hartBeat/hb2014/hb140801plover.html for another Killdeer story.

It may be ironic that the genesis of this article began after a chance meeting with world renowned birders on a boardwalk in the woods, at an iconic Florida National Wildlife Refuge. The irony stems from the fact that a boardwalk in the woods is one place a birder is not ever likely to encounter any plovers of any kind. Nevertheless, serendipity being what it is, maybe on our next walk on a beach somewhere we will encounter a birder with specific information about a marsh location for a Black Rail, a bird not ever likely to be found on a beach, that will set us off on another quest for the photos necessary for a rail article. But not All Aboard Florida. We will leave that one for the politicians and the newspapers.

For more information on the plight of Piping Plovers, see: audubon.org/news/pbs-newshour-zooms-piping-plover-efforts (4/1/15)

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