# First North American Record of Greater Sandplover

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Greater Sandplover on Bolinas Lagoon, 5 February 2001. Photograph by Peter LaTourrette.

On the afternoon of 29 January 2001, during a Point Reyes Bird Observatory (P.R.B.O.) shorebird and waterfowl census, an unfamiliar *Charadrius* plover was discovered roosting on the southern shore of Bolinas Lagoon, Marin County, California. At approximately 1300 Pacific Standard Time, Abbott and Howell were finishing the census at Seadrift, a gated community in Stinson Beach, when the bird was spotted and initially identified it as a Snowy Plover (*Charadrius alexandrinus*). When Howell looked at it more closely, however, he knew that it was not a Snowy Plover. Its body size, long legs, large bill, and lack of a white hind collar suggested that it was a sandplover.

For about 15 minutes, while the bird roosted next to a Black-bellied Plover (Pluvialis squatarola), Howell and Abbott observed it in good light at about 30-40 m through 60x telescopes, made sketches, and took notes. Abbott then left to contact P.R.B.O. biologists, including Pyle, who arrived at about 1400. Pyle's initial reaction when he saw the bird through binoculars at about 300 m range was that it was a Snowy Plover; but upon closer examination, the large bill and pale legs suggested a Wilson's Plover (C. wilsonia). Howell noted, however, the lack of a white hind collar, the olive-colored legs, and turnstone-like call, thus ruling out Wilson's Plover, Based mainly on bill size and leg color, both Pyle and Howell agreed that it was unlikely a Mongolian Plover (= Lesser Sandplover; C. mongolus) of the east Asian mongolus subspecies group, to which all North American records refer. Both observers had prior field experience with Greater Sandplover (C. leschenaultii) and considered that possibility, but neither felt confident that it was not a largebilled Lesser Sandplover of the west Asian atrifrons subspecies group (see Hirschfeld et al. 2000 for taxonomy).

Due to the difficulty of distinguishing between Greater and Lesser Sandplovers, the bird remained unidentified for several weeks. Birders arrived at Bolinas Lagoon from across North America, beguiled by a bird that even experts could not identify in the field. It remained faithful to the site, most often seen alone, but at times, particularly when feeding, it associated loosely with other shorebirds. Its preferred feeding habitat was relatively sandy mud (N. Warnock, pers. comm.); when the tide inundated this area, the bird roosted among high tide debris on a nearby sand spit. Its behavior was largely dependent on tidal cycles, and there were periods of up to a week when it was not found. After initial debate, most opinion favored Greater Sandplover. For example, based on examination of photos and observations on a birding website (http://fog.ccsf.org/~jmorlan/sandplover.htm), E. Hirschfeld and T. Hardaker (both versed in sandplover identification) felt strongly that this was, indeed, a Greater Sandplover.

On 15 March 2001, the bird was captured on Stinson Beach by P.R.B.O. biologist Doug George and was measured, photographed, and released without harm by Pyle and Howell. Based on comparisons of these measurements to those of museum specimens (Table 1), we confirmed the bird as a Greater Sandplover—the first record for North America. The last corroborated sighting of the bird was on 8 April 2001 (Howell and Richard A. Erickson). Seadrift personnel received sightings by unknown observers through 28 April, including reports that the bird had "turned orange," but these remain as yet unconfirmed.

#### DESCRIPTION

Size, Structure, and Bare Parts: Howell and Abbott considered the bulk of the sandplover to be about one-third that of a Black-bellied Plover Compared to Dunlin (Calidris alpina) present at the same site, Pyle estimated the bulk of the bird to be about one-and-one-half times greater The bird was approximately half the height of a Black-bellied Plover and slightly taller than Dunlin and Sanderling (C. alba). When compared directly with a Snowy Plover (on 1 April), the sandplover appeared at least twice as large. When standing, the wing tips projected well beyond the tail, with the tail tip about equal to the tip of the eighth primary. The sandplover appeared "flat headed," similar to Snowy and Wilson's Plovers, but its longer legs gave a comparatively lanky appearance. Pyle estimated its tarsus to be about one-and-one-half to one-and-threequarter times that of a Sanderling. Leg color usually appeared mediumpale, dull yellowish olive (Frontispiece, Figures 1-2); in bright sun, the legs looked paler, while in overcast lighting they seemed duller and more grayish. A dull flesh or pinkish tone to the legs was apparent in low angle sunlight and in the hand. The bill was black, heavy, and stout (Figure 1), the "nail" (the distal bulge of the upper mandible) appeared to comprise about half of the bill's length, and the bill tip was relatively pointed (Figure 2). The large bill was proportionally comparable to that of a Black-bellied Plover. When observed in flight, there was a slight, yet distinct, toe projection beyond the bird's tail (Figure 3).

#### Plumage

The plumage markings and color of the sandplover (Figures 1-5) were remarkably similar to those of a Snowy Plover in basic plumage. Its crown, auriculars, upperparts, and chest patches were sandy gray-brown, and its nape was only slightly paler, sandy-buff brown, unlike the distinct white hind collar shown by similar North American Charadrius. As in Snowy Plover, there was a small patch of white just above the sandplover's bill and lores; the whitish supercilium appeared variable in extent and shape, depending on lighting and angle of viewing; and the throat and underparts were entirely white. When seen alongside a female-plumaged Snowy Plover on 1 April, the sandplover's upperparts appeared slightly darker and grayer. The upperwings showed dark remiges with a whitish wingstripe broadest across the inner primaries (Figure 3); the underwings were bright whitish overall, but their appearance varied greatly with lighting. The uppertail coverts and tail base were pale sandy, contrasting with the dark brown subterminal tail band and sandy gray-brown back and rump. In bright light, however, the rump and uppertail often appeared concolorous, while in overcast conditions the paler uppertail coverts and tail contrasted noticeably with the rump.

In late January, the striking contrast between fresher (first basic) scapulars and worn, bleached (juvenal) upperwing coverts immediately identified the bird as being in its first winter (Figure 4); a scattering of mantle and scapular feathers were also juvenal. (Adults would show a more uniform appearance at this time of year.) The bird continued to molt throughout its stay, gradually replacing the juvenal tertials, tertial coverts, scapulars, and most median and lesser upperwing coverts. The longest juvenal tertial was retained on 29 January, when the inner tertials had been shed; on 13 February the longest juvenal tertial had been shed (Figure 4), the new inner tertials were mostly grown, and some outer lesser and median coverts had been shed. By 12 March, the longest new tertial had grown in, as had the new, white-tipped subscapular, and many juvenal median and lesser upperwing coverts had been replaced, but a worn and faded juvenal covert panel remained in the carpal region (Figure 5). The juvenal primaries, secondaries, and rectrices had been retained.

#### Vocalizations

On 29 January (during windy conditions), Howell and Abbott heard the bird call in flight and likened it to the call of a Black Turnstone (*Arenaria melanocephala*): a dry, rattled, three-syllable *trr-i-rrt* or *tri-i-it*. On later dates (in calm weather), the call sounded mellower, more reminiscent of a Ruddy Turnstone (*A. interpres*): a three-syllable, slightly sharp, rattled *tu-tu-tu* or *teu-t-tu*, in slightly descending series or with the middle note slightly higher (Figure 6). The bird also gave simpler, two-note calls, such as *tu-tu*, and less frequently a single *tu* or *teu*.

#### Measurements

With the bird in hand (Figures 7-9), Pyle and Howell independently measured (hence the range of values) and double-checked various parameters: exposed culmen length (24.0-24.7 mm; Figure 7); bill nail length (12.2-12.9 mm); bill depth at base (7.3-7.4 mm); bill depth at deepest point of distal bulge (5.4-5.5 mm); wing chord (137.7-138.0 mm); and tarsus length (35.8-37.0 mm). In addition, Pyle measured the flat wing (139.1 mm) and tail length (48.3 mm).



Figure 1. Greater Sandplover roosting on Stinson Beach, 15 March 2001. Note large bill with long nail and relatively pointed tip. *Photograph by S. N. G. Howell.* 



Figure 2. Greater Sandplover on Bolinas Lagoon, 5 February 2001. Note the heavy, black, stout bill. Compare this with other photographs presented here: in various postures, against different backgrounds, and under various lighting conditions, the bird took on rather different appearances. *Photograph by P. LaTourrette.* 



Figure 3. Greater Sandplover in flight at Bolinas Lagoon, 1 February 2001. Note slight toe projection beyond tail tip and shape of wing stripe. *Photograph by L. Sansone.* 

### DISCUSSION

Sandplovers differ from superficially similar North American *Charadrius* (e.g., Figure 10) by a combination of their brownish nape, bill size and shape, leg color, and call. Field separation of Greater versus Lesser Sandplover in basic plumage has long been a contentious issue. Identification criteria for this pair were detailed by Taylor (1982), Shirihai et al. (1996), and Hirschfeld et al. (2000). Bill size and structure, leg color, toe projection in flight, shape of the wing bar, and contrast of the subterminal tail bar have been considered characters of particular importance in separating the two species.

The bill of Greater is more pointed than the relatively blunt-tipped bill of Lesser, has a longer nail, and, excepting the westernmost subspecies of Greater (*C. l. columbinus*), is heavier and longer than that of Lesser. Leg color of Greater is characteristically dull yellow-olive, paler than the dark olive-gray to blackish legs of Lesser. In flight, Greater shows noticeable projection of toe tips beyond the tail, whereas Lesser shows little if any projection. The wing bar of Greater bulges more along the primaries and narrows along the secondaries; that of Lesser is more even in width. The subterminal tail band of Greater averages darker, contrasting more with the rest of the tail.

On the Stinson sandplover, we found bill size and structure (particularly nail length) and leg color to be the most useful field identification features; these were typical of Greater (Table 1, Figures 2, 7) and outside the range of Lesser. Toe projection was consistent with Greater, but this feature shows overlap between the two species in Australia and can be difficult to evaluate in the field (C. Corben, pers. comm.). While wing bar and tail pattern were also consistent with those reported for Greater (Figure 9), examination of birds in the hand in Bahrain (A. Forsten and A. Lindholm, pers. comm.) and published photos (pers. obs.) suggest that these features may not be diagnostic.

Other field marks we found helpful included upperpart color and posture. Greater Sandplover has relatively paler and sandier upperparts than the darker and browner upperparts of Lesser (Taylor 1982; C. Corben and D. I. Rogers, pers. comm.). In addition, the Stinson bird characteristically held a horizontal posture while standing and feeding (recalling a Black-bellied Plover), in contrast to the more upright posture typically shown by Lesser (which recalls a Pacific Golden-Plover, *Pluvialis fulva*) (Hirschfeld 1991; Howell and Pyle, pers. obs.).

Many shorebirds replace upperwing coverts and tertials in their first year, but over-winter molt of these feathers occurs mainly in the tropics and southern hemisphere, not at the latitude of central California, where this molt usually occurs before winter (Howell and Pyle, pers. obs.). In Australia, Greater Sandplovers complete this molt from late November to March (Marchant and Higgins 1993), relative to which the California bird exhibited a slightly retarded schedule—perhaps not surprising for a vagrant. Of note is that the tertial molt greatly affected the visible primary projection: on 29 January three primary tips projected beyond the longest tertial, which fell about equal with the tip of the seventh primary; on 13 February, four primary tips projected beyond the tertials, the longest of which fell about equal with the tip of the sixth primary (Figure 4). By 12 March, with the new longest tertial fully grown, the primary projection had reverted to that of 29 January.

Voice of the two sandplover species has received variable treatment in the literature, with both species' calls often likened to those of Ruddy Turnstone. Taylor (1982) reported shorter, harder calls for Lesser and longer, trilling calls for Greater. This is the opposite of the Stinson Greater Sandplover (shorter calls) compared to Lesser Sandplovers (longer calls) in Alaska (Howell, pers. obs) and Australia (C. Corben, pers. comm.). Most recently, Hirschfeld et al. (2000) suggested "that voice is of virtually no use when identifying vagrants." Critical attention to analogous calls, involving spectrographic comparisons, may elucidate the field identification potential for calls of these species.

Measurements and ratios of the Stinson sandplover are close to mean values for Greater Sandplover and fall outside of the ranges for Lesser Sandplover (Table 1). A comparison of measurements for the Seadrift bird to those of Hirschfeld et al. (2000) reveals slight a overlap in wing and tarsus lengths with the maximum values recorded for Lesser (although this may be due in part to different measuring techniques). In each case, however, the values for exposed culmen and bill nail, along with ratios or combinations of measurements (e.g., wing length and bill length), fall well outside the range of Lesser and confirm the Stinson bird as a Greater Sandplover.

For birds in the field, Millington (1988) indicated that the tarsus-tobill-length ratios calculated from photographs can be useful for separating these species: 1.43-1.78 for Greater versus 1.70-2.16 for Lesser (also see Table 1). Prior to the Stinson bird's capture, Pyle and Howell independently took measurements from 12 different photos of the bird in profile and calculated tarsus-to-bill-length ratios of 1.58-1.71 (Pyle, from 8 photos), and 1.55-1.67 (Howell, from 4 photos), both indicating Greater Sandplover. Thus it appears this method can be helpful.



Figure 4. Field sketch and notes of S.N.G. Howell.



Figure 5. Greater Sandplover on Stinson Beach, 12 March 2001. Note the relatively uniform upperparts with mostly new wing coverts and tertials. Compare this with Figures 2 and 4 and with the frontispiece for plumage and posture differences. *Photograph by S.N.G. Howell.* 



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Figure 6. Two examples of flight call of the Greater Sandplover, Bolinas Lagoon, 1 March 2001. Three-note calls, such as these, were most commonly given either with the middle note higher (on left), or with notes in slightly descending series (on right). *Recorded by S. N. G. Howell*.

There are three subspecies of Greater Sandplover: nominate *leschenaultii* breeds in Mongolia and north-central China; *crassirostris* in southwestern Russia and Afghanistan; and *columbinus* in the Middle East. In winter, *leschenaultii* ranges from southeastern Africa to Australasia (with migrants rare but regular as far east as Japan); *crassirostris* from the Red Sea to the Gulf of Oman; and *columbinus* from the southeastern Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf (Brazil 1991, Marchant and Higgins 1993, Hirschfeld et al. 2000). Measurements of the Stinson sandplover agree with those of the nominate subspecies (Hirschfeld et al. 2000), which breeds the farthest east and is the longest-distance migrant.

We will never know how this bird reached California, but the following scenario seems as plausible as any. A Great Circle line drawn from the wintering grounds of nominate Greater Sandplovers in southeastern Africa to Bolinas Lagoon passes through the region of this taxon's breeding grounds, which lie around the half-way point of this Great Circle distance. It has been suggested that circannual ("built-in") clocks predetermine for how long a young bird flies in its first fall migration which, in conjunction with a correct compass course, would take it to the species's wintering grounds (review by Gwinner 1996). Thus a young bird that flew for the predestined time period from its nesting grounds, but in a 180° misoriented course, could end up in central California, with its route passing through southwest Alaska in fall where refueling could have occurred. It is unlikely that the bird arrived at Bolinas Lagoon on 29 January, and we suspect that it was overlooked through the fall and early winter.

The Greater Sandplover has been recorded as a vagrant at least 66 times in Europe (Hirschfeld et al. 2000) but never before in North America (A.O.U. 1998). The Lesser Sandplover (*mongolus* subspecies group) is casual in North America south of Alaska, where it is a rare but annual migrant that has bred on occasion (A.O.U. 1998). In California there have been eight records of Lesser Sandplover, all from 12 July to 3 October, including one from Marin County (Erickson and Hamilton 2001). No confirmed North American records exist for Lesser Sandplovers of the *atrifrons* group.

#### **Acknowledgments**

Foremost, we thank the personnel at Seadrift Association (Dick Kamieniecki, Bob Stevens, Jim O'Miela, Kiren Niederberger, and Tommye Jarvis) for their remarkable hospitality and tolerance in accommodating almost 2500 visitors seeking the sandplover. Without the skill and patience of Gary Page and especially Doug George, we might never



Figure 7. Greater Sandplover on Stinson Beach, 15 March 2001, to show exposed culmen length of >24 mm. Ruler stop is held even with base of exposed culmen. The pale area across the culmen base was scaly, keratinous material, and not feathering; this feature is lost on museum specimens. *Photograph by S. N. G. Howell.* 



Figure 8. Greater Sandplover on Stinson Beach, 15 March 2001. Comparison with in-hand photos of Greater (left) and Lesser (right) sandplovers from Hirschfeld et al. (2001). *Photograph by P. Pyle.* 



Figure 9. Greater Sandplover on Stinson Beach, 15 March 2001. Note upperwing and tail patterns. *Photograph by P. Pyle.* 

# Greater Sandplover

have confirmed the identification. At the National Museum of Natural History (U.S.N.M.), Smithsonian Institute, Washington, D.C., James Dean and Christina Gebhard facilitated Pyle's examination of plover specimens. Joe Morlan's website provided a forum for opinions from around the world; Maya Decker, Roger Harshaw, Peter LaTourrette, Les and Cindy Lieurance, Larry Sansone, and David Seay kindly contributed photographs for study; Chris Corben, Annika Forsten, Antero Lindholm, and Danny I. Rogers helped with discussions relating to field identification; Corben and Diana Stralberg produced the sonograms in Figure 6. Among many others who assisted in various ways, we would like to acknowledge Keith Hansen, Guy McCaskie, Jackie Miller, Sandy Scoggin, Lynne Stenzel, and Nils Warnock. The manuscript benefited from comments by Thomas Gardali, Erik Hirschfeld, Gary Page, and Nils Warnock.

This is contribution number 890 of the Point Reyes Bird Observatory.

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Figure 10. Comparison of (top to bottom) a typical Snowy Plover (USNM 342132; female; *C. a. tenuirostris*), Lesser Sandplover (USNM 172914; female; exposed culmen 19.8 mm), Greater Sandplover (USNM 179026; female; exposed culmen 24.5 mm), and Wilson's Plover (USNM 460599; female; *C. w. beldingt*). Note relative bill sizes and body size differences. Due to specimen preparation, hind collar differences cannot be discerned *Photograph by P. Pyle.* 

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-Received 25 June 2001; accepted 21 August 2001

# Table 1. Measurements (mm) of the Stinson Beach Greater Sandplover compared to those of specimens of Greater Sandplover and Lesser Sandplover.

	Greater Sandplover <sup>1</sup>		Stinson bird	Lesser Sandplover <sup>1</sup>	
	Mean	Range	Mean <sup>2</sup>	Mean (±S.D.)	Range (±S.D.)
Exposed Culmen	23.8 (1.09)	22.0-26.9	24.5 <sup>3</sup>	17.6 (1.08)	16.3-19.8
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Wing Chord	135.9 (3.18)	132-142	137.9	126.7 (4.18)	118-133 .
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Culmen/Nail	1.98 (0.07)	1.78-2.11	1.94	2.26 (0.13)	2.07-2.53
A CONTRACTOR OF A CONTRACTOR					
Wing/Culmen	5.71 (027)	4.91-6.28	5.63	7.22 (0.57)	6.26-8.10
		CALL TO THE PARTY			

<sup>1</sup> Measurements taken by Pyle of 20 Greater Sandplover and 19 Lesser Sandplover specimens at the USNM. All were first-year birds collected on the wintering grounds, most in Southeast Asia (and, therefore, likely represent the nominate subspecies of both taxa); however, some were collected elsewhere in Asia and Africa. We use the international name Lesser Sandplover rather than the name "Mongolian Plover" for *C. mongolus* for the sake of convenience.

<sup>2</sup> Measurements of the Stinson bird taken by Pyle and Howell on 15 March 2001. The value reported here is the mean of 3-4 measures taken with both ruler and calipers. For each measure the range was <5.6% of the mean (see text).

<sup>3</sup> Exposed culmen measures are subject to shrinkage between live birds and specimens; e.g., Engelmoer and Roselaar (1998) found 2.8-4.25% shrinkage in plovers. Applying these values to the Stinson bird would result in specimen culmen length of 23.5-23.8 mm.