

**Snowy Plover Observed at North Island, Georgetown County,
South Carolina**

BILL PULLIAM
217 2nd St.
Ft. Collins, CO 80524

MARK SPINKS
Rt. 2 Box 189
Georgetown, SC 29440

WENDY ALLEN
USC Baruch Marine Lab
P.O. Box 1630
Georgetown, SC 29442

BETSY HASKINS
153 Garden St.
P.O. Box 1630 LaParte, IN 46350

A Snowy Plover (*Charadrius alexandrius*) was observed at the northern end of North Island, Georgetown County, South Carolina, on three occasions between 9 January and 26 February 1992. In all instances the bird was seen near the time of high tide in the company of six Piping Plovers (*C. melanotos*).

The bird was first discovered by Mark Spinks at approximately noon on 9 January, under cloudy skies with calm winds. While engaging in a routine survey of the small flock of wintering Piping Plovers at North Island, he noted that one plover in the flock had dark legs rather than the typical orange-pink leg color shown by Piping Plovers. On closer examination, he found that this bird also had a dark ear patch and a bill that was detectably longer than that of the adjacent Piping Plovers. Otherwise its coloration and behavior were similar to that of the Piping Plovers. Spinks studied the bird through a 15x-60x spotting scope from as close as 30 m. He concluded that this bird was a snowy Plover, and on his return from North Island, he contacted several other experienced observers to notify them of its presence. However, due to the inaccessibility of the location, no attempts were made to relocate the bird for the next six weeks.

The North Island plover flock was next observed on 19 February by Wendy Allen and Betsy Haskin, at 1130 hrs under partly cloudy skies, while they were conducting a routine monthly survey as part of the South Carolina Shorebird Project (coordinated by C. Marsh, Coastal Carolina University). They noted a bird in the flock that was generally similar to a basic-plumage Piping Plover but with gray legs and a dark patch behind the eye that contrasted markedly with its white forehead. They observed the bird for approximately 10 min. with binoculars and a 45x spotting scope from as close as 20 m. They were sure the bird was different from the Piping Plovers, and later that day confidently identified it as a Snowy Plover.

The final sighting of the bird took place on 26 February, by Wendy Allen and Bill Pulliam. They located the plover at approximately 1500 hrs., roosting with the same flock of six Piping Plovers with which it had been seen on the two previous occasions. They studied it leisurely for 30 minutes in good light under partly cloudy skies with a 1-15 knot wind. They were able to examine the bird through a 45x spotting scope from as close as 15 m, and through binoculars from as close as 5 m. They had excellent opportunities to compare it directly to both basic-plumage (four birds) and alternate-plumage (two birds) Piping Plovers within the same field of view, and Allen was able to obtain numerous photographs (Figs. 1-3).



Fig. 1. Snowy Plover (third from left) with Piping Plovers and Sanderling, North Island, Georgetown Co., South Carolina. Photo by Wendy Allen.

The following description is based primarily on Pulliam's notes taken in the field while viewing the bird, and a sketch he made immediately on return from the island before consulting any field guides. All of the characters noted, except for the flight patterns, are visible in Figs 1-3. Overall the bird was clearly a small *Charadrius* plover that was generally similar to a basic-plumage Piping Plover. However, there were



Fig. 2. A Snowy Plover (on right) with Piping Plover on low flat beach, North Island, Georgetown Co., South Carolina. Photo by Wendy Allen.



Fig. 3. Snowy Plover on low flat beach. Photo by Wendy Allen.

numerous differences in details of the plumage and structure between the bird and all of the nearby Piping Plovers. The bird's shape was distinctly different from the Pipings. It was smaller overall, and appeared somewhat shorter-legged. This difference was great enough so that the bird could easily be singled out by size, even to the unaided eye from a distance of 15 m. Its legs were dark neutral gray, with no detectable pink, orange, or yellow tint. The leg color could be seen well, as it could be distinguished that it was dark gray, not black, and the orange-pink colors of the Piping Plover's legs were easily visible. The bird's bill was longer and thinner than those of the Pipings, and was all black. The total length of the bill was approximately equal to the distance between the base of the bill and the eye, whereas in the Piping Plovers the bill was considerably shorter than this distance. The thin, straight bill was distinctly different from the short, thick bills of the Piping or Semipalmated (*C. semipalmatus*) Plovers, and along with the short legs gave an impression of a more elongate, sleek outline than that of the Pipings.

The bird's mantle (including back, upper wing coverts, and all portions of flight feathers visible at rest) and crown were gray, of a similar shade to but slightly darker than those of most (but not all) of the six Piping Plovers available for comparison. The back and rump showed a very slight scaly pattern, possibly attributable to feather wear, but this did not differ qualitatively from the basic-plumage Pipings. The rump and upper tail coverts were of a similar color as the back, and showed no contrast to it in flight. The bird had a partial breast band similar to but noticeably shorter, darker, and more clearly defined than those of the Pipings. It also had a well-defined ear patch, much darker than any shown by the Pipings. The bird showed a dark stripe on the upper forehead separating the gray crown from the white lower forehead, a feature that was also shown by the alternate-plumaged (but not the basic-plumaged) Pipings. The combination of dark forehead stripe, ear patch, and the clean-cut dark partial breast band gave the bird a distinctive "black-and-white" appearance when viewed from the front that was quite different from the Piping Plovers.

A final, and unsuccessful, effort to locate this bird was made on 28 February, by Spinks, Pulliam, Lex Glover, and Perry Nugent. This visit was made near low tide, rather than at high tide as on the three previous occasions. Though they spent over an hour on the island and easily found the flock of six Piping Plovers, the Snowy Plover was never seen. This may indicate either that the bird was no longer in the area, or that it associated with the Piping Plovers only at high tide. No further sightings or attempt to relocate the bird were reported.

Most of the characters listed above are fairly subtle quantitative differences between this bird and typical Piping Plovers, rather than neat qualitative distinctions. Any single one of these differences, or even a combination of a few of them, would certainly not be sufficient to rule out the possibility of the bird being an aberrant Piping Plover. However, the combination of all of these characters yields a bird that indeed is qualitatively different from a Piping Plover, and is entirely consistent with a Snowy Plover. Every feature of the bird that could be observed in the field (with the exception of vocalizations, which unfortunately were not heard) agrees with its being a Snowy Plover; many are inconsistent with its being a Piping Plover. Indeed, there does not appear to be any plumage of any other species throughout the world, that is concordant with the North Island bird in pattern, size, and shape. Thus these observers have no doubt that the bird seen and photographed at North Island is a Snowy Plover, representing the first documented record for South Carolina and the region (LeGrand 1992) and one of the very few records for the entire Atlantic coast north of Florida (Robertson and Woolfenden 1992). Interestingly the South Carolina Snowy Plover record fit into a pattern of scattered Snowies showing up in unusual spots during spring 1992. They produced such records as the first for Michigan, third for Tennessee, fifth for Wisconsin, and notable records for Idaho and Iowa (Kaufmann 1992). This pattern of vagrancies continued on in the South Atlantic Region during Spring 1993 with the first documented Georgia record on Sapelo Island 17 April (Davis 1993).

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