

**Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula* at Queenscliff, Victoria,
19 January to 9 May 1981**

Submission to BARC seeking endorsement of a long accepted report: Case 10??

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Introduction:

A Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula* was present at Swan Island, Queenscliff, near the entrance to Port Phillip Bay in Victoria from 19th January to 9th May 1981 (Robinson 1982). This is a well-established and much published 'record' (see citations and references) such that in normal circumstances it would be considered a waste of BARC's time bothering to assess the report. However, at the time of the occurrence and initial publication the very similar Semipalmated Plover *Charadrius semipalmatus* had not been recognized in Australia and therefore observers were not always mindful of this possible confusion species. Moreover, a very significant discriminating character, white in the lores adjacent the bill, had not then been described (Mullarney 1991). Moreover some plumage features such as the width of the breast band considered at that time to be diagnostic are today regarded as less reliable. Hence it seems prudent that BARC should assess this report. A copy of the report published in the Geelong Naturalist (Lane B.A. 1981) is attached.

Facilitated by its long stay, I was one of many to see and photograph the bird. Ron Brown (deceased) who at the time was working at the Arthur Rylah Institute, collected images from several photographers including me for documentation and research purposes. Somehow my slides went missing and in compensation for my loss I was given copies of four slides of the bird taken by Trevor Pescott, the well-known Geelong birder and author. Despite their age and evident deterioration, in July 2018 I had these converted to digital images. These are now attached and form a significant part of this submission (see page 2).

Description: A complete description which included details of the extent of the webbing between toes is given in the original note published in the Geelong Naturalist (Lane B.A. 1981) and is reproduced here. Only one photograph was provided therein but I provide four here. My field-notes state that this was a robust small plover, noticeably stockier and larger than Red-capped Plover, with white underparts, complete but narrow blackish breast band, mainly brown head and upperparts, complete white collar, broad white forehead and white supercilium. The bill was longer and more substantial than that of Red-capped Plover and was wholly dark. The legs were bright yellowish-orange and the iris was dark. There was no visible yellow eye ring. A bold white wing bar was visible in flight.

The photographs show that where the dark loreal line met the base of the bill it was equal in depth to the upper mandible. Thus there was no white above the gape.



Ringed Plover at Queenscliff, Victoria in January 1981

Photos by Trevor Pescott

Identification: The Ringed Plover is one of the small *Charadrius* plovers that have a white collar and black breast band. Other similar likely confusion species are eliminated by the criteria indicated below (Hayman *et al.* 1986; Chandler 1989; Mullarney 1991; Dunn 1993; Marchant & Higgins 1993; Beaman & Madge 1998, van Duivendijk 2011; Menkhorst *et al.* 2017).

The rather plump, dumpy appearance, dark brown rather than a slightly paler, more sandy-coloured upperparts, absence of bold yellow orbital ring and presence of a substantial amount of white in the upper-wing, eliminate Little Ringed Plover.

The following combination of rather subtle features eliminates Semipalmated Plover.

- 1) The absence of webbing between the middle and inner toes as reported by David Eades in the Lane (1981) published note,
- 2) Broad loreal stripe with no white above the gape,
- 3) Breadth and prominence of supercilium behind the eye,
- 4) The bill was too long,
- 5) Absence of any trace of a yellow orbital ring,

Status

To date BARC has accepted five records of this species these being: Case 133, Boonaroo, Qld., 1983; Case 330, Marlo, Vic., 2002; Case 476, Rottnest Island, WA, 2005; Case 527, Mandura, WA, 2007; Case 985, Stockton NSW, 2017. In addition, Case 118, Westernport Bay, Vic. 1996 is currently before BARC. There are however, about 16 reports including the subject of this submission not yet assessed by BARC most of which are likely authentic but some could be misidentified Semipalmated Plovers.

Acknowledgement

Trevor Pescott kindly gave permission for the use of his images and kindly provided photocopies of the Lane 1981 article.

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A Victorian Record of the Ringed Plover.
Brett A. Lane



Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*
Photograph by Trevor Pescott

INTRODUCTION

On 19th January, 1981, an adult Ringed Plover (*Charadrius hiaticula*) in winter plumage was observed feeding on mudflats near the Yacht Squadron immediately north of Queenscliff, 27 kilometres east of Geelong. This constitutes the first Victorian occurrence of this species.

This paper documents its behaviour in the area, and describes the characteristics used to identify the specimen, together with those which separate it from the similar Semipalmated Plover (*C. semipalmatus*) which breeds in northern Alaska and Canada and could conceivably accidentally migrate to Australia.

The Ringed Plover breeds in Arctic and northern Eurasia, migrating south in the northern winter to north Africa and nearby coasts. It has only occasionally been recorded in southern Africa and South-east Asia. It has been observed in Australia a number of times before. As these occurrences are documented in McGill (1969) and Rix (1977), this information will not be reiterated here.

The bird was subsequently observed by many people, until 9th May by M. Cameron (*pers. comm.*).

BEHAVIOUR

The bird was first observed in good sunlight around mid-morning using 8 x 30 binoculars at a distance of 15 metres. It was feeding in the typical "run-stop-tilt" manner of plovers. A notable exception to normal plover behaviour, however, was noted. When it stopped, it would rapidly tap the wet sand with one foot, before tilting to catch its prey. This behaviour is not commonly observed in other species of plover in Australia, and was seen in this bird a number of times subsequently by other observers. Its purpose is not certain, but it probably serves to stimulate movement of the prey, to enable the bird to easily locate and eat it.

When first observed, the plover was feeding on wet sand, amongst *Salicornia quinqueflora* herbfield near the high tide mark east of the Yacht Squadron. This was three hours after the high tide. Subsequent visitors found the bird at this exact place only at this state of tide. J. Pratt (*pers. comm.*) saw the bird at lower states of tide on tidal mudflats approximately 1 km distance, on the south-western side of Swan Island, at the southern end of the Queenscliff Golf Club. At other times, it fed along the water's edge, or on tidal sand and mudflats, around the sand island north of the Queenscliff Boat Harbour. When feeding it frequently associated with such small waders as Red-necked Stints (*Calidris ruficollis*) and Red-capped Plover (*Charadrius ruficapillus*). Other waders present included large flocks

of Curlew-Sandpiper (*Calidris ferruginea*), Red Knot (*C. canutus*), Great Knot (*C. tenuirostris*), Bar-tailed Godwit (*Limosa lapponica*), and Eastern Curlew (*Numenius madagascariensis*). At high tide when its feeding grounds were covered, it usually roosted in company with Red-capped Plovers in a sheltered depression between sandhills on the sand island. This depression is sometimes flooded during spring tides, and the occasional shells, stones, and jetsam on its sandy floor provide camouflage for roosting waders.

At no time during its stay at Swan Island was it seen in any other habitat apart from tidal sand and mudflats.

FIELD IDENTIFICATION

A small to medium sized plover, with sandy brown upperparts and predominantly white underparts, was seen on the sandflats. The first specific characters noted were the broad black breast band, dark eye and ear-covert patch, and the white "ring" around the nape above the black band. Thus, it was identified as one of the "ringed-type" plovers (Ringed (*C. hiaticula*), Little Ringed (*C. dubius*), or Semipalmated (*C. semipalmatus*)). Further observation revealed an incomplete white stripe above the eye-patch, and in flight, a prominent white wing bar, thus eliminating Little Ringed. It was not until some days later, when D. Eades (*pers. comm.*) managed to obtain excellent views down to 10 metres in good light using a 20 x telescope, that the webbing of the feet was seen, and Semipalmated was ruled out. It had one partial web between the outer and middle toes compared to partial webbing between all fore-toes in the Semipalmated (Prater, Marchant and Vourinen, 1977).

The bird was slightly smaller than a Double-banded Plover (*C. bicinctus*), which were in the area on later occasions, and noticeably larger than the Red-capped Plover (*C. ruficapillus*). Unlike the former, however, it had a much more stooped stance, much like the Red-capped.

More detailed observation revealed that the breast band and other "black" areas were in fact blackish-brown. McGill (1969) and Rix (1977) observed this on their specimens. Towards April, these areas took on a much blacker appearance. The legs were orangey-yellow, becoming more orange later in the season. The bill was completely black, at first with no indication of paleness near the base. These features, combined with the lack of pale edging to the coverts and mantle feathers (as in juveniles) indicated that it was adult (i.e. greater than 15 months old) in winter (non-breeding) plumage. The darkening of the breast band, eye patch and frontal band through time suggest the bird was moulting into summer (breeding) plumage. The base of the bill became pale orange before the bird departed (Jonsson, 1976).

These observations reveal that it was behaving normally for a northern hemisphere breeding, trans-equatorial migrant wader.

After consultation with the literature, particularly Dukes (1980) account of a British occurrence of the Semipalmated Plover, further confirmation of the identification of the bird as a Ringed Plover was obtained. A comparison of the photographs of Semipalmated Plover in this paper with the Queenscliff bird, paying particular attention to the breast band width, showed that it had a broader band compared to that of the Semipalmated Plover. The band thinned only in the very middle, whereas in the latter species, it thins nearer the sides of the breast.

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