

Semipalmated Plover *Charadrius semipalmatus*

at Bundaberg Port, QLD 6th of January, 2012

¹Jack Moorhead, ²Chris Barnes and ³Bill Moorhead

Summary

A Semipalmated Plover *Charadrius semipalmatus* was found and photographed by Chris Barnes (CB) prior to a scheduled shorebird survey in restricted access area at the Bundaberg Port around 0540 on 06/01/2012. The bird was relocated later in the morning around 0730 and seen by Jack Moorhead (JM), Bill Moorhead (BM), Nev Capell (NC) and Jann Capell (JC) around 700 m from the original site. Further extensive attempts to relocate the bird were unsuccessful. The bird was immediately identified in the field as either Semipalmated Plover or the similar Ringed Plover, with photographs confirming the identity later that day. If accepted, this will be the 8th confirmed record from BARC, the 5th chronological Australian record and the 1st and only record for Queensland.

Introduction

CB arrived early to complete a monthly shorebird survey in restricted access area at the Bundaberg Port on 06/01/2012. The habitat in the area is a combination of brackish samphire dominated spoil ponds and grasslands, of which the Plover was seen in both. The area is approximately 1.5 km inland from coastal mudflats, and is frequented by a large number of migratory waders particularly during high tide. CB located the Plover at 0540 which was quickly identified as either a Ringed Plover or Semipalmated Plover due to the obvious white neck collar, small rounded structure, distinct yellow eye ring and white wing bar visible in flight. The Plover was loosely in association with nearby Sharp-tailed Sandpipers, Red-capped Plovers and Red-necked Stints amongst others. After alerting other members of the survey group, the Plover was re-located around 0730 and seen by JM, BM, NC and JC in a nearby paddock. The bird was generally wary and observed in flight before not being relocated. Pictures of the Plover were emailed to prominent Australian birding members with the identification verified by Mike Carter and Jeff Davies on 06/01/2012 as a Semipalmated Plover. This was due to a combination of; palmations between the middle and inner toe, yellow orbital ring and position of loreal stripe relative to the bill base.

The sighting was reporting on Birding-Aus and local networks, but the bird could unfortunately not be re-located despite extensive searches. The descriptions and identification in this report are primarily based on a series of high-quality photographs taken by CB and BM.

Description

The below six (6) figures illustrate the key features of the Plover, with a brief description provided after.

Figure 1: Semipalmated Plover in side profile, uncropped (CB 0540)



Figure 2: Semipalmated Plover with Sharp-tailed Sandpiper (middle foreground) and Red-necked Stint (right). A cropped version of this photograph is shown in Figure 3 (CB 0540)



Figure 3: Semipalmated Plover cropped, illustrating diagnostic features including the palmation between the middle & inner toe on the lifted right foot (CB 0540)



Figure 4: Semipalmated Plover cropped headshot, showing distinct yellow orbital ring in non-breeding plumage and dark loreal stripe intersecting the bill just above the gape line (CB 0540)



Figure 5: Semipalmated Plover in flight, showing obvious narrow white wing-bar, which appears to taper towards the outer primaries (BM 0730)



Figure 6: General view of the habitat the Semipalmated Plover was located in (BM 0730)



Size and Structure

The size of the bird is larger than surrounding Red-necked Stint and smaller than Sharp-tailed Sandpipers nearby shown in photographs. The general structural appearance is of a 'stubby' rounded bird with a short bill, short legs and a 'plump' body shape. CB, JM & BM are familiar with Semipalmated Plover from sightings in Australia and overseas and the size and structure of the bird was immediately reminiscent of this species.

Bare Parts

The key bare parts of the bird are;

- Legs are orange-tinted and short relative to other *Charadrius*. Figure 3 illustrates a lifted right foot, showing an obvious palmation between the middle and inner toe.
- Bill is short and stubby, black with an orange base.
- Distinct yellow orbital ring.

Plumage

Key plumage features of the bird are;

- General dusky brown upperparts, with clean white underparts.
- Obvious white hindcollar, extending completely around the neck at a consistent width.
- Brown breast band of a consistent width, which is broken in the middle.
- Brown loreal stripe, which shows a small white strip between the gape and the lores.
- 'Dirty' white earcoverts.
- White wing-bar observed in flight, which is a relatively consistent width towards the outer primaries.

Aging

Based on the distinct yellow orbital ring, lack of buff fringes to upperparts and orange base to bill the plover is likely an adult non-breeding.

Identification

This bird can clearly be seen to be a member of the *Charadrius* genus of Plovers. The obvious white hindcollar, orange legs, general plumage and shape rule out all typical Australian Plovers which are also present at the observation site. Little Ringed Plover can be ruled out due to the obvious white wing-bar and short 'plump' structure. Due to these features, the bird is either a Semipalmated Plover or the very similar Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula*, both of which have been recorded as vagrants to Australia. The below key features identify the bird as a Semipalmated Plover;

1. Webbing between the toes; as illustrated in Figure 3, the bird shows an obvious palmation between the middle and inner toe on the lifted right foot. Ringed Plover typically shows no palmation between the middle and inner toe, whilst Semipalmated Plover always shows some webbing.
2. Yellow orbital ring; the bird shows a distinct yellow orbital ring in non-breeding plumage, whereas in Ringed Plover this feature is only present in breeding males.

3. Position of loreal stripe relative to the bill base: whilst this feature is not as obvious as other individuals observed in Australia, there is still a small white strip between the gape and the lores shown in *Figure 4* separating the dark loreal stripe from intersecting the bill at the gape. In Ringed Plover, the loreal stripe intersects the bill base below the gape line whilst in Semipalmated Plover the loreal stripe intersects above the gape line. This feature has been emphasised in recent years as a diagnostic feature for non-breeding Semipalmated Plovers.

Additional features which may support the identification as Semipalmated Plover include;

- A small bill with a bulbous tip. Whilst the pictures show a short bill length which is more typical of Semipalmated Plover, the photos are generally too distorted to read too much into.
- The bird shows a white wing-bar in flight which appears to taper towards the outer primaries and looks narrower than typical Ringed Plovers in flight.

Location

The Semipalmated Plover was located in restricted access area in the Bundaberg Port region, approx. 1.5km inland of the Bundaberg Port Marina. The approximate GPS location is 24°46'01"S 152°23'41"E. Where the bird was initially found by CB at 0540 and relocated around 0730 was approx. 700m to the south west.

Previous Reports

Semipalmated Plover has been recorded seven (7) times to date in Australia, with the first record in 2009 and semi-regular recordings since. All known records to the authors have been submitted to BARC for approval. The Bundaberg Port Semipalmated Plover will become the eighth (8th) record for Australia if accepted, the fifth (5th) chronologically and the first and only record for Queensland. All known previous reports of Semipalmated Plover in Australia are listed below;

- Broome, WA. October 2009 [Case No. 873];
- Tuross Head, NSW. May 2010 [Case No. 648];
- Clonmel Island, Vic. June 2010 [Case No. 646];
- Broome WA, September 2010 [Case No. 1166];
- Carpenter Rocks, SA, November 2014 [Case No. 871];
- Lord Howe Island, NSW. April 2017 [Case No. 982]; and
- Shoalhaven Heads, NSW. October 2019 [Case No. 1086].

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References & Bibliography

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