

## Status and Occurrence of Lesser Sand-Plover (*Charadrius mongolus*) in British Columbia.

By Rick Toochin and Louis Haviland

### Introduction and Distribution

The Lesser Sand-Plover (*Charadrius mongolus*) is an elegant species of shorebird found breeding throughout East Asia from the Chukotka Peninsula, south to the Kamchatka Peninsula, with birds also breeding on the northeastern shores of the Sea Of Okhotsk, areas west of Lake Baikal, and across southern China, and to the Himalayas (Brazil 2009). The Lesser Sand-Plover winters in coastal East Africa from Somalia to South Africa, with birds wintering in coastal areas on the Arabia Peninsula from Saudi Arabia to Yemen, and birds wintering along coastal areas from Iran through Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Burma, Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Australia, the Philippines, southern China, Taiwan and the southern Ryukyuan Islands of Japan (Hayman *et al.* 1986). There are many different subspecies found within the range of the Lesser Sand-Plover. The Lesser Sand-Plover subspecies (*Charadrius mongolus stegmani*) is the subspecies that has been recorded in North America (Paulson 2005). In Alaska, the Lesser Sand-Plover is an annual migrant throughout the outer Aleutian Islands and breeds on nearby Commander Island in Russia (West 2008). The Lesser Sand-Plover is also a regular migrant throughout the Bering Sea region and has even been found breeding on at least one occasion at Gambel on St. Lawrence Island (West 2008). There are scattered records throughout the state of Alaska away from where the species is normally encountered (West 2008). In these regions, the Lesser Sand-Plover is classified as a casual to accidental species (West 2008). In Washington State, the Lesser Sand-Plover has only one accepted record by the Washington Bird Records Committee (WBRC 2012). In Oregon, there are 6 accepted records for the state by the Oregon Bird Records Committee (Roberson 1980, OFO 2012). The Lesser Sand-Plover is also an accidental in California where there are only 9 accepted state records by the California Bird Records Committee (Hamilton *et al.* 2007, Tietz and McCaskie 2014). In British Columbia, the Lesser Sand-Plover is classified as an accidental vagrant with only 4 Provincial records (Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). This species can venture inland with records for Alberta, Ontario and Louisiana (Godfrey 1986, Paulson 2005). There even records for the east coast of North America from Rhode Island and New Jersey (Paulson 2005).

### Identification and Similar Species

The identification of the Lesser Sand-Plover is covered in all standard North American field guides. In the context of British Columbia, there are no other regularly occurring species that look anything like this species in adult breeding plumage. This makes identification fairly straight-forward for adult birds. There has been a recent winter record of the much rarer and similar looking Great Sand-Plover (*Charadrius leschenaultia*) from Bolinas Lagoon in California from January 29 – April 8, 2001 (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). The separation of the Greater Sand-

Plover from the Lesser Sand-Plover can be complex and difficult, and is out of the scope of this article. For those interested in how to separate these two species it is recommended keen observers read Hayman *et al.* (1986). The identification of juvenile and winter-plumaged Lesser Sand-Plovers requires more patience and attention to detail when separating them from the similar looking Semipalmated Plover (*Charadrius semipalmatus*) (Paulson 2005).

The Lesser Sand-Plover is medium sized species that is 19 cm in length and has a 56 cm wingspan (Paulson 2005, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The adult birds hold their breeding plumage from April to August (Sibley 2000). Adult males in breeding plumage are more extensively marked than the females (Paulson 2005, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The adult males in breeding plumage have a black mask from behind the eye that travels through the dark eye to the base of the bill (Hayman *et al.* 1986). There is white on the front of the face bordered by a black line that cuts across the forehead from one eye to the other (O'Brien *et al.* 2006). The bill is small, stout, thick and black (Message and Taylor 2005). There is a thin white supercilium above and behind the eye (Paulson 2005). Above the dark line on the fore head is an orange line with a brown cap (Paulson 2005). The orange continues down the neck to the sides of the neck, breast and upper sides (Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). The rest of the belly is white, as are the undertail coverts (Sibley 2000). The throat is white with a thin black line that acts as a border between the two colours (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The back and wings are a sandy-brown colour that extends down onto the rump (Hayman *et al.* 1986). The legs are long and dark (Jonsson 1992). The tail is mostly dark with the dark feet projecting past the tail tip (Message and Taylor 2005). In flight, there is a weak white wing stripe that extends into the base of the open primaries (Message and Taylor 2005). The underside of the wing shows extensive white axillaries that extend up into the base primaries (Sibley 2000). There is a dark secondary edge that extends up into the primaries (Sibley 2000).

The adult female in breeding plumage has a similar plumage pattern like the males, but is much more washed out (Hayman *et al.* 1986).

The juvenile birds have a similar facial pattern to the adults, with both a white forehead and a white eye stripe behind the eye (Hayman *et al.* 1986). There is a darker cap with scaly feather edges and a dark ear patch that extends through the eye to the base of the bill (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The nape is brown and extends down the sides of the neck as well as down the back, wings and rump (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The wings are brown, but with light buffy edges to the feathers as well as on the tertial feathers (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The breast is white and extends down to the undertail coverts (Sibley 2000). The wing pattern is the same as the adults (Hayman *et al.* 1986). The legs are also dark like the adult birds (Hayman *et al.* 1986).

In winter plumage, the Lesser Sand-Plover has the dark ear patch that extends to the base of the bill (Hayman *et al.* 1986). The top of the head has a dark cap with a white supercilium and white forehead (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). Birds in this plumage are a brownish-gray colour overall with a patch at the side of the neck (Sibley 2000).

The calls given by the Lesser Sand-Plover is a short, harsh rattle “*drrit*” or “*tirrick*” that is slightly rising in pitch (Sibley 2000).

The only commonly occurring species in British Columbia that can be mistaken for a Lesser Sand-Plover is a winter-plumaged Semipalmated Plover. The Semipalmated Plover is a slightly smaller than the Lesser Sand-Plover measuring 18 cm in length and having a wingspan of 48 cm (Paulson 2005, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). In all plumages, this species has a complete breast band, pale orange base to the bill and orange legs (Sibley 2000). In overall colour, the back, wings and rump are a darker brown (Sibley 2000).

The calls of the Semipalmated Plover are a loud rising “*chu-wee*” call that is radically different sounding to the Lesser Sand-Plover (Sibley 2000).

### **Occurrence and Documentation**

The Lesser Sand-Plover is an accidental species in British Columbia with only 4 Provincial records (Campbell *et al.* 2001, Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). All records to date have been adult birds still in breeding plumage (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). Out of the 4 Provincial records 3 have occurred in the mid to the latter half of July (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). The exception is an adult found in late June at the end of Rose Spit in the Queen Charlotte Islands (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). The first record for British Columbia was of an adult bird in breeding plumage found by Peter Hamel and Margo Hearne at the end of Rose Spit on June 22, 1993 (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). Incredibly, either this bird or another bird was found and photographed near Victoria at Esquimalt Lagoon from July 26-29, 1993 (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). The next occurrence in British Columbia was of an adult female photographed along Boundary Bay in Delta from July 12-17, 2007 (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). The final record to date was of an adult male in full breeding plumage found with 5 adult Semipalmated Plovers at the San Juan River Estuary in Port Renfrew on July 22, 2007 (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). The timing of the British Columbia records mirrors all records found along the west coast to California with adult birds occurring from June to August (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). The only difference so far is that there have been no juvenile birds found yet in British Columbia (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). With more scrutiny given to shorebird hotspots and the widespread use of digital cameras, it is highly likely there will be future records of both adult and juvenile Lesser Sand-Plovers in the Province.



Figure 1: Record #: 2: Lesser Sand-Plover adult at Esquimalt Lagoon on July 28, 1993. Photo © Tim Zurowski.



Figures 2 & 3: Lesser Sand-Plover adult female east of 104<sup>th</sup> Street, Boundary Bay on July 17, 2007. Photos © Ilya Povalyaev.

**Table 1: Records of Lesser Sand-Plover for British Columbia:**

- 1.(1) adult male June 22, 1993: Peter Hamel, mobs (photo) Rose Spit, QCI  
(Siddle 1993b, Davidson 1993, Campbell *et al.* 2001)
- 2.(1) adult male July 26-29, 1993: Richard Yank, mobs (photo) Esquimalt Lagoon, Colwood  
(Siddle 1993b, Davidson 1993, Campbell *et al.* 2001)
- 3.(1) adult female July 12-17, 2007: Carlo Giovanella, mobs (photo) east of 104<sup>th</sup> Street,  
Boundary Bay (Toochin *et al.* 2014)

4.(1) adult male July 22, 2007: Louis Haviland, Rick Toochin: Beach at Port Renfrew  
(Toochin *et al.* 2014)

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