

**BLACK-BELLIED PLOVER**     **Donald Shephard**

**Black-bellied Plover in breeding plumage.**

**Photo courtesy of US Fish and Wildlife Service, Tom Bowman**

While others prepared their barbecues and eagerly awaited fireworks on July 4, 2004 Becky Bowen of downtown Caspar followed her passion to Ten Mile Beach. She spotted a Black-bellied Plover near the mouth of Inglenook Creek still wearing his full breeding plumage.

Becky says, "I'd never seen anything like that except in pictures and it very nearly stopped my heart. I remember getting out the cell phone and calling Alison Cebula at State Parks to report the sighting and babbling like an idiot."

I prefer to think of Becky as a sentinel for shorebirds. Like the Black-bellied Plover, she stands guard and calls out a warning while other species feed unconcernedly. Long-winged in flight, it shows a clear white wingbar and square white rump. From below, a diagnostic black mark on the armpit contrasts with the white underwing. In breeding plumage, this species sparkles white and gray above, with a white line along the side and jet black underparts. Non-breeding birds are pale below and greyish and pale spotted above. The large dark eye is prominent. The stance appears hunched and neckless, hence the old Cape Cod name, Beetlehead.

They move relatively slowly on the ground and fly away silently when disturbed. They exhibit the typical plover habit of stop, look, and peck, but occasionally pick in shallow water like

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continued

sandpipers. If you observe their tracks in wet sand, you will see they are the only plover in our region with a small hind toe like the lapwings. Later evolving plovers have lost them.

Becky is not alone in admiring this handsome shorebird. Its large breeding range includes West Russia east to Baffin Island, while its winter range covers the coastal areas of north Europe, Africa, Australia, Asia, North and South America, but not Antarctica. In England, where it does not breed, it is known as the Grey Plover, perhaps in the interest of truth in advertising, for its off-season plumage appears gray.

This plover is one of our strongest fliers, one reason for its wide range. Dorothy Tobkin tells me Black-bellied Plovers are common in migration and she sees them at Virgin Creek all winter. Most birds have lost the striking black chest by the time they arrive here, although a dazzling male visited recently. Volunteer members of the Save Our Shorebirds program count 30-40 all winter. Since we lack the huge mudflats found in Humboldt County, where large numbers congregate, our sightings are all the more precious.

Black-bellied Plovers are the largest of US plovers and, like Whimbrels, take prey of sufficient size to interest gulls, which pester them. Arthur Cleveland Bent in his book *Life Histories of North American Shorebirds* quotes three stalwarts in 1918 who "took" a California bird which had in its stomach "fourteen small snails, one small bivalve mollusc, and parts of two or more small crabs." Bent also writes that they "resort to meadows and upland pastures where grass is short and do some good by devouring grasshoppers, cutworms, earthworms and beetles."

Take a beach walk and you may see Black-bellied Plovers. Their behaviour becomes aggressive and asocial as they feed alone, but roost in flocks. Watch for a male to spread its tail in full show-off mode, it's amazing according to that passionate birder, Becky Bowen, "It looks like an angel's fan."

**Black-bellied Plover non-breeding plumage**

**Photo by Gabriel Buissart**

