

**SEMI-PALMATED PLOVER Donald Shephard**

**Non-breeding Semi-palmated Plover**  
**photo John Sunan**

Stroll Ten Mile Beach in August or September and you will likely run into Becky Bowen studying a Semi-palmated Plover, so called because it has the toes joined only part way down with a web. Becky thinks of them as round birds: round bodies, round heads, round eyes. No wonder she calls them round. These birds are often exceedingly fat in autumn. In 1905, at a time when Ringnecks, as they were then known, were shot for game, C.W. Townsend wrote: "The fat is under the skin, develops all the viscera, and infiltrates the liver. How birds fly so vigorously on their long migrations is a mystery." Their diet consists of worms,

small mollusks, crustaceans and insects. They are on their migration from breeding grounds in the Arctic to feeding places in Central and South America.

Semi-palmated Plovers especially like the mudflats on the south shore of Ten Mile River. A beginner will be forgiven for first thinking Killdeer before noticing this species has a single ring around its neck while the Killdeer has two. More experienced birders note the absence of rufous color on the rump.

This is the darkest of the small plovers. Note the dark brown upper side, white belly and breast, dark cheek, and orange legs, stout orange bill with dark tip. In flight they show a faint white line on the wings which contrasts with the general brown of the upper parts. They keep to themselves in flight, but readily join other species on the ground. You will find Semi-palmated Plovers in association with Least and Western Sandpipers, but also flying with Sanderlings and other larger waders.

Semi-palmated Plovers give the impression of slowly migrating south along a moveable feast in fall, but hurrying to the breeding grounds in spring. Once there, the song is generally given from the ground. It has been likened to a whinny or the sound of a bouncing ball. Notes are at first slowly repeated but their speed increases until nearly running together. Calling birds crouch low with tails spread and slightly cocked, wings partly open and feathers of breast and flanks puffed out. Sometimes one walks around another, sometimes they spring at each other, sometimes they walk side by side in a cakewalk uttering their clucking song. They often emit a plaintive whistle of two notes while in flight, or a single note from the ground.

In 1840 Audubon wrote that in Labrador this plover makes, "a cavity in the moss, in a place sheltered from north winds and exposed to the full rays of the sun, usually by small ponds and surrounded by short grass." Bare pectoral patches suggest both sexes assist in incubation.

## **SEMI-PALMATED PLOVER**

**continued**

Three or four eggs produce precocial young, capable of running or even swimming short distances to follow parents to small islets on shallow lakes. They also lie flat on the sand, well camouflaged.

Go with Becky at high tide and you may catch this bird asleep on the upper beach beyond the reach of waves. Or you may see them in compact flocks flying, twisting and turning as if animated by a single thought. They also fly in loose order. On alighting they at once spread out on the sand in true plover fashion, and do not, like sandpipers, keep together and move close to the wave line. Another plover habit, which at once distinguishes them from sanderlings and other small sandpipers, is that of running about with heads up and then dabbling suddenly at the ground from time to time, whereas sandpipers usually move with their heads down, diligently probing the sand. With erect figures they run in various directions, often standing still as if listening, occasionally jerking or bobbing their heads and necks and then swiftly dabbling at a morsel of food.

Adults have a partial prenuptial molt involving the body plumage, some scapulars and wing coverts, and a complete postnuptial molt from July to December. The sexes look alike in immature and winter plumage and look nearly in breeding plumage. In winter, in both sexes, the black markings are replaced by grayish-brown. Their plumage matches wet sand, their favorite feeding habitat.

If this description leaves you scratching your head, you are not alone. Becky tells me that in September, 2010, (Save Our Shorebirds (SOS) volunteers posted a photo on the Cowlick's bulletin board and identified it as a Semi-palmated Plover at Virgin Creek Beach. SOS volunteers like to post photos of "What's On Our Beaches" in the ice cream parlor). This triggered a bunch of phone calls from birders who complained that the bird in the photo was misidentified. Whether it was the light, or the angle, or the ongoing molt, we may never know, but birders swore it was not a Semi-palmated Plover. But that's exactly what it was.

Fortunately, there will be many more chances to observe Semi-palmated Plovers. They are among the few plovers whose numbers are apparently increasing, perhaps owing to their versatility in food and habitat choice, their wide-spread coastal winter distribution, or the expansion of suitable expansion in the sub-Arctic as a result of disturbance by both humans and Arctic geese.

### **Semi-palmated Plover in flight photo Becky Bowen**

