

(Jeff Lemons)



## Charadriidae the PLOVERS

Members of the families Charadriidae (Plovers) and Scolopacidae (Sandpipers) are often referred to as “shorebirds.” “Shorebird” is a generic term applied to a variety of birds that forage along the shore of coastal or inland waters. Many types of shorebirds migrate extraordinary distances between their breeding grounds in the far north and wintering sites far to the south. “Stopover habitat” must be available along their migration routes so these birds are able to rest and refuel. This habitat is vital to their survival.

In the Western Hemisphere, populations of many kinds of shorebirds are in peril. For this reason, a variety of state, federal, academic, and conservation organizations have joined together to develop a comprehensive plan for the conservation of shorebirds in the United States. The goals of this plan are threefold. First, to ensure the protection of habitat on breeding and wintering grounds and at migration stopover sites. Second, to stabilize populations of shorebirds already in decline and to insure other shorebird populations are not put at risk. Third, to cooperate internationally on behalf of shorebird conservation in this hemisphere. Over 30 species of shorebirds have been documented utilizing stopover habitat in the Carolina Piedmont.

Only a small number of shorebird species had been documented in the region prior to the 1960s. Starting in that decade, birders began to intentionally search out habitat sites favored by migrating shorebirds. They armed themselves with spotting scopes set atop sturdy tripods so they could get excellent looks from a distance. Many migrating shorebirds were found visiting mudflats exposed along lake shores during dry periods. Many types of plovers and sandpipers were discovered frequenting area wastewater treatment ponds where there were expansive drying beds. The Mecklenburg Audubon Society even advertised special weekend field trips to local sewage treatment plants. Participants were often rewarded with sightings of shorebird rarities and these group outings added several new species to the Mecklenburg County bird list. Today, mudflats are still found on lakes during dry periods, but wastewater treatment technology has changed and expansive drying beds are no longer used. However, the flat terrain of most sewage treatment plants can still provide excellent habitat for a variety of shorebirds.

So, how does one distinguish a plover from a sandpiper? A plover is a more compact, thick bodied, somewhat rounded bird with a fairly thick bill that is shorter than the length of its head. Its body length is slightly longer than its body height. Its legs are relatively short. Also, plovers are visual feeders that generally feed in a characteristic “step, step, stop” pattern—moving suddenly, stopping, then abruptly moving again.

Five species of plovers have been documented in the Central Carolinas. They range in size from the small Semipalmated Plover and Piping Plover at 7 ¼ inches, to the Killdeer at 10 ½ inches, to the American Golden-Plover and Black-bellied Plover at 10 ½ inches and 11 ½ inches, respectively. Only the Killdeer breeds here, the rest are migrants.

This early report was published in the *Mecklenburg Times* in April 1896, adjacent to a piece announcing the continuing increase of local acreage plowed for planting cotton: “For several days past sportsmen have found a good many plover in the plowed fields about town. The plover is a migratory bird, but it is only in recent years that it has stopped here. A few were first seen five or six years ago. Now they are plentiful, each spring. They are very shy, fast runners and hard to get a shot at.”

Whether these birds were in actuality the common Killdeer, or some other type of plover or shorebird, we will never know.