Golden Plovers

Rich Stallcup

IT IS THE AUTUMN EQUINOX, and you are birding Point Reyes. There are a lot of people birding Point Reyes! A group is working the grassy hilltop known as Spenaletta plateau in hopes of early longspurs. Someone who knows the flight calls shouts, “Golden Plover.” The bird is spotted flying in from the sea. It calls again, wheels, flying inches above the short grass, quarters, and lands near the Holsteins. Great, a Golden Plover! But which one?

What? What do you mean which one?
We don’t get many golden plovers in California, but making up for those few are two different kinds. The central United States hosts huge numbers of golden plovers during migration but only one kind.

Years of speculation by birders and, finally, proof documented by Peter Conners (Auk 100:607–620 July 1983) has pinned down the fact that the American “race” and the Pacific or Siberian “sub-species” are actually distinct, full species. The two forms nest sympatrically in much of Western Alaska, and hybrid or intermediate birds are rare, suggesting that pairing is far from random.

The American form of Golden Plover is currently known as Pluvialis dominica dominica, the Pacific one P. dominica fulva. When accepted by the American Ornithologist’s Union Committee on Taxonomy and Nomenclature, they will most likely be known as the American Golden Plover (P. dominica) and the Pacific Golden Plover (P. fulva). Here we will call them simply dominica and fulva.

Timing

THE EXACT TIMING for migrants’ passage is not yet established, since many records from the past failed to specifically identify which plover was involved. We do, however, know some of the basics.

The first dominicas arrive in California in mid-July. Most are juveniles, and all of them leave for South America by early November. In Spring, most of the few migrants away from known wintering spots for fulva (except north along the coast where they would overlap), and especially those inland, are also dominica. Remember, dominica winters in the southern hemisphere and is not to be expected in California between November and March.

Distribution

THE BREEDING RANGE of fulva is a relatively narrow swath that stretches clear across northernmost Siberasia and splashes over the Bering Straits into western Alaska. Its huge winter range extends along the coasts of central East Africa, India, and Asia to Australia, southern New Zealand, and islands in the south-central and western Pacific (called Oceania in old ornithological literature). Its migration from Alaska to south Pacific isles is direct — over the big water. A very few winter on favored places along the California coast at about the same latitude as their northernmost wintering range in Asia. These are the only individuals known to winter in the Americas, but for them to occur in Baja or farther south would be no surprise. The bird has, in fact, been collected in Chile.

The first fulvas average later in arrival than dominicas; they are often not reported before mid-September. In late September and early October, the two species may be found together at their favorite coastal spots, presenting a great chance to compare them. Little flocks of fulva tend to winter in fairly small areas and so are not difficult to find. They do not depart until late April or early May, when one may see them in almost complete alternate (breeding) plumage.

Shape and Plumage

THE TWO PLOVERS are very similar in shape. Of the common shorebirds, they most closely resemble Black-bellied Plover but are more petite and delicate in proportion. Both are slimmer, taller, and smaller-headed than Black-bellied Plover. Of the goldens, fulva, though a slightly smaller bird, looks taller than dominica; it has longer
**Dominica**

**Fulva**

Black-bellied Plover

Dominica

Fulva

In background, Holsteins and Black-bellied Plovers, with one flying Golden Plover

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*Although the two different species of Lesser Golden Plover occurring in California are not yet officially split, why wait? Go out and identify one of each, and put them in the bank for your lists. Even when they were considered the same species, the two plovers have long been known as distinct forms. Numerous books celebrate dominica as a record-worthy, long-distance migrant and fulva as the bird that runs around, robin-like, on manicured lawns and rooftops on the larger, populated Hawaiian Islands.*

Your challenge now, if you choose to accept it, is to find a hybrid between fulva and dominica...and then convince somebody else. Next, try to describe the difference in flight-calls between the two forms!

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