The Identification of Semipalmated and Common Ringed Plovers in Alternate Plumage

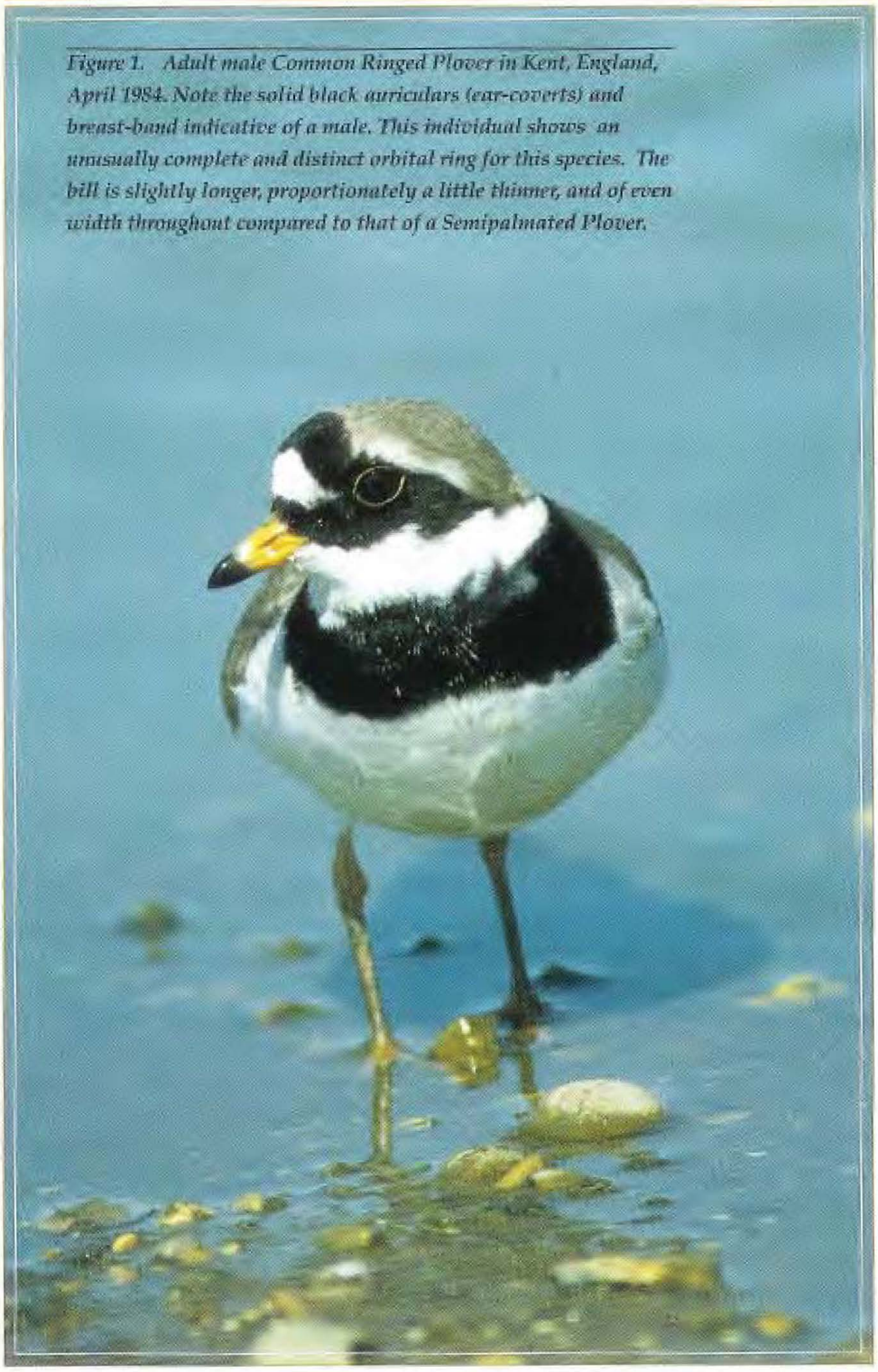

Figure 1. Adult male Common Ringed Plover in Kent, England, April 1984. Note the solid black auriculars (ear-coverts) and breast-band indicative of a male. This individual shows an unusually complete and distinct orbital ring for this species. The bill is slightly longer, proportionately a little thinner, and of even width throughout compared to that of a Semipalmated Plover.

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In North America, the Common Ringed Plover *(Charadrius hiaticula)* is a breeding bird in northeastern arctic Canada from northern Ellesmere Island south through Bylot Island and eastern Baffin Island (Godfrey 1986). Outside these areas in eastern North America there are a handful of sight records—some with photos—from Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island. Most of these sightings involve juvenal-plumaged birds, so even photos do not necessarily provide definitive proof; but, with most of the records, standard Common Ringed Plover vocalizations were heard. In western North America, the species has occurred only in Alaska, where it has been recorded regularly only as a spring migrant at St. Lawrence Island. It has nested at Koozata Lagoon (Sealy et al. 1971).

In Alaska away from Saint Lawrence Island, it is strictly casual, with several spring records from the Seward Peninsula (Kessel 1989), a recent fall sighting from St. Paul Island, Pribilofs, and a handful of spring and fall records from the central and western Aleutians (Adak, Amchitka, and Attu islands), some of which are supported by specimens (Kessel and Gibson 1978). Even at St. Lawrence Island, the

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Figure 2. Male Common Ringed Plover at Gambell, Alaska, 28 May 1992. There is a distinct white stripe above the eye and just a hint of an orbital ring (below the eye only). The dorsal coloration has a grayish cast enhancing the contrast with the forecrown and ear coverts.

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Figure 3. Same individual as in Figure 2, showing the same characters.

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Figure 4. Same bird as in Figures 2 and 3, showing the breast band, which averages slightly thicker than on Semipalmated Plover. Note the narrowing in the middle, which is standard for all Common Ringed and Semipalmated plovers.

species is often hard to find, and it is *always* outnumbered by its close relative, the Semipalmated Plover *(C. semipalmatus)*. Since 1981, I have visited Gambell on St. Lawrence Island every spring for a one-week period at the end of May and the beginning of June. I always see up to a half-dozen Semipalmated Plovers, a pair of which usually takes up residence around one of the boneyards near the village; the displaying male is quite vociferous and obvious. On about half the trips we have recorded Common Ringed Plover. Usually these are presumed migrants that are present for only a short period of time, but occasionally males have settled into one of the boneyards and started to display. Even in those years in which we have missed Common Ringed Plover, other observers have recorded it, either before or after the period we are there.

So what does this all mean? The basic rule of thumb, even at St. Lawrence Island, is that any

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Figures 5 (left) and 6 (right). Male Common Ringed Plover at Gambell, Alaska, 2 June 1985. All characters discussed under Figures 1 and 2 are also visible in these photographs. This is the same individual in both photos, which were taken within a minute or so of each other. Note how the bird's changing posture greatly thickened the breast band (Figure 6).

ARTHUR MORRIS

Figure 7 (cover photograph). Alternate-plumaged male Semipalmated Plover on 19 May 1990 at Cape May, New Jersey. In comparison to the Common Ringed Plovers in Figures 2 through 6, this bird shows a complete, thin, orangey-yellow orbital ring, almost no white above the eye, and a slightly browner dorsal coloration that results in less contrast between the upperparts and the ear coverts and forecrown bar.

ARTHUR MORRIS

Figure 8. Female Semipalmated Plover in faded alternate plumage at Jamaica Bay Refuge, New York, August 1985. Note the pronounced whitish supercilium and the brownish of the auriculars and breast band. The yellowish orbital ring is still fairly conspicuous.

Figure 9. Adult female Common Ringed Plover at Anglesey, England, in mid-April 1988. The head pattern is not quite as contrasty as on alternate-plumaged males.

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plover of this type is more likely to be a Semipalmated than a Ringed. I calculate the odds at about three to one or even greater. This means that Semipalmated Plover must be decisively eliminated before any claim of Ringed is made. (I rather suspect that the enthusiasm for seeing Common Ringed Plover has inflated the actual number of records of that species in Alaska and elsewhere.) Additionally, any plover involved in a display flight (a slow-motion nighthawk-like flight with the bird constantly vocalizing) is even more likely to be a Semipalmated, although such behavior does not eliminate Ringed.

There are many characters that have been proposed for separating these two species, but I feel the best means is to first sex the bird by plumage and hope you have a male. Sexing these two species and other species of banded plovers—Snowy, Piping, and Wilson's—by plumage in the field is fairly straightforward when you have a decent view of alternate-plumaged birds. Males of both species show solid black breast-bands and auriculars (Figures 2 to 7), whereas females show extensive brown in these regions (Figures 8 and 9). If you are dealing with a male, note the extent of white above the auriculars. On male Semipalmateds there is at best a spot or thin streak of white above the eye (Figure 7), and many birds show no white at all. On male Ringeds, there is a bold white stripe above the auriculars that gives the head a more striking pattern (Figures 1 to 6 and 10).

On females of both species, however, the head pattern is more blended. Most troublesome is the fact that female Semipalmateds show a strong supercilium (Figure 8), and thus closely resemble Common Ringed. With female birds, then, a specific identification is much more difficult. A combination of other characters (discussed below) needs to be used, and the identification should be clinched by the diagnostic vocalizations.

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Figure 10. Adult male Common Ringed Plover in Kent, England, in early May 1986, showing a thin, complete orbital ring. Note the slightly longer and thinner bill of more even width throughout compared to that of a Semipalmated. Such differences are slight, however, and should be used only as a minor character in an identification.

Interestingly, the great majority of Common Ringed Plovers at Gambell have exhibited features consistent with males in full alternate plumage. R.J. Chandler (pers. comm.) has noted that in the U.K., where Common Ringed Plover is common, the majority of individuals in alternate plumage are sexed as males; he suggests the possibility that the plumage of some females may be virtually identical to that of many males. This possibility should be looked into with Semipalmated Plovers as well.

One secondary feature that we have found to be useful, given close views, is the presence or absence of an orbital-ring. On alternate-plumaged Semipalmateds, the yellow-orange orbital-ring is complete (Figure 7). It seems particularly obvious on males but is present on most or perhaps all females as well (more field testing is needed). Although Semipalmated's orbital-ring is not as striking as that of the Little Ringed Plover (*Charadrius dubius*), it still should be visible given good views. None of the roughly 20 Common Ringed Plovers I have seen at Gambell have shown a noticeable orbital-ring (Figures 2–6), although at extremely close range a trace of an orbital-ring is visible, usually under the eye only. Chandler (1989) states that some alternate-plumaged male Common Ringed Plovers (at least in Britain) do show a thin yellow-orange orbital-ring (Figures 1 and 10), and one of the photos of a Common Ringed Plover in that publication shows a relatively complete orbital ring (Figure 1). This character was discovered independently and first described by Walsh (1985) in referring to alternate-plumaged Semipalmated Plovers. Chandler (1987) expanded the usefulness of this feature and said it was valid for all Semipalmated Plovers in all plumages. I feel that although some basic-plumaged adult and juvenile Semipalmateds do show a thin, complete orbital-ring, on others the orbital-ring is so faint as to be very difficult to discern in the field. Clearly more field work needs to be done to determine the usefulness of this feature on alternate-plumaged females and, particularly, on juvenal- and basic-plumaged birds.

The species' bill shape differs slightly, with Ringed having a longer bill that is proportionately a little thinner and of even width throughout (Figures 1 and 10). On Semipalmated the bill is shorter and stubbier; the bill base is a bit thicker, giving the culmen a more sloped angle (Figures 7 and 8). These bill differences are slight, however, and bill shape should be used only as a minor character in an identification.

Other very subtle characters of minor value include the bolder white wingbar and longer-winged appearance in flight of Ringed. Another feature that we have noticed on Common Ringed Plovers at Gambell is that they appear slightly grayer and paler dorsally than Semipalmateds; the latter species appears darker brown above. This leads to greater contrast between the black and gray areas on the head of Ringed Plovers.

There is *geographic variation* in dorsal coloration of Common Ringed Plover, however, with the nominate race, *C.h. hiaticula* (northeast Canada to western Europe) being described as larger and paler than the smaller and darker *C.h. tundrae* (northern Scandinavia, Russia, and, presumably, the few that reach Alaska). But Hayman et al. (1986) point out that this interpretation is unsatisfactory and that there are clines in both upperpart coloration and size that run more in a north-south rather than east-west direction. The birds that turn up at Gambell are certainly from northern populations, and from the described range they should clearly pertain to the darker *C.h. tundrae*, yet consistently they seem to be slightly paler than Semipalmated Plovers dorsally.

In the past, the standard feature used to separate the two species was the width of the breast band, with Ringed having the broader band. Although Ringed does appear to have a broader breast band on average, I find it difficult to assess this feature accurately in the field because the apparent thickness of the band in all the banded plovers varies greatly according to the bird's posture. Note the great difference in breast-band thickness visible on the Common Ringed Plover in Figures 5 and 6. *The two photos are of the same bird taken within a minute of each other.* Even as a secondary character, breast-band differences have only marginal value.

A new fieldmark used to separate birds in *juvenal* plumage was recently proposed by Mullarney (1991). On Semipalmated, the bottom edge of the dark face mask (i.e., the lores) meets the bill in a line above the gape, close to the culmen. On Ringed, the bottom edge of the dark lores meets the bill at the gape. He further commented that Semipalmateds in breeding plumage tend to show more black in the lores than do the juveniles, but that there is often a small wedge of white above the gape. Some Semipalmateds are virtually identical, however, to Common Ringed Plovers, which rarely, if ever, show any white above the gape line. I have not personally studied this feature on enough

birds to comment on its usefulness, but clearly it should be extensively tested in the field on individuals of known species (where vocalizations corroborate the identification).

There are slight differences in the amount of palmation (foot webbing) between the toes. Common Ringed Plover has webbing between the outer and middle toes, but only a very small amount between the inner and middle. Semipalmated has "obvious" webbing between both the inner and middle and outer and middle toes (Hayman et al. 1986). Although I have personally never been able to get close enough to either species to see such a difference with any certainty, several observers state that such distinctions can be made some of the time, provided the birds are at close range and on firm terrain. Foot webbing should therefore be ignored unless the observer is presented with exceptionally close field studies.

One diagnostic character that can be used to separate these two species is their vocalizations. The call-note of Semipalmated is a vigorous and rich, upslurred, whistled *chu-wheet*. The call of Common Ringed is a mournful *poo-wee*, in which both notes are more similar in pitch. The display vocalizations (vaguely a "song") are different as well, and again the "song" of Ringed is more mournful and perhaps slightly softer. The calls of both species are found on the National Geographic Society's *Guide to Bird Sounds* recording. It should be pointed out that possible vocal differences have been described (Riddiford 1983) between *C.h. hiaticula* and *C.h. tundrae*, with the latter giving calls closer to those of Semipalmated Plover. Riddiford acknowledged at the time, however, that he had no first-hand experience with the vocalizations of Semipalmated Plover. Certainly all the Common Ringed Plovers at Gambell have given unambiguously typical calls.

As is so often the case, it is essential that one first thoroughly learn the field characters of the common species (Semipalmated Plover) before attempting to differentiate the rare one (Common Ringed Plover). Any confusing bird, or one only tentatively identified, should be confirmed by call. If the bird calls like a Semipalmated, that means it *is* a Semipalmated, despite one's interpretation of the other field characters. I have found the calls to be 100 percent diagnostic. In fact, Alaskan authorities generally require that reports of Common Ringed Plovers include notes on vocalization.

Summary

Although St. Lawrence Island, Alaska, is one of the most accessible locations for birders to add Common Ringed Plover to their ABA Area list, even there the species is decidedly outnumbered by the Semipalmated Plover. In dealing with birds in alternate plumage it is first essential to correctly sex the bird involved. Males in this plumage are fairly easy to identify to species on the basis of head pattern; females are more difficult, although orbital-ring features could well prove diagnostic for females as well as for males. Other features discussed differ only slightly between the species and require subjective interpretations. One feature—breast-band thickness—can be particularly misleading. It is advisable that all claims of Common Ringed Plover be substantiated by noting any vocalizations. This caution is particularly true for problematic birds or from any region in North America away from northeastern arctic Canada or St. Lawrence Island—where confirmed Common Ringed Plover records are few indeed.

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