CHARADRIUS PLUVIALIS, Linn.

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Golden Plover.

Charadrius pluvialis (winter) et *apricarius* (summer), Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 254.

Pluvialis apricarius, Bonap. Compt. Rend. de l'Acad. des Sci., tom. xliii. (1856) p. 34.

——— *aurea minor*, Briss. Orn., tom. v. p. 47.

——— —, Macgill. Hist. Brit. Birds, vol. ii. p. 94.

——— *auratus*, Suckow, Naturg. der Thiere, tom. ii. p. 1592.

IN commencing the history of the Golden Plover, shall I speak of it in an Epicurean sense, as being one of our best birds for the table, and as playing a part in commerce equal to that of the Snipe and the Woodcock? shall I approach the subject with an account of its habits and economy during the months of winter, when it assembles in flocks, and runs over our fallow fields and barren heaths? or shall I speak of it in the mountain-home where it spends the summer among flowery ling and heather-bells, where it sends forth its pipe to the antlered monarch, trips beside the blue hare, or tilts with the Grouse that may approach too near its nesting-place? At this period its vesture of black is beautifully relieved by streaks of white and spangles of yellow, and the bird is in its greatest beauty. Few persons are aware that the Golden Plover undergoes a seasonal transformation. Linnæus and many of the older authors considered that these very distinct plumages were indications of specific distinctness: but it is my place to depict the remarkable differences which occur in the summer and winter liveries of some of our native birds; and the present is one of them.

I believe the opinion is entertained that purity of colour and richness of markings depend in a great measure upon elevation, the clearness of the atmosphere and the non-obstruction of the rays of light; whether this be correct or not, I have always found that the greater the elevation a bird frequents, be it a Ptarmigan or a Plover, the richer are the tints of its plumage in summer, and the greater the contrast of its winter dress. These features, too, are still more apparent among continental than island examples; thus the Ptarmigan and Golden Plovers of Norway are far finer, and undergo a more complete change in summer and winter, than those of Scotland or Ireland. The like is the case with other birds, of which I could cite numerous instances, were it necessary. I enter into these little digressions, because I believe they are not without their interest, and for the sake of variety; for the habits of our native birds have been so repeatedly and so ably described, that the subject is well-nigh exhausted.

About the fall of the leaf, or when autumn presages the coming winter, the Golden Plovers, both adults and young, leave the misty mountain-side, and, assembling in flocks, visit every portion of the central and southern districts of England, from the Cheviots to Cornwall. It may now be seen in all the open moorlands, fallow fields, commons, and great marshes, such as those which occur in Lincolnshire, Norfolk, and Suffolk, on the sandhills near the sea-shore and the muddy flats left by the receding tide. Its great powers of flight enable it to pass over vast distances with such rapidity that, while at one moment it may be seen on the sea-shore, in half an hour's time it is miles away on some upland waste. The bird has now put on its winter livery, is very fat and in fine condition for the table, but continues to improve in this respect from the commencement of the autumn frosts until the ensuing February, when an entire change in its disposition occurs. "Coming events cast their shadows before:" the return of the sun induces it to remove to other localities, and to prepare for the performance of a more important duty—that of breeding. The assumption of the summer dress now commences with the appearance of black feathers on its previously white breast and throat, both sexes being under the same influence. By the end of April or the beginning of May most of the Golden Plovers have left the lowlands, some resorting to the Cheviots, others to the Grampians, the wilds of Sutherlandshire, and as far north as favourable situations occur, some even proceeding to Iceland. In Ireland the habits of the bird are precisely the same as in our own island, inasmuch as it spends the summer among the hills, and the autumn and winter on the lowlands and the sea-shore. Mr. Alfred Newton affirms that the bird certainly breeds in Yorkshire, and probably in Derbyshire also. Macgillivray has given so graphic a description of the habits of the Golden Plover, as witnessed by him in the summer, that I shall not hesitate to transcribe it here. "Amid the wild scenery of the rugged hills and sedgy valleys, the mellow notes of the Plover come gently and soothingly on the ear, and you feel, without being altogether conscious of its power, that it soothes the troubled mind as water cools the burning brow. As you listen to it, now distant, now nearer, and see the birds, with short flights, approaching as if to greet you, though in reality with more fear than confidence, with anxiety and apprehension, the bright sunshine that glances on their jetty breasts is faintly obscured by the white vapours that have crept up from the valley, and presently all around us is

suffused with an opaline light, within the confines of which a bird is dimly seen to advance, then another and a third. Presently a breeze rolls away the mist, and discloses a number of these watchful sentinels, each on his mound of faded moss, and all emitting their mellow cries the moment we offer to advance. They are males, whose mates are brooding over their eggs, or leading their down-clad and toddling chicks among the, to them, pleasant peat-bogs that intervene between the high banks, clad with luxuriant heath, not yet recovered from the effects of the winter frosts, and little meadows of cotton-grass, white as the snow-wreaths that lie on the distant hill. How prettily they run over the grey moss and lichens, their little feet twinkling, and their full, bright, and soft eyes gleaming, as they commence their attempts to entice us away from their chosen retreats! The nest is a slight hollow in a tuft of moss or on a dry place among the heath, irregularly strewn with fragments of withered plants. The eggs, of which the full number is four, are placed with their small ends together. They are much larger and more pointed than those of the Lapwing, being, on an average, two inches and one-twelfth in length and one inch and five-twelfths in their greatest transverse diameter. The shell is thin and smooth, of a light-greyish or pale-greenish yellow or cream-colour, irregularly spotted, dotted, and blotched with dark brown, and sometimes having a few light-purple spots interspersed, the markings larger towards the broadest part. The young leave the nest immediately after they burst the shell, and conceal themselves by lying flat on the ground. At this time the female evinces the greatest anxiety for their safety, and will occasionally feign lameness to entice the intruder to pursue her. I have several times seen one fly off to a considerable distance, alight in a conspicuous place, and tumble about as if in the agonies of death, her wings flapping as if they had been fractured or dislocated. The eggs are delicious, and the young birds, when fledged, not less so."

I have incidentally alluded to, but perhaps not spoken sufficiently in detail of, the great difference in the dress of the Golden Plover at opposite seasons of the year. I may add, then, that the whole of those parts of the plumage which are black in summer become white, or white intermixed with yellow, in winter, and that the golden colouring of the newly moulted feathers becomes exceedingly conspicuous, particularly in the young of the year—a circumstance which has obtained for the bird its well-known name of Golden Plover. Another state of plumage also demands a passing notice—that in which the bird is decked during the first four or five days of its existence. To see the young in the beautiful colourings and markings which then adorn them, their own native hills must be resorted to. The wild aspect of these localities, with their frequent accompaniments of wind, mists, sleet, and rain, would seem to be but little suited to these delicate nestlings; but such is not the case, for they are perfectly hardy, and are in possession of all the energies necessary for their safety from the moment they are hatched. The mossy character, too, of the markings with which they are adorned tend to their preservation, since it closely assimilates in appearance to the surface of the ground and the objects surrounding their birth-place. Should any of my readers desire to view the Golden Plover in all its beauty, let them repair to the Dovrefjeld, in Norway, by the 1st of July, and they will there find it in its gayest dress, with its young just hatched. No fear of disappointment need be entertained; for the bird is very plentiful in this bleak moorland, up to an elevation of from five to six thousand feet. There they will also find the White Grouse, the Redwing, the Fieldfare, the Blue-throated Warbler, and a host of other birds breeding, which will interest them, to say nothing of one of the wildest scenes in nature, backed by the frowning Sneehatten in the distance. Should such a journey be incompatible with their convenience or pleasure, let them betake themselves to the Grampians, on many parts of which the bird breeds; but this locality is far less interesting than the one above-mentioned, in Norway, my visit to which will always be remembered with feelings of pleasure.

It might be supposed that a bird possessing such vast means of transport would enjoy a wide range over the face of the globe; but the reverse is the true state of the case; for we now know that the Golden Plovers of China, India, Java, Sumatra, Australia, and America, which were formerly believed to be identical with it, comprise several species, all of which are quite distinct from our bird, whose range extends over the whole of Europe, Asia as far eastward as Afghanistan, and Africa as far south as the equator.

To say that the flight of the Golden Plover is rapid in the extreme, that it overtops the hills in flocks, and descends down the valleys like a shower of stones, that it trips over the ground with the utmost celerity, that it feeds more by night than by day, that its food consists of worms, insects, and their larvæ, that its weight is from seven to nine ounces, that the female exceeds her mate in size, and that she lays four large eggs, would not be adding to our stock of ornithological knowledge, since these points are as well known to every one acquainted with our native birds as to the writer of this chapter.

It will not be necessary to append a lengthy description of the colouring of the adults, since their appearance in summer and winter is correctly delineated on the accompanying Plates; but I may mention that the young birds at two days old are exceedingly pretty, having all the under surface, part of the wings, two stripes down the back, a space under the eye, a line along the forehead, and the back of the neck white, the remainder of the plumage marbled with orange and black; the legs purplish flesh-colour; and the bill rather darker. One of the two accompanying Plates represents a male, a female, and four young birds, all of life-size, in their summer dress; the other represents the bird as seen in its winter costume, with a number of reduced figures in the distance.

CHARADRIUS PUUVIALIS. Linn.

Illustration of the bird in its winter plumage

Winter plumage

Water & land, Jap.

Gould, John. 1873. "Golden Plover, *Charadrius pluvialis* [Pl. 38-39]." *The birds of Great Britain* 4, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323996>.

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