

**DO YOU KNOW THE DIFFERENCE? Plovers and Dotterels, Family Charadriidae ...**

*Ellinor Campbell, drawings by Kaye Traynor*

Plovers and Dotterels...what's in a name? The most well known 'plover' is the Spurwinged Plover, which has been renamed a Masked Lapwing. It's a relatively large bird, 35-38cm (a bit smaller than a magpie), and in country areas, can be seen and heard in paddocks, gardens, parks, and even on roundabouts. The focus of this article is the five smaller species, commonly found in our district near water, two of which were classified as dotterels but are now plovers. Four are permanent residents, but the fifth, the Double-banded Plover, spends its winters here but breeds in New Zealand, where it is called the Banded Dotterel.

Some common characteristics of all plovers and dotterels are that they lay their eggs in a scrape on the ground, and the chicks are not fed by the parents. They have compact bodies, short necks, large eyes, and short beaks. They hunt their mainly aquatic and terrestrial invertebrates by sight rather than feel, using a run-and-pause technique. They also eat some vegetable matter. In non-breeding seasons they form flocks with other shorebirds, but in breeding seasons they are highly protective of their territory, eggs and chicks. The parents protect their young by uttering an alarm call, performing distraction displays even attacking the predator or intruder. Both parents take care of their offspring.

Widely known, despite being the most rare and highly vulnerable, is the **Hooded Plover**. This oh-so-handsome bird is the biggest of these five plover/dotterels, but still only 19-23 cm, the same size as a Willie Wagtail. It is very much smaller than the Masked Lapwing with which it is often confused. Adult "Hoodies" have a distinctive black head, a white rear collar, grey back, white breast, and distinctive red on the beak and ring around the eyes. Many of us have spent hours on our ocean beaches on "Hoodie watch", trying to keep nesting pairs and their chicks safe from humans and their pet dogs. So here is an apparently distinctive characteristic...they inhabit our wildest beaches. Well, that's nearly correct. I wondered why I saw "Hooded Plover" signs at Lake Victoria near Point Lonsdale, and recently learned that is because they are also found around this lake. However lakeside locations are unusual, except in Western Australia and South Australia.



Hooded Plover



Black-fronted Dotterel

The **Black-fronted Dotterel** (formerly plover), 16-18cm, can be seen along the edges of the Painkalac Creek and Anglesea River, and is sometimes confused with a Hoodie. However, first the habitat is different, being the banks of rivers and estuaries. Second, the head is mainly brown with a narrow white band above the beak, a wide black band through the eyes, dark grey-brown back, and a distinctive wide black band across the breast. The red eye-ring and beak are similar to the Hoodies.

The **Red-kneed Dotterel** (formerly plover), 17-19cm, is also a freshwater bird and often seen in wetlands in the Breamlea area. The adult has a distinctive black hood above the beak, blending with, and finishing below, the eyes. It also has a large white bib before the very wide black band across the lower breast and abdomen, and a brown back. Their dull red knees, which are at the top of their legs, are their least obvious distinguishing feature.



Red-kneed Dotterel

The **Red-capped Plover** is 14-16 cm and is the smallest of these five species. It is mostly found on ocean beaches, often with Hoodies and other shorebirds in the Breamlea area. It is white with brown back and cap, but the adult male has a rusty fox-red cap.



Red-capped Plover

The **Double-banded Plover**, 17-19cm, is easy to confuse with a range of small brown shorebirds on our ocean beaches due to its having brown and white non-breeding plumage, with the beginning of bands across the chest. This develops into the breeding plumage of two wide bands across their chest, the top one black and the lower chestnut. This may be seen in adult birds that are newly arrived or soon to return to New Zealand.



Double-banded Plover

References

<http://www.wildliferescuemagazine.com/plovers-in-care.html>  
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