

The Plover Project: Key stopovers, regional abundance, and habitat associations of American Golden-Plovers in the Grand Prairie Region

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[Editor's Note: In 2007, IOS revived its grant program to support bird research in Illinois. A condition of the grants is to write an article on the project for the *Meadowlark*. The response from researchers and donors alike has been remarkable. We look forward to bringing you many more articles that highlight what is being learned about birds in Illinois thanks to your continued support. -JW]

Introduction

The "Grand Prairie" region of eastern Illinois and western Indiana was once defined by continuous expanses of grassland, dotted with marshes and wet meadows. Migrant shorebirds flocked to the wetlands and open places maintained by fire and bison. Although the landscape is now dominated by row-crop agriculture, some shorebird species still rely on this region for critical stopover habitat. Among them are the American Golden-Plovers (*Pluvialis dominica*) that pass through by the thousands during their transcontinental flight from wintering to breeding grounds. In many years the region supports a substantial portion of the hemispheric population, estimated at 150,000 breeding pairs (Morrison et al. 2001b).

Plovers flock to the wide open farm fields of the Midwest to rest, forage, and molt before heading northward to the Arctic. For decades, local birders have documented large groups congregating in row-crop fields, but beyond these scattered reports, surprisingly little is known about the magnitude of stopover across the region or the habitat selected by plovers.

Just as the plow, tractor, and drainage tile radically changed the Grand Prairie landscape of the 20th century, genetic engineering, ethanol production, and wind turbines are changing it once again. These changes bring new challenges for the American Golden-Plover, whose population has been declining steadily in recent decades (Johnson and Connors 1996, Gratto-Trevor 1998, Morrison et al.



2001a). A thorough understanding of the natural history of these migrants and their unique habitat needs may be necessary to ensure their continued survival.

Research

To address this need and engage students in avian research, the University of Illinois student chapter of The Wildlife Society initiated The Plover Project. Our initial objectives were to: 1) provide an opportunity for students to participate in relevant bird research, 2) determine the dispersion of plovers across the Grand Prairie region, and 3) explore habitat associations for future analysis.

A flock of American Golden-Plovers featuring birds in both alternate and basic plumages flies over Shelby County. 4 May 2008. Photo by Eric Walters.

A student crew observes American Golden-Plovers in Edgar County, Illinois in spring 2008. Photo by Courtney McCusker.

