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The occurrence of both species of 'Lesser Golden Plover' and of Nearctic scolopacids in Côte d'Ivoire

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Summary

The West African records of the three species of golden plover are reviewed and, while there are no satisfactory observations of the Greater Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria* south of Senegambia, recent evidence from Côte d'Ivoire is presented showing that both the American Golden Plover *P. dominica* and the Pacific Golden Plover *P. fulva* occur in the region. Details of three other Nearctic wader species seen in Côte d'Ivoire are given.

Résumé

Sont examinés les données sur les trois espèces de pluviers dorés dans l'Ouest africain; alors qu'il n'y avait aucune observation satisfaisante du Pluvier doré *Pluvialis apricaria* au sud de la Sénégambie, on a de Côte d'Ivoire des preuves récentes de la présence du Pluvier d'Amérique *P. dominica* ainsi que du Pluvier fauve (*P. fulva*) dans la région. Sont donnés aussi des détails sur trois autres espèces de limicoles néarctiques vus en Côte d'Ivoire.

Introduction

The status of the golden plovers in West Africa is confused. Up to three species may occur; the Greater Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria* and the dimorphic Lesser Golden Plover *Pluvialis dominica*, which is increasingly treated as comprising two separate species, with the largely Asiatic-Australasian *Pluvialis fulva* (Pacific Golden Plover) split from the Nearctic-Neotropical *P. dominica* (*sensu stricto*) or American Golden Plover, (Connors 1983, BOURC 1986, Hayman *et al.* 1986, Knox 1987). The aim of this paper is to review briefly the West African records of all three species and to present new evidence, from Côte d'Ivoire, that both *fulva* and *dominica* occur in the region. The occurrence of *apricaria*, south of Senegambia, remains however questionable. The opportunity is also taken to give details of three other Nearctic wader species seen in Côte d'Ivoire.

Previous 'Golden Plover' Records in West Africa

Within Africa *P. apricaria* is considered to be a common Palaearctic visitor to the coasts of North and Northwest Africa, where its distribution is centred on Morocco to Libya, but it also occurs more rarely eastwards to Egypt and as far south as Senegambia (Urban *in* Urban *et al.* 1986). The same author, who accords the two forms of the Lesser Golden Plover subspecific rank only, treats *P. fulva* as a winter visitor in small numbers to the littoral of the eastern half of Africa, locally common in coastal Ethiopia and Somalia but with records from Sudan to the Cape, inland to eastern Zaire and Burundi. *Pluvialis dominica* is considered a vagrant to the coasts of W and NW Africa, with a scattering of records from Senegambia, Sierra Leone, Ghana and Nigeria.

The West African literature suggests however that all three species can occur in the region (although in all but the most recent papers *fulva* is treated as a subspecies of *dominica*), but the situation is confused because of the difficulties of identifying golden plovers in the field. Thus Elgood (1982), Grimes (1987) and Gatter (1988), treating records from Nigeria, Ghana and Liberia respectively, 'lumped' *apricaria* and *dominica* (*sensu lato*) together for this reason. Of the records for Nigeria, Elgood (1982), states that they were thought to be of *fulva*, although it is not clear whether one or more individuals were involved, whereas of the four sightings from Ghana, one was considered by its discoverers to have been *fulva*, one a probable *dominica*, a third a putative *apricaria*, while the fourth was not identified (Grimes 1987). Gatter (1988) simply cites the record(s) from Liberia as '*apricaria/dominica*' without comment. The single observation from Sierra Leone was thought to have been of *dominica* (*sensu stricto*) (Field 1974) and one from the Gambia has been accepted as such (Gore 1990). There is also one record of a 'Lesser Golden Plover' (*dominica*, *sensu lato*) from Togo, given by Cheke *et al.* (1986). Two individuals were seen on São Tomé in 1954, of which one was collected and initially identified as *apricaria* (Frade 1958, 1959). This record was subsequently transferred to '*dominica*' (Frade & Vieira dos Santos 1977).

Significantly, *P. fulva* has recently been found to winter regularly in small numbers at a coastal locality in Gabon (Christy 1990). There is also one record of a probable *dominica* from this site (Alexander-Marrack *in* prep.).

Browne (1982) considered *apricaria* to be a scarce winter visitor to northwest Mauritania and north Senegal and a scarce passage migrant to southwest Mauritania while Gore (1990) lists one definite and five probable records of it from The Gambia. The occurrence of *apricaria* south of Senegambia remains however unproven. Urban (*in* Urban *et al.* 1986) cites the (since rescinded) record from São Tomé, which had previously been accepted by Mackworth-Praed & Grant (1970) and Curry-Lindahl (1981). Others have been more cautious—Moreau (1972) stated that *apricaria* was "listed as having occurred on São Tomé in 1954"; Hayman *et al.* (1986), evidently unaware of Frade & Vieira dos Santos (1977), considered this sighting probably to have been of either *dominica* or *fulva*. Curry-Lindahl (1981) also mentions, without comment, another record of *apricaria*, from Gabon. This presumably refers to an old

record stemming from collections made by du Chaillu, which Bannerman (1931) and Malbrant & Maclatchy (1949), amongst others, have treated as dubious.

New Records of 'Golden Plovers' from Côte d'Ivoire

While therefore, there do not seem to be any convincing records of *apricaria* south of Senegambia, we have further evidence that both species of 'Lesser Golden Plover' do occur in West Africa. We have four records from Côte d'Ivoire (Demey & Fishpool 1991), two of which showed, on the basis of recent refinements in field identification criteria (Hayman *et al.* 1986, Dunn *et al.* 1987), characters typical of *fulva*, whilst the others were identifiable as *dominica*. The details are given below.

Pluvialis dominica

The first individual was found at Dabou ricefields (05°20'N, 04°23'W), in southern Côte d'Ivoire, on 17 Dec 1988. It was watched for 75 minutes foraging on a bare rice paddy. It was confiding, allowing approach to within 15 m, giving excellent views through a telescope up to x40 magnification. The bird was seen on four more occasions between 20 Dec 1988 and 15 Jan 1989 in the same locality; what was almost certainly the same individual (on the strength of plumage details) was seen subsequently on six dates between 22 Feb and 2 Mar 1989 at Adiopodoumé (05°19'N, 04°13'W), some 25 km to the east. Here it roosted in the company of Ringed Plovers *Charadrius hiaticula* and Common Pratincoles *Glareola pratincola* on a ploughed field.

On 14 Oct 1989 another *dominica* was seen at the same site at Dabou, where it was watched for 30 minutes under excellent conditions, foraging with a number of Wood Sandpipers *Tringa glareola*. The bird was not seen again. The identification of both individuals was based upon the following salient characters.

First impressions were of birds of unrelieved cold grey tones. On each the crown was very dark grey-brown with paler streaking and the supercilium was bright white and conspicuous. The ear-coverts, throat and neck were a paler grey-brown. The wings, scapulars and mantle were dark grey-brown with numerous pale off-white spots; the hindneck and nape were paler than crown and mantle. On the first individual the mantle was conspicuously darker than the scapulars and wings, forming an almost black patch or saddle in the middle of the back. The underparts of the first bird were grey-brown from chin to lower breast with some mottling, while the belly was paler with fainter mottling, suggestive of a first-winter bird. On the second, the upper breast was greyish and streaked while the lower breast and belly were mainly white with irregular black spotting, from which the bird was inferred to be an adult. The wings were long, projecting well beyond the tail tip when folded. The primary projection beyond the folded tertials was also long and on the first individual four primaries could clearly be seen surpassing the tertials. The underwing coverts and axillaries were grey-buff.

Pluvialis fulva

The first bird was seen on 5 Dec 1987, also at Dabou ricefields on a bare rice paddy. It too accompanied a group of Wood Sandpipers and was watched for 40 minutes through a x20 telescope at distances of 50–100 m. The bird was not seen subsequently despite repeated visits. The second individual was found on 23 Oct 1989 at Adiopodoumé, on the bare soil of a newly planted cassava field, where it had joined a number of Ringed Plovers. It was seen there on a further six occasions, the last being on 8 Nov 1989. Excellent telescope views were obtained, the bird being approached to within 20 m in a car. The characters which led to these birds being identified as *P. fulva* are as follows:

Both birds were striking in their warm buff-brown colouring about head, neck and upperparts. Most of the ear-coverts, throat, foreneck and sides of neck were pale buff. The crown was brighter buff streaked darker, capping a distinct buffy-white supercilium. The upperparts were warm buff with brighter yellow spotting; on the second individual the feathers of the wings and scapulars were seen to be dark-centred with bright golden-buff fringes. On the first individual the breast and flanks were also golden-buff with faint darkish mottling, suggesting the bird was possibly in its first winter. The second showed a marked transition between the warm buff of the foreneck and the colder brownish white tones of the upper breast, whilst the lower breast and belly bore numerous heavy black spots, indicative of an adult.

On both birds the folded wings were only slightly longer than the tail. It proved impossible, despite good views of the second individual, to determine the number of primaries projecting beyond the tertials; however the tertials were long and the primary projection distinctly short. In flight, both birds were seen to have buff or buff-grey underwing coverts and axillaries.

Other Nearctic waders in Côte d'Ivoire

In addition to the American Golden Plovers, we recorded four other Nearctic waders in Côte d'Ivoire (Demey & Fishpool 1991). These included one White-rumped Sandpiper *Calidris fuscicollis*, two observations of Pectoral Sandpiper *Calidris melanotos* and one of a Wilson's Phalarope *Phalaropus tricolor*. Brief details are given below but full descriptions have been deposited with the Editor of *Malimbus*.

White-rumped Sandpiper *Calidris fuscicollis*

At Dabou ricefields on 29 Oct 1988 a calidrid was seen, intermediate in size between adjacent Little Stint *Calidris minuta* and Curlew Sandpiper *Calidris ferruginea*. Thereafter it was seen on three further dates, the last being 5 Nov 1988. It was identified as a White-rumped Sandpiper on the basis of the following details: the folded wings were long, clearly surpassing the tail tip; the upper tail and rump were white like that of Curlew Sandpiper, and contrasted strongly with the dark tail tip; the bill was shortish, slightly decurved, thicker at the base which was dirty orange-pink,

the distal portion dark. Warm brown colouring in feathers of crown and scapulars suggested the bird was a juvenile.

This is the second record of White-rumped Sandpiper from West Africa; the first being from Ghana (Grimes 1987). Urban *et al.* (1986) mention three records from southern Africa during 1979–1983, since which time there have been two more (Sinclair *et al.* 1986, Hockey *et al.* 1988).

Pectoral Sandpiper *Calidris melanotos*

The first of two individuals was seen on 13 Feb 1988 at Dabou ricefields, on bare mud bordering a drying pool, feeding in loose association with a number of Wood Sandpiper and Ringed Plover. The second was also found at Dabou ricefields, on 21 Oct 1989; it was seen on two further dates, the last being 28 Oct 1989.

The identification of these birds as Pectoral Sandpipers was based upon the following; the neck and upper breast were brown-buff streaked darker, abruptly demarcated from the lower breast and belly, which were white; the bill was medium-short and slightly decurved, orange-brown at the slightly thickened base, darker at the tip; the legs were yellow-brown. In body size they approached the accompanying Wood Sandpipers but were shorter legged. White and buffish fringes to the feathers of the mantle and scapulars suggested both birds were in first-winter plumage.

There are apparently three other records of Pectoral Sandpiper from West Africa. For one of these there is a specimen, collected by Frade (1958, 1959) on Príncipe; this record is cited by Mackworth-Praed & Grant (1970), although it is not mentioned by Urban *et al.* (1986). There are also records from Gabon (Alexander-Marrack in prep.) and Ghana (Hedenström *et al.* 1990). The latter record could conceivably refer to the same individual as the first of ours. Their sighting, also of a juvenile bird, pre-dates ours by just over a month and was made at a site c. 450 km to the east.

Wilson's Phalarope *Phalaropus tricolor*

On 8 Apr 1989 at Grand Bassam (05°14'N, 03°45'W) by the mouth of the Comoé river a medium-sized, active, small-headed, long-legged wader was seen. It was almost entirely grey above except for a white rump and supercilium, and all white below; there was a small grey smudge in front of the eye, which continued as a line behind the eye and curved downwards onto the neck. The bill was long, dark and thin with a downcurved tip. The legs were relatively long and conspicuous dirty yellow-orange. The bird was seen on a sand bar where it was feeding in a characteristic manner with its bill held horizontally, a few centimetres above the surface, actively catching (presumably) arthropods close to ground level.

From the above the bird was identified as a Wilson's Phalarope; what was almost certainly this bird had previously been seen on 11 Mar 1989 at this locality, but at a distance too great to permit identification.

This appears to be the first record of this species from West Africa. Urban *et al.* (1986) cite three records from Morocco and five from southern Africa, where in recent years it has been recorded annually (Sinclair *et al.* 1986, 1987, Hockey *et al.* 1988, 1990).

Discussion

The presence of Nearctic charadriiforms on the seaboard of West Africa is not unexpected given the frequency of vagrancy of a number of such species to western Europe. Indeed it is likely that, as Field (1974) pointed out, and as the other examples given above suggest, the relative paucity of records is indicative more of an absence of observers than of birds. The occurrence of eastern Palaearctic migrant waders in West Africa seems at first less plausible, which, coupled with the difficulties of field separation of 'Lesser Golden Plovers', means that claims of sightings of *fulva* from the region are likely to be treated with scepticism. The recent discovery of a small wintering population of *fulva* in Gabon (Christy 1990) however, indicates the presence of the species in western Africa on at least a semi-regular basis; vagrancy (and perhaps regular overwintering) elsewhere in the region may hence be expected.

It may also be relevant that other waders with wintering distributions in Africa similar, or at least broadly comparable, to that of *P. fulva* have been recorded from the region. Thus, there are records of the Greater Sandplover *Charadrius leschenaultii* from Nigeria (Elgood 1982), Senegal (Condamin 1987), Liberia (Gatter 1988), Gabon (Christy 1990) and Côte d'Ivoire (Demey & Fishpool 1991); of Caspian Plover *Charadrius asiaticus* from Nigeria, Cameroon and Mali (Urban *et al.* 1986) with a record given as *C. mongolus/asiaticus* from Liberia (Gatter 1988). There is also a number of records of Terek Sandpiper *Xenus cinereus* from West Africa: Senegambia, Mali, Togo, Nigeria and Chad (Urban *et al.* 1986), Ghana (Grimes 1987), and Côte d'Ivoire (Thiollay 1985).

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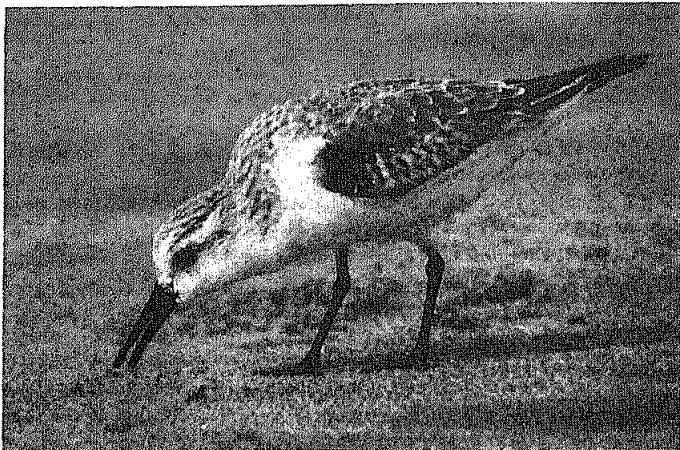
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Sanderling—Bécasseau sanderling—*Calidris alba*
(Photo: Michael Gore)