

KLEPTOPARASITISM OF AMERICAN GOLDEN-PLOVERS BY RINGED-BILLED GULLS

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Each fall, I have cruised the plowed fields in the western New York Lake Ontario plain looking for flocks of American Golden-Plovers (*Pluvialis dominicus*) and other migrants that frequent this habitat.

On Friday, 5 September 1997, I watched American Golden Plovers at the Breslawski Farms in Hamlin, Monroe County. There were extensive plowed fields on both the north and south sides of North Hamlin Road. I sat in the car and watched 13 American Golden-Plovers, along with Killdeer (*Charadrius vociferus*) and Ring-billed Gulls (*Larus delawarensis*) on the south side of the road. Surprisingly, the American Golden-Plovers were distributed over the entire field which was at least 300 yards deep to the first knoll and 500 or more yards wide. It became immediately obvious that one, two, or three Ring-billed Gulls, all of which were adults, were chasing individual plovers.

The plovers were feeding on worms, probably earthworms, which were several inches long. As soon as a plover would pick up a worm, a gull would fly after it. The plover would quickly take flight with the worm hanging from its bill. It would easily outdistance the gull and land again. But the gull would catch up and the plover would take flight again, flying in long arcs very close to the ground with the gull in pursuit. Eventually, the plover would drop the worm and the gull would land and fetch the prey. These chases lasted up to about one minute. I watched this scene repeated at least six times in a half-hour period, and, in most cases, the gull was successful in stealing the prey. I noticed that at least on one occasion, a Killdeer caught a worm but the gulls did not pursue it.

This scenario was brought to a halt when three or four American Golden Plovers, apparently from the north field, started giving alarm calls from above my head. With these alarm calls, both the gulls and plovers left the field. The plovers from both fields assembled in a large flock of about 40 birds, made one pass over the field and headed due south. The gulls left the area and about two minutes later, an immature Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) appeared.

It is not unusual to find American Golden Plovers on large plowed fields that also have migrant Ring-billed Gulls. Usually, however, they are well separated. In my time as a birder, I have found flocks of American Golden Plovers at least 100 times and never seen this behavior. I speculate that the maintenance of separation is a defense tactic for the plovers.

Kleptoparasitism, the forceful taking of food by one species from another, is a well-known practice of certain gulls (Brockman and Barnard 1979). Black-

headed Gull (*Larus ridibundus*) has been known to pirate numerous species of birds (Baccetti 1987), including Lapwings (*Vanellus vanellus*) and Greater Golden-Plovers (*Pluvialis apricaria*) for worms in both spring and fall (Kallander 1977). Greater Golden-Plovers have adapted their feeding habits to minimize the effects of this parasitism (Thompson 1983). Ring-billed Gulls have been reported to pirate both ducks (Chavez-Ramirez 1995) and Dunlin (*Calidris alpina*) (Warnock 1989).

LITERATURE CITED

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