

Dotterel; What's in a name?

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Eurasian Dotterel © Vojtěch Kubelka



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Eurasian Dotterel © Jullian Bhalerao

The Dotterel *Charadrius morinellus*; when I first heard the name as a youngster it was one of those, almost mythical, species which, as far as I could see, I had little or no chance of ever seeing. In those days even an outing to Norfolk from our house in the home counties, let alone a holiday to the Cairngorms, was still only a dream; my family could not afford a car.

It was an inaccessible bird and the fact that I was unlikely to see one any time soon, added to the aura of mysticism surrounding the bird, and the wonderful name highlighted the specialness of this bird to me.

I had no appreciation of why the bird was called by this unusual name, I thought it was rather quaint, cute even, but in fact, nothing could be further from the truth.

Human beings have a habit of disappointing me and bursting my bubbles of naivety, especially when it comes to birds and their conservation,

and when I discovered why the Dotterel was thus named a thought occurred to me; what is it about we humans that makes us feel so damn superior to every other living thing on this planet? If an animal or bird doesn't behave in a manner in which we can find admiration, courage, speed, agility, we end up belittling the creature; witness such expressions as dumb animals, bird brained, silly cow, filthy pig and so on.

What was it that offended me so, bringing these thoughts to the fore of my troubled young mind?

The name is derived from the old English word *dote*, which means simpleton or fool, and in Scotland the Dotterel has also been known as the moss fool. In Gaelic it is called *Amadan-Mòintich* ('peat-bog fool') reflecting both its perceived stupidity and its chosen environment. John Skelton (1460-1529) in his *The Book of Phillip Sparrow* (before 1508) referred to the bird thus;

'the Dotterell, that foolish peck'

These birds were regularly netted on their migration north through England. Trapping was carried out at night using a light to dazzle the birds and stones bashed together to chivvy the birds towards the waiting net. An unusual myth arose from these netting days that the birds would imitate their hunter's movements;

'Being a kind of bird as it were of an apish kind, ready to imitate what they see done, are caught according to foulers gesture: if he put forth an arme, they also stretch out a wing: sets he forward his legge, or holdeth up his head, they likewise doe theirs ; in briefe, whatever the fouler doth, the same also doth this foolish bird untill it be hidden within the net.'

William Camden 1551 – 1623)

They were thus persecuted for sport, for the pot and for their plumage – their feathers were prized by fishermen for making trout flies – and were also sought after by egg collectors and taxidermists. Hunters would look for them at their traditional stopping-off places on the Yorkshire coast. The



Eurasian Dotterel© Elis Simpson

Dotterel Inn, where hunters would stay, still exists near Filey, while other traditional stopping places led to the naming of two Dotterel Halls in Cambridgeshire and a Dotterel Farm in North Yorkshire. It is claimed that a hunter could expect to shoot fifty pairs in a season.

There is also an old adage passed down from the shepherds referring, presumably, to the southern movements of the dotterels portending the coming of winter, much as the disappearance of the common swifts from our town fills me with a feeling that winter is not far away. However one can only assume that the birds must have been more numerous and lingered longer on their southward journey in those days than they do now;



Eurasian Dotterel © Tormod Amundsen—Biotope

*‘When dotterel do first appear, it shows that frost is very near;
But when the dotterel do go, then you may look for heavy snow.’*

As if all this were not bad enough, those studious men of science who set about naming everything in an ordered and scientific way perpetuated the idea of these birds being less than savvy. The specific name that this bird is to be saddled with in perpetuity is *morinellus* meaning little fool, from the Latin *morus* meaning foolish. I say in perpetuity because scientific names can only be changed if the alternative name predates the former name, and, since this bird was thus named by Linnaeus himself, who was the founder of this system, it is unlikely that a more sympathetic name will ever be coupled with this unfortunate creature.

Changes have been attempted along the way though. Whilst these learned men have by and large stuck with the unfortunate specific moniker, there have been a couple of alternatives suggested. Linnaeus’ original name in 1758 is what we use presently, *Charadrius morinellus*. However in 1760, Mathurin Jacques Brisson (1723–1806) thought that this bird is more closely related to the tundra plovers (*Pluvialis*) and called it *P. minor*, due to its diminutive size compared to Golden *P. apricaria* and more especially Grey Plovers *P. squatarola*.

Some attempted change by alluding to the distribution of the Dotterel when naming it. Peter Simon Pallas in 1773 related it to their distribution in Russia in the region where the Tartars lived *i. e.* west-central Russia along the Volga and Kama Rivers, west of the Ural Mountains *Charadrius tataricus*. A chap called Philipp Ludwig Statius Müller must have seen a direct association with England naming it *C. Anglus* [sic] in 1776, which seems strange since the species was never common as a breeder here, although it was clearly more common on passage in the past than now, as previously alluded to. Later in 1788 Johann Friedrich Gmelin called them *C. sibiricus* referring to their most easterly breeding populations.

In 1831 Christian Ludwig Brehm had a stab at changing the genus to *Eudromias* (which means swiftness from the Greek *eudromia*). This was in widespread use until recently when it reverted to *Charadrius*. Brehm stuck however to the ignoble *morinella* for the specific name. William Macgilivray tried again to use *Pluvialis* whilst retaining the specific *morinellus* in 1842 and Charles Lucien Jules Laurent Bonaparte tried to shift the insult to the genus whilst then referring to the Siberian range of the bird for the specific name; *Morinellus sibiricus* 1856.



‘Eurasian Dotterel © Shlomi Levi



Eurasian Dotterel © Elis Simpson

The days in which I was discovering birds beyond my garden and local parks from books were those halcyon days before the necessity to standardise English names across the world reared its ugly head. So the Dotterel in my book was called just that, as was Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*, Ringed Plover *Charadrius hiaticula* Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*, Redshank *Tringa totanus* etc. after all, we had those scientific names to level the playing field didn't we? Today though the convention has become that we need to add the prefix Eurasian to our Dotterel in order to differentiate it from any other so-called dotterels around the world.

And here I have a slightly controversial point of view, and one that will certainly get me into trouble with some of my friends around the world and especially those in New Zealand, although it shouldn't be taken too seriously. As explorers of the past spread out across the world, they made a point of trying to make everywhere they went as much like home as they could. They would also name any unfamiliar bird they came across after one that was similar within their reference set, whether appropriate or not. A classic example of this is the American Robin *Turdus migratorius* and also, in my opinion, anything that is called Dotterel away from the original species thus named. Given that the name was given to that bird due to its unfortunate trust in mankind, it should not be applied to anything else I feel, it is specific to that species. If this were the case we could then drop the suffix, like we do with the Dunnock *Prunella modularis*.

In New Zealand, they are particularly fond of their Dotterels and flatly refuse, for the most part, to concede to the English standard name. Thus, what we call a Double-banded Plover is and always will be, to the New Zealanders, simply Banded Dotterel. The New Zealand Dotterel has recently been split, and here was a chance to change the name to Plover and what did they come up with? Southern and Northern Red-breasted Plover, quite a mouthful, and one that I don't expect the Kiwis to be adopting imminently.



'Banded Dotterel' © Elis Simpson



'New Zealand Dotterel' © Elis Simpson

In Australia there are three dotterel species; Inland Dotterel *Charadrius australis*, Black-fronted Dotterel *Elseyaornis melanops* and Red-kneed Dotterel *Erythrogonys cinctus*. The latter of these really has been badly misrepresented in its names. Not only is it not really a Dotterel or even a plover, it is actually a Lapwing and the only one in that family not called *Vanellus*, but the red knees are anatomically speaking actually equivalent of our ankles.



Black-fronted Dotterel © Elis Simpson



Red-kneed Dotterel © Elis Simpson

South America also has a couple of Dotterels, the Tawny-throated Dotterel *Oreopholus ruficollis* and the Red-chested Dotterel *Charadrius modestus*. All of these birds in the southern hemisphere are in the plover family and could (and should?) be called plover instead of dotterel.



Rufous-chested Dotterel © Keith Barnes



Tawny-throated Dotterel © Elis Simpson

It took me until 1986 when I was in my twitching years before I was able to make my first acquaintance, first hand, with the Eurasian Dotterel. I drove up to Cottenham in Cambridgeshire and witnessed a trip of eight birds. This was species number 314 of my headlong dash to reach 400 British species. In those days 400 was the total to reach for any serious twitcher, but now that seems such a modest number as totals hover around the 600 mark for some. As for British my list now? I stopped counting when I spent more time abroad and it died entirely when I moved abroad and currently dwells around the 450 mark somewhere. I get the occasional opportunity, coupled with desire to add to that total, from time to time. Those times mostly involve waders such as Short-billed Dowitcher *Limnodromus griseus* and Hudsonian Godwit *Limosa haemastica* both added to my British List since my return from Brazil.

During Wader Quest Eurasian Dotterel was our 94th species and we saw it at the top of Pendle Hill in Cumbria. For the full story of this exhausting hill climb and other stories, read *A Quest for Waders* ISBN 978-0-9955146-2-1. £15.00 plus p&p.

For more interesting facts about waders in relation to human culture; art, music, literature, poetry myth legend and much more besides, read *An Inspiration of Waders* ISBN 978-0-9955146-1-4 £8.50 plus p&p, both books by Rick and Elis Simpson. Available from Wader Quest via sales@waderquest.net

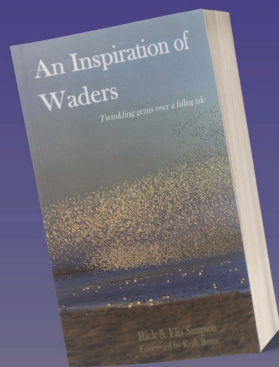


Eurasian Dotterel, Pendle Hill, UK; Wader Quest's 94th species © Elis Simpson

An Inspiration of Waders

A Wader Quest Publishing book
by Rick and Elis Simpson

An Inspiration of Waders



Twinkling gems over a falling tide

The foreword is by Keith Betton



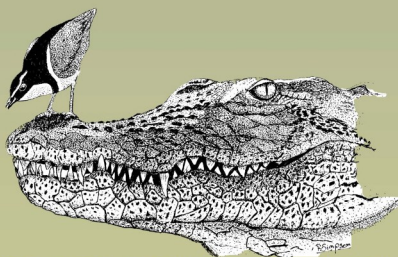
Discover our cultural connection to waders and how they have inspired us.



BY RICK AND ELIS SIMPSON



Find out how waders have inspired careers, myths, legends, art, music, poetry, theatre, books, discovery and much more besides.

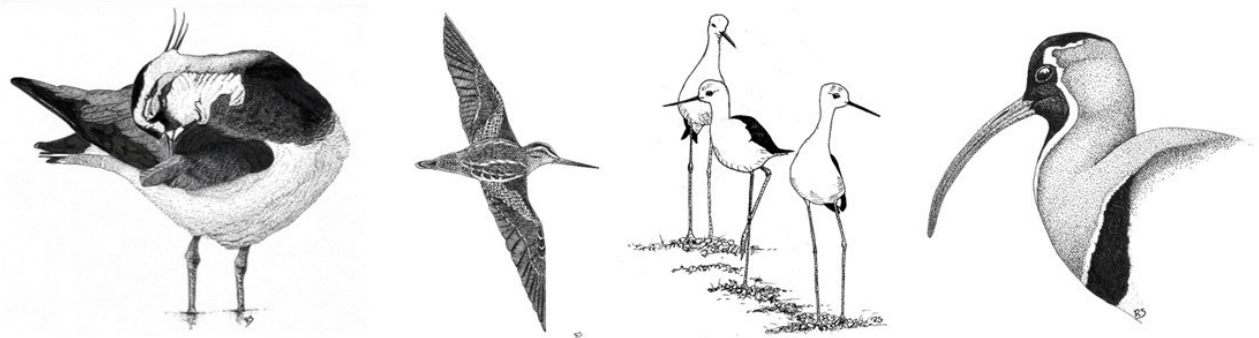


WADER QUEST PUBLISHING

All profits will go to Wader Quest

New Wader Quest book - *A Quest for Waders* by Rick and Elis Simpson

A new book from Wader Quest Publishing by Rick and Elis Simpson. This book chronicles the journeys they made to see waders around the world, and the parallel journey of Wader Quest from fundraiser to Registered Charity - all proceeds go to Wader Quest.



Foreword by Dominic Couzens

'This is a cracking read whether you're a waderphile or not. Ticking, dipping, ducking, diving, it's all here as Rick and Elis go through their version of a mid-life crisis to set up Wader Quest. A must-read for all birders.'

- Iolo Williams: Naturalist and T. V. presenter.

'Rick and Elis' enthusiasm ripples through this book. what they have achieved, bringing waders to the forefront of peoples minds alongside their conservation is second to none. A brilliant read which, like their beloved waders, will have you probing deeper into this amazing family.'

- Tim Appleton MBE: Founder of Birdfair Rutland Water and Creator of Rutland Water Nature Reserve.

'I was hooked by the prologue. The tragedy of extinction was brought home to me on seeing, in Morocco in 1990, three of the last few slender-billed curlews to exist. Thanks to the commitment of conservation organisations from around the world and support of people like Rick and Elis the spoon-billed sandpiper has a fighting chance of making it.'

- Debbie Pain: Conservationist and scientist.

'Waders are one of the most threatened groups of birds, with several species on the brink of extinction and many more suffering serious declines. This makes Rick and Elis Simpson's Wader Quest - a charity dedicated to protecting waders and highlighting their plight - important and necessary. This fascinating book tells the story of how the organisation grew from their quest to see all the world's waders, before it was too late.'

- Rebecca Armstrong: Editor of Birdwatch magazine.

orders - sales@waderquest.net



'Breathtakingly excellent - like a birding Michael Palin. The photographs and drawings are fantastic, and the text is fast-moving, endlessly entertaining and amusing.' - Jim Wright.

'This book is all of the things that the reviews on the back cover [above], and the excellent Foreword by Dominic Couzens, promise.' - Mike and Rose Clear.