

Kentish Plover; What's in a name?

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Kentish Plover © Dave Jackson



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'The Kentish Plover might be supposed, from its most inappropriate name, to be confined to the south-east corner of England. On the contrary its range extends eastwards for 250 degrees of latitude.'

Henry Seebohm



Kentish Plover © Elis Simpson

As a young boy I always thought that in order to see a [Kentish Plover](#), all I would need to do is go to Kent. As my knowledge grew in the late 60s and early 70s, I discovered that Kentish Plovers do not actually occur in Kent and I then puzzled about why they had this name. It was much later that I eventually found the reason.

So why then is this bird named after a county in southern England?

The bird was first recorded in the UK in 1787 when it was described by John Latham from specimens sent to him from Kent. This was of course the link to the county and the reason he chose that name. He gave the birds the Scientific name *Charadrius cantianus* (Medieval Latin; *Cantia* = Kent).

That scientific name would have stuck if it had not been the case that Linnaeus had named the bird before him with a specimen taken from Egypt which he called *Charadrius alexandrinus*, a much more geographically pertinent name given the current range and status, and the one which we use today. Despite this, somehow the English name Kentish Plover remained, despite Common Sand-Plover, Alexandrine Plover and Stone Runner all being mooted by various authors at one time or another.

These unfortunate birds found themselves with a small population at a time when collecting birds was all the rage and, sadly for them, the rarer the species the better. Hence, as was the way of things then, the rarer they became the more sought after were their little corpses to the collectors. Whilst it would have been easy to obtain a bird from the continent, collectors didn't rate those as highly as one taken in England, and their eggs too were much sought after.

In the late 1880s there were thought to be around 15 pairs in Kent but as the century



Kentish Plover © Elis Simpson



Kentish Plover © Dave Jackson

changed there was a bit of a recovery and by 1908 there were 30-40 pairs that bred successfully due to the new protection afforded to them. However, by the 1930s breeding was only sporadic, the chief cause being development which destroyed the habitat, with housing, roads and a railway all eating into their breeding area.

Between 1902 and 1905 three nests were found in Lincolnshire, but all the eggs were taken. Meanwhile, back in Kent, Kentish Plovers continued to breed on and off until 1935 and in Sussex until 1956. In 1939 Brian Vesey-Fitzgerald wrote;

'The precarious position of this little sprite of the shingle as a British breeding species is due entirely to the voracity of collectors. Possibly in this case the shooting of the birds in the breeding season has done more harm than egg collecting, ruthless as that was... and this shooting goes on to all intents and purposes unchecked whenever the bird appears beyond the boundary of an area where protection is properly enforced.'

In 1952 a pair attempted to breed in Suffolk but the eggs disappeared just before they were due to hatch. That was the end of the species as a breeding bird in the UK until a pair did so in 1979, once more in Lincolnshire, and in 1983 a pair laid two clutches in

Norfolk, the first was predated the second abandoned.

To add insult to injury in April 2020 the species was officially recognised as a rarity by the British Birds Rarities Committee. There is some hope that, with the modern attention to conservation, and the trend for more southerly species to return to, or invade, the UK that this lovely species may return as a breeding bird once more; we can but hope.

The taxonomy of the Kentish Plover has also had a chequered history. Various genera have been applied to the species *Aegialitis* Boie 1822, *Hiaticula* G. R. Gray 1840, *Leucopoliis* Bonaparte 1856 and *Aegialophilus* Gould 1865 but, despite a time when *cantianus* reigned supreme as the specific name, the original *alexandrinus* has returned, presumably to stay.

Splitting has also taken place in that the American version of Kentish Plover, known as [Snowy Plover](#) *Charadrius nivosus*, has now been given specific status as too has [Javan Plover](#) *Charadrius javanicus* and, in 2020 the resident subspecies *seebohmi* of southern India and Sri Lanka, was proposed to be split as the [Hanuman Plover](#), Hanuman being the monkey god in Hinduism.

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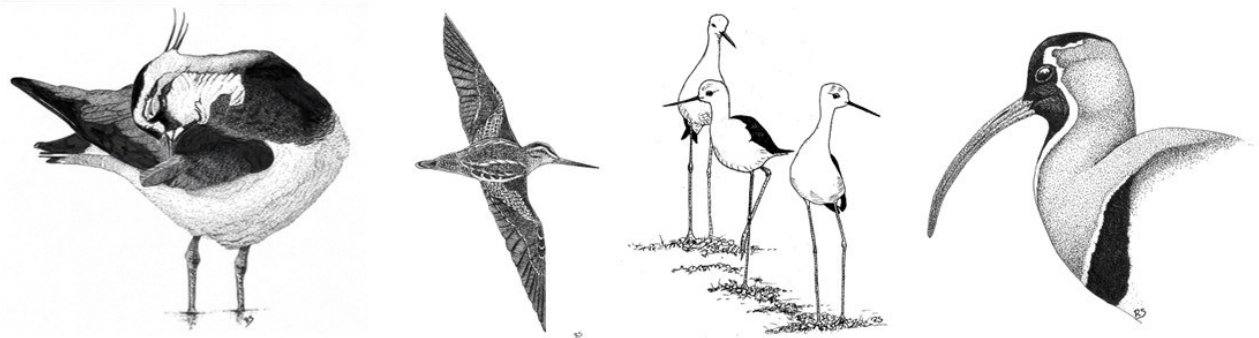
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'Hanuman' Plover © Elis Simpson

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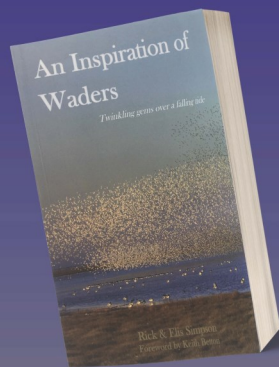
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An Inspiration of Waders



Twinkling gems over a falling tide

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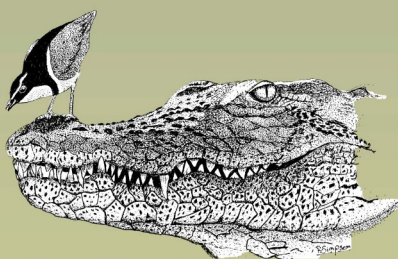
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