



WADER GURU



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European Golden Plovers © Elis Simpson

Short answer: These flocks will all be facing the same way for both safety and comfort. They will all be facing into any breeze or wind that is occurring at the time. If they need to take off suddenly to escape danger the airflow will already give them lift when they open their wings. The contours of their body, being streamlined for flight, also reduce buffeting and ruffling of the feathers that would allow cold air to get into the downy feathers, compromising the bird's insulation.

Long answer: There are two main reasons for the birds to assemble in this way; the birds will all be sitting facing any breeze or wind. The first reason is safety, survival being the most important instinct of any wild creature. By facing into the wind, should the birds need to take off suddenly to avoid danger, once they open their wings, the moving air will already be providing lift meaning the effort, and time, taken to get airborne is reduced. Every split second counts and could make the difference between life and death. As for looking behind them, plovers and lapwings have very large eyes and terrific peripheral vision which means that they have a very wide field of view. Try sneaking up on a Lapwing from behind, it'll see you easily.

In one study (see further reading below), comparing European Golden Plovers with Red Knots, it was found that the plovers had a small blind spot behind the head of around 20°, compared to 35° in the knots. However, they had a considerably larger blind spot above the head than the knots. This is why, if you observe lapwings or plovers for any length of time you will often see them with their heads cocked to one side looking skyward on the lookout for avian predators.



Southern Lapwing from behind © Elis Simpson



Northern Lapwing, Kentish Plover, Puna Plover, Hooded Plover, Wrybill, Sociable Lapwing and Grey Plover checking the skies above its head © Elis Simpson

In addition, in a large flock, at any one time, due to the numbers involved, you will notice that there will always be one or two that are alert and those that have their head tucked back over their backs will also have their eyes open, or half open (as in the photo at the top of the page), so the chances of creeping up on them are small.

Regarding comfort, birds are streamlined to enable flight, the same advantage applies when they are on the ground, so facing any wind or breeze helps them remain stable. Imagine if they were to stand side-on to any wind, they would get blown about and even knocked over, especially if standing on one leg as they tend to do. If they were to be back-on to the wind, the air movement would ruffle the waterproof outer (contour) feathers allowing cold and wet to get into the insulating layer of downy feathers, which are there to maintain the body temperature of the bird. This would increase the chance of the bird getting chilled, with a detrimental affect to its health and ultimately survival.

Further reading;

[What is a Plover's Page?](#)

Martin, Graham R. & Theunis Piersma [Vision and touch in relation to foraging and predator detection: insightful contrasts between a plover and a sandpiper](#)

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