

# Pacific Golden Plover

*Pluvialis fulva*

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Hunter Bird  
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A Pacific Golden Plover in breeding plumage, at Norfolk Island (photo: Alwyn Simple)

This is a plump-looking mid-sized shorebird with a relatively short bill (for the size of the bird). There are no subspecies. We mostly see it in its non-breeding plumage, as a mottled grey-brown bird. However, its upperparts are gold-spangled, a distinguishing feature that readily separates a non-breeding bird from other Australian coastal plover species (i.e. Grey Plover). Although that golden colouration fades in summer, some gold spots always remain. In juveniles, the gold markings are smaller and they too fade in summer but they always are visible from a careful inspection.

Non-breeding-plumaged Pacific Golden Plovers can be differentiated from Grey Plovers by several factors – the latter are ~20% larger and have a correspondingly larger head, they completely lack any golden upperparts, and their white rump, black axillaries (“armpits”) and white wing bar all are obvious when the bird is in flight. In contrast, Pacific Golden Plovers have a dark rump, dusky underwing and minimal wing bar.

Birds in breeding plumage are striking – the gold spangling on their upper parts becomes vivid, and extends onto the crown; all of the under parts turn black; and they develop a white band which starts above the eye as a supercilium and runs down the sides of the neck and breast. Although the adults mostly do not fully-develop their breeding plumage while they are here with us, that development usually is well advanced by the time they depart and at least semi-retained when they return.

In general, males and females look identical. However, in breeding plumage the underparts of males tend to be nearly immaculate black, while those of females are usually flecked with white, especially the undertail coverts.



A Pacific Golden Plover in non-breeding plumage, at Stockton (photo: Chris Herbert). This bird has very little gold on its upper parts, but look closely and you should see them.

### Global Distribution

The Pacific Golden Plover is a migratory shorebird. The map below shows the northern hemisphere breeding range (it spans northern Russia, Siberia and Alaska) and the non-breeding season range. Although the main non-breeding range is centred on south-east Asia and Australia (ie the East Asian-Australasian Flyway), some birds migrate to eastern Africa and some to western USA.

The most recent estimate of the total population is 125,000 birds (source: BirdLife Australia). Only 7-8% of that population comes to Australia – the remainder become well-distributed across many countries within the EAFF. Singapore, with 13% of the population, hosts the highest proportion.

Most shorebirds, including Pacific Golden Plover, exhibit site fidelity – i.e. they return each year to the same location so long as the site continues to offer safe foraging and roosting habitats.



Breeding range (yellow) and non-breeding range (blue) for Pacific Golden Plover (map sourced from: <http://datazone.birdlife.org/species/factsheet/pacific-golden-plover-pluvialis-fulva/distribution>)

### Regional Status

The main two locations for Pacific Golden Plover in our region are the Hunter and Manning estuaries. The Hunter estuary population declined substantially during the 1980s and 90s, but it increased over the following two decades, probably as a result of the many salt marsh rehabilitation projects occurring over that time. However, since 2020 the counts from HBOC's monthly surveys

have dropped by ~30% and they usually are of below 200 birds now. It might be that new roost sites have formed through the rehabilitation work, and which aren't covered in the surveys. The Manning estuary population of ~150 birds probably is stable – there is a similar problem of not knowing where all the roost sites are.

Birds usually start to leave here in March, with the migration departure completed by about mid-April. However, most years a small number of Pacific Golden Plover over-winter in the Hunter Region. Those are immature birds, too young to breed and therefore not undertaking the northwards migration.

### **At the breeding grounds**

The Pacific Golden Plover breeds in Arctic tundra areas. Males usually arrive first, and build a nest of lichen, moss, and grasses, in shallow scrapes on the ground in a dry open area. The female lays 4 blotchy buff-coloured eggs. The pair share the incubation duties and care of their young. Soon after hatching, chicks forage independently, but return to their parents for warmth and shelter. In the tundra, Pacific Golden Plover eat nearly anything within their territory that crawls, and they also eat berries, leaves, and seeds.

When juveniles are able to fly, about 4 weeks after hatching, the adults depart on their southern migration (females usually leave first). The juveniles remain behind, not starting their migration until as late as October-November depending on weather conditions. They migrate by instinct, continuing their southward journey until they find a suitable area that is not already fully-claimed by adults.





A Pacific Golden Plover nest in Alaska (photo: Kristine Sowl, image sourced from <https://pacificbirds.org/2021/04/pacific-golden-plovers-connect-us/>)

## About the name

### Pacific Golden Plover

A popular theory is that the genus name derives from the Old French term *pleuvoir*, to rain (which itself is derived from the Latin *pluvia*, rain). This might even be true: Linnaeus in 1729 wrote of what's now known as the European Golden Plover: "They are called *regnipipare* (i.e. "rain-caller") because they flock together and call before rain". There are three plover species which develop gold-spangled upper parts in breeding plumage and thus get called "golden plover". Our bird migrates south through the Pacific – there also are American and European Golden Plover species. The American and Pacific ones were considered conspecific until the 1980s.

### *Pluvialis fulva*

Using the same logic as above, the genus scientific name derives from the Latin *pluvia*. The species name is from the Latin *fulvus*, tawny, deep or reddish yellow.



A Pacific Golden Plover in flight – note the dark rump (photo: Rob Palazzi).

Design Rob Kyte at Conservation Matters 0420 821 460 Text by Alan Stuart based on information mainly sourced from • HBOC's Hunter Region annual bird report series • Volumes 1-7 of HANZAB (the Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds) • Bird in the Hand (ABSA information sheet series) • Menkhorst et al. (2017). The Australian Bird Guide • Ian Fraser & Jeannie Gray (2013). Australian Bird Names A Complete Guide • Richard Cooper, Ian McAllan and Brian Curtis (2020). Atlas of the Birds of NSW and the ACT, Vol 1 • J.A. Jobling (2010). Helm Dictionary of Scientific Bird Names.

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