

SHORT NOTE

A partial albino shore plover (*Thinornis novaeseelandiae*) on South East Island, Chatham Islands

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The New Zealand shore plover (*Thinornis novaeseelandiae*) is an endangered endemic shorebird, with a total wild population of <200 individuals. The bulk of the population (about 130 birds) is found on South East Island, Chatham Islands (BirdLife International 2000). There appears to be only 1 record in the literature of an albino shore plover; "...a pure white example was collected at the Chatham Islands in 1880 by Mr. Palmer and is now in the Tring Museum" (Oliver 1930). This specimen (Palmer no. 303, Rothschild no. 126) is still in the Natural History Museum, Tring, and has the catalogue number BMNH 1939.12.9.38 (Knox & Walters 1994). We record here the existence of a partial albino female shore plover breeding at Thinornis Bay, South East Island (44°21'S, 176°10'W) in the 2001/02 season.

The bird was originally banded with metal band C-28243 as a juvenile on 20 February 1995 at Watercress Bay, South East Island (E.S. Kennedy, pers. comm.). In January 1998, JED re-trapped and colour banded it RY-YW; it was then 3 years old and was paired and breeding in Thinornis Bay. At that time, its plumage appeared normal, with the usual dark face mask, light brown crown and mid-brown upper wings. Adult shore plovers are sexually dimorphic and RY-YW was a typical female, having a brown face mask (males have a black face mask) and a bill with an orange base and dark brown pigment in the distal two-thirds (males have the basal two-thirds of the bill bright orange with only a dark brown tip) (Marchant & Higgins 1993).

Shore plover in Thinornis Bay have been monitored closely in succeeding seasons. RY-YW's

plumage was normal in the 1998/99 season (T. Thurley, pers. comm.), and in the 1999/2000 and 2000/01 seasons until at least the end of May 2001, when her bill had the usual orange base, graduating to a darker tip (HG, pers. obs.).

By November 2001 the bird was in its 7th year, and was still paired and breeding in the same territory as in 1998. It had, however, acquired striking plumage (Fig. 1). The head was largely white, with only a few pale brown feathers on the crown. The only remnant of the dark face mask was a narrow collar of dark brown. The back and upper wings were mid-brown with patches of white. The rump and upper tail were not seen clearly. The iris was normal (dark brown); the eye ring was normal (orange). Dark brown pigment was entirely lacking from the bill, which was orange with a pale horn tip. The legs and feet were the normal orange, but the claws (normally black) were pale horn.

The bird is, therefore, a partial albino *sensu* Pettingill (1970). It appears that the dark brown melanic pigments are lacking from the bill, claws, and some of the plumage, while the carotenoids responsible for the orange (Welty 1975) of bill, legs, and eye ring are still present. The 1880 Palmer specimen shows similar pigmentation, although the white plumage is more extensive; "The specimen is pure white except for some darkish marks on the outer web of the third and fourth primaries and two or three single feathers of the wing coverts...the feet as well as the beak are still quite light orange-horn coloured. Tip of beak and claws are of the same light colour" (F. Steinheimer, pers. comm.).

Because RY-YW has been individually colour banded since the age of 3 years, it is possible to be



Fig. 1 Female shore plover (*Thinornis novaeseelandiae*) RY-YW ("Snowy") at Thinornis Bay, South East Island in January 2002. Photo: J.E. Dowding.

certain that she acquired atypical plumage as an adult, and has not had it since an early age. Pettingill (1970) notes that while albinism may be inherited, it "...may also be spontaneous, developing in an individual as a result of some physiological disturbance".

The timing of acquisition of albino plumage by RY-YW (between the beginning of June and early November) is also of interest. In shore plover, the normal adult post-breeding (pre-basic) moult occurs in summer and autumn (Dowding & Kennedy 1993, Marchant & Higgins 1993). This suggests either that RY-YW moulted extremely late in 2001 or that there is a partial pre-breeding (pre-alternate) moult in shore plover (see Marchant & Higgins 1993).

The shore plover population in Thinornis Bay is closely monitored each season and almost all juveniles are banded. It will be interesting to see whether RY-YW's plumage changes again at any time, either by becoming even whiter or by reverting to normal. It is also possible that as a result of her appearance she may be divorced and join the pool of non-breeding birds. It will also be interesting to see whether any of her offspring display similar aberrant plumage at any time.

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