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Authors: Sharpe, Christopher J., Giner F., Sandra B., Rodríguez-Ferraro, Adriana, Miranda, Jhonathan, Torres, Lermith, et al.

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First records of Piping Plover *Charadrius melodus* for Venezuela, with a revision of its non-breeding distribution

by Christopher J. Sharpe, Sandra B. Giner F., Adriana Rodríguez-Ferraro, Jhonathan Miranda, Lermith Torres & José Ochoa G.

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SUMMARY.—The non-breeding distribution of Piping Plover *Charadrius melodus* outside the USA has only recently been elucidated, with new records in Central American and Caribbean countries during the last decade. A specimen from Ecuador was the only definite record in South America prior to 2018. We present two records of Piping Plover in Venezuela; the first at the Paraguaná Peninsula, Falcón state, on 25 February 2018, and the second in the northern part of Ciénaga de Los Olivitos Wildlife Refuge and Fishing Reserve, Zulia state, on 5 March 2020.

Piping Plover *Charadrius melodus* is a small shorebird of international conservation concern. Its population has declined significantly since the 1950s, but concerted conservation action slowed the trend and has led to overall increases since 1991 (BirdLife International 2020). Global numbers are now calculated at more than 5,700 breeding birds (Elliott-Smith *et al.* 2015). Nevertheless, *C. melodus* has been lost as a breeding bird in several US states (Elliott-Smith & Haig 2020) and is still one of the most threatened shorebirds in the USA and Canada, being federally listed in both countries (Elliott-Smith *et al.* 2015) and considered globally Near Threatened (BirdLife International 2020). Its non-breeding range outside the USA has only recently been elucidated, with new records from several countries.

The species breeds in North America and winters on the Atlantic coast of the south-eastern USA, the Gulf of Mexico coast south to the Yucatán Peninsula, in the Bahamas, Turks & Caicos, and Cuba (Wiersma *et al.* 2018, Elliott-Smith & Haig 2020). Although it overwinters in small numbers in Puerto Rico (Lewis *et al.* 2006), it is scarce on Hispaniola (Latta *et al.* 2006), and only a vagrant to Jamaica (Haynes-Sutton *et al.* 2009) and the Virgin Islands (seven records on St. Croix; Yntema *et al.* 2017; and at least three on Anegada; Raffaele 1989, McGowan *et al.* 2007, eBird 2018). There are no records from the Cayman Islands (Bradley & Rey-Millet 2013, Kirwan *et al.* 2019). In the Lesser Antilles, it is a vagrant on Anguilla (Holliday *et al.* 2015), St. Martin (eBird 2018), St. Kitts (Steadman *et al.* 1997), Antigua (Elliott-Smith *et al.* 2009), Guadeloupe (Levesque & Jaffard 2002, Levesque & Saint-Auret 2007), Martinique (Levesque *et al.* 2005) and Barbados (Buckley *et al.* 2009). Furthermore, there are two records from the Atlantic coast of Central America: a bird photographed in Honduras in October 2012 (Gallardo 2014), and a flock of six in Nicaragua in February 2000 (Martínez-Sánchez 2007). In the southern Caribbean there are at least two documented records on Bonaire, 96 km off the Venezuelan coast (Prins *et al.* 2009, eBird 2018). On the Pacific coast, it is rare and irregular in Mexico, from Sonora to Nayarit (Howell & Webb 1996), and there is one record from Costa Rica in November 2009 (Zook 2010). A specimen from south-west Ecuador, collected in October 1955 and now held at the Natural History Museum, Tring (NHMUK 1956.5.6), is the only confirmed record in mainland South America (Marchant 1956). Although there is a published record from far northern Brazil (Azevedo *et al.* 2003), this has not been repeated elsewhere (see Elliott-Smith & Haig 2020).

and the reported specimens are actually of Semipalmated Plovers *Charadrius semipalmatus* (Piacentini *et al.* 2015, Pacheco & Agne 2019).

We present two more records for South America, more than 50 years since the first record in Ecuador. On 25 February 2018, several of us were undertaking shorebird counts on the Paraguaná Peninsula, Falcón state, north-west Venezuela, as part of a Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network study. Field work commenced shortly after dawn at the sandy spit of Playa El Pico on the west side of the peninsula (11°51'20"N, 70°18'00"W; Fig. 1). A mixed flock of small shorebirds was foraging on the south side of the spit. It comprised 43 Sanderling *Calidris alba* and three Semipalmated Sandpipers *C. pusilla*. At 07.30 h, JM, who had moved further west along the spit to photograph the flock, flushed what he initially thought to be a Snowy Plover *Charadrius nivosus*, a low-density species on the Caribbean coast of Venezuela. The flock flew closer to the other observers while the bird in question landed amongst seaweed 1–2 m higher up the beach and began foraging c.30 m away. The behaviour did not match *C. nivosus* and, as its head shape, more vertical stance and short runs were more reminiscent of *C. melodus*, CJS suggested that the observers move closer to the bird to ascertain its identity. Almost immediately the bright orange legs were seen, eliminating *C. nivosus* and reinforcing identification as *C. melodus*. Over the next 30 minutes, the bird was observed from 10 m by four observers and photographs (Figs. 2–3) were obtained by JM & CJS. This individual was not ringed.

The bird was distinctly larger than the superficially similar *C. nivosus* (the only other pale ash-grey *Charadrius* in the region), with an erect rather than horizontal stance, assumed after short runs of just a few paces. The crown was rounded, rather than flattened as in *C. nivosus*, and the forehead steep. Legs were conspicuously bright orange, while the bill was black with a tiny orange base (only visible at close range and in photographs), characteristic of non-breeders. The forehead was white, the ear-coverts pale grey, separated from the

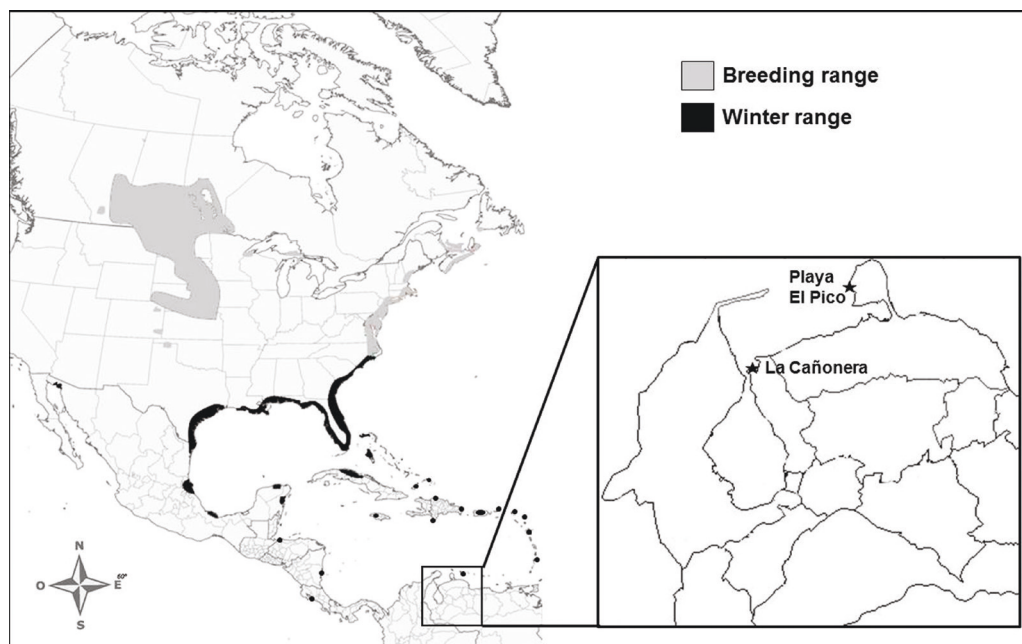


Figure 1. Distribution of Piping Plover *Charadrius melodus*: grey shading denotes breeding range, black areas indicate winter range and recent records (for sources, see bibliography), and stars indicate record localities for Venezuela described here.



Figures 2–3. Non-breeding Piping Plover *Charadrius melodus*, Playa El Pico, western Paraguaná Peninsula, Falcón, Venezuela, February 2018 (Jhonathan Miranda)

crown by a broad white supercilium, creating a plain face, within which the large black 'button eye' was prominent, producing an overall 'innocent expression'. The sooty lateral breast-band was the darkest area of feathering, with no black in the rest of the plumage. This is the first record for Venezuela and the second for continental South America.

Two years later, on 5 March 2020, another single *C. melodus* was recorded in La Cañonera sector within the northern part of Ciénaga de Los Olivitos Wildlife Refuge and Fishing Reserve, Zulia state, also in north-west Venezuela (10°57'36"N, 71°22'41"W). In the area there were several plovers, including 19 Wilson's *Charadrius wilsonia*, 32 *C. semipalmatus* and two Grey *Pluvialis squatarola*. The Piping Plover was observed by LT at 10.30 h, together with a Wilson's Plover on a dry mudflat. When LT moved closer in order to observe the bird better, it moved away and closer to a Semipalmated Plover *C. semipalmatus*. In this case, the size, coloration and behaviour of the *C. melodus* were unmistakably different to the other plovers present in the area. LT also obtained photographs and observed that the plover was not ringed (Figs. 4–5).

North-west Venezuela, especially its coastal areas, is poorly studied from an ornithological perspective, nor is it a preferred destination for birders. The Paraguaná



Figures 4–5. Non-breeding Piping Plover *Charadrius melodus*, Ciénaga de los Olivitos Wildlife Refuge and Fishing Reserve, Zulia, Venezuela, March 2020 (Lermith Torres)

Peninsula, in particular, is an ideal ‘migrant trap’ due to its geographic location. A handful of visits has generated new bird records for Falcón state or Venezuela as a whole, both shorebirds (e.g. Buff-breasted Sandpiper *Calidris subruficollis*; Azpiroz & Rodríguez-Ferraro 2006) and landbirds (White-eyed Vireo *Vireo griseus*, Northern Parula *Setophaga americana* and Magnolia Warbler *S. magnolia*; Rodríguez *et al.* 2017). In terms of conservation, Playa El Pico, in particular, may be an important site for shorebird conservation as breeding Snowy Plover and American Oystercatcher *Haematopus palliatus* have been recorded there (Azpiroz & Rodríguez-Ferraro 2006). This beach, however, lacks legal protection and is frequently visited by fishermen and tourists, who drive vehicles along the sand disturbing breeding and resting birds. Feral dogs are also observed there, and may pose an additional threat to shorebirds. In the case of Ciénaga de los Olivitos Wildlife Refuge and Fishing Reserve and the nearby Salina Solar Los Olivitos, these areas are very important for shorebird conservation, not only because of the large concentration of wintering birds, but also because uncommon species in Venezuela have been recorded there in recent years. The first record of Red-necked Phalarope *Phalaropus lobatus* for the country was reported in February 2016, and in the same year the first record of Wilson’s Phalarope *P. tricolor* was reported in Zulia state (Torres *et al.* 2016), with large numbers of the latter recorded since, most recently a flock of 512 individuals in January 2020. Additionally, since 2008, there have been frequent records of Marbled Godwits *Limosa fedoa* (Giner *et al.* 2017) and Buff-breasted Sandpipers wintering there, as well as breeding records for Snowy Plover (L. Torres & F. Espinoza *in litt.* 2013). These two areas are protected and receive few visitors, thus potential threats to shorebirds are minimal there.

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Addresses: Christopher J. Sharpe, Consultant, Manomet / Western Hemisphere Shorebird Reserve Network, April Cottage, Chapel Street, Rocklands NR17 1UJ, Norfolk, UK, e-mail: sharpebird@gmail.com. Sandra B. Giner F., Instituto de Zoología y Ecología Tropical, Universidad Central de Venezuela, Caracas, Distrito Capital, Venezuela, e-mail: sandra.giner@ciens.ucv.ve. Adriana Rodríguez-Ferraro, Depto. de Estudios Ambientales, Universidad Simón Bolívar, Valle de Sartenejas, Miranda, Venezuela, e-mail: rodrigueza@usb.ve. Jhonathan Miranda, Provita, Av. Rómulo Gallegos c/Av. 1 Santa Eduvigis, Edif. Pascal, Torre A, Piso 17, Caracas, Venezuela, e-mail: biojhonathan@gmail.com. Lermith Torres, Movimiento Ambientalista No Gubernamental La Educación (MANGLE), Los Puertos de Altagracia 4036, Zulia, Venezuela, e-mail: lermithtorres55@yahoo.es. José Ochoa G., Centro de Estudios en Zoología Aplicada (CEZA), Facultad Experimental de Ciencias y Tecnología, Universidad de Carabobo, Venezuela, e-mail: jochoabat@gmail.com