

Raccoons of the shore: the Semipalmated Plover
Article by Taylor Bennett

We at Gulf Coast Bird Observatory are conducting non-breeding shorebird surveys along the Texas Coast until the end of March. The beaches that we monitor are Matagorda Beach, Bryan Beach, Quintana Beach, and Follet's Island. We are mainly focusing on threatened, endangered, or species of high concern which include Piping Plover, Snowy Plover, and Red Knot.

While surveying, we encounter other shorebirds along the beach including the Semipalmated Plover. These particular plovers are neither threatened nor endangered which classifies them as common and species of low concern. They are the most common and numerous plover you can encounter on the beach and can be seen from September to late April along the Gulf Coast.

The Semipalmated Plover differs slightly from other plover species. The word "semipalm" is actually referring to its partial webbed feet and not its plumage. It has orange legs and a stout orange bill with a black tip similar to a Piping Plover which makes it slightly difficult to distinguish, especially when both of them are in winter plumage.

What makes it stand out from other plovers is its darker plumage, which is browner on top. As well, it has eyepatches around its eyes which become a mask during breeding season and resembles a raccoon, well, at least to me it does.

The Piping Plover has very pale plumage and lacks the mask around its eyes. Luckily for us, the breeding and wintering plumage of the Semipalmated Plover stays dark while the Piping Plover stays pale. The Semipalmated Plover also has a very large, dark neck band while the Piping Plover has a narrower black neck band only during breeding season.

Semipalmated Plovers and Piping Plovers have similar feeding styles. They both use the stop and go method and rely heavily on sight to go after their prey. They also use their bill to probe in the sand. Both birds mainly feed on insects, marine worms, crabs, mollusks, and other marine invertebrates. They both can be seen hunting their prey by foot trembling, in which they move their feet rapidly in the sand creating vibrations to cause prey to surface. They both like to be on their own when they feed, however, the Semipalmated Plovers prefers to roost and fly in large flocks.

Another difference between Semipalmated Plovers and Piping Plovers is their breeding habitat. Piping Plovers prefer nesting along the coast on beaches or in the Greater Plains near lakes and rivers within the United States. Semipalmated Plovers prefer the cold and migrate towards the sub-Arctic and Arctic for breeding. They don't necessarily lay nests on the actual tundra, but prefer to nest on gravel bars along rivers and ponds.

Their dark plumage helps them blend in to this particular environment which protects them against predators. Both Semipalmated and Piping Plovers will defend their nest and chicks using the broken-wing display in which they fake an injury in order to distract the predator away.

Both plover species can be seen at all of our monitoring sites, especially Follet's Island and Matagorda Beach. On behalf of Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, thank you for reading and as always, when observing shorebirds please share the beach and give them their space to rest and recharge.

IMG_1753: Photo of Semipalmated Plover observed feeding along the shores of Follet's Island near Surfside, TX. Photo taken by Taylor Bennett.