



Artur Bujanowicz

## Lesser Sandplover (Mongolian Plover)

*Charadrius mongolus*

### Geographical variation and distribution

The Lesser Sandplover (or Mongolian Plover) has an extensive although discontinuous distribution that extends from the Pamir Mountains in the west, through Central and North-east Asia to the Chukotsky Peninsula in the north-east (Hirschfeld *et al.* 2000). Breeding has also been recorded in Alaska. Five subspecies are generally recognised: *mongolus* in Eastern Siberia and the Russian Far East; *pamirensis* in Central Asia; *atrifrons* in the Himalayas and southern Tibet; *schaeferi* from eastern Tibet to southern Mongolia; and *stegmanni* from the Kurile Islands and Kamchatka north to Chukotsky (del Hoyo *et al.* 1996). Only *pamirensis* (the most westerly breeding form) occurs in Western Eurasia and Africa. This breeds in the mountains of west-central Asia (Pamirs, Karakoram, Ladakh, Kun Lun and Tien Shan), and winters from Eastern Africa through the Red Sea and Persian Gulf to Pakistan, western India and Sri Lanka, with small numbers reaching Southern Africa (regularly as far south as Durban in South Africa), the Seychelles and Madagascar (Wetlands International 2000, Hirschfeld *et al.* 2000). Several reports of *C. mongolus* in Cyprus and Turkey are thought more likely to refer to Greater Sandplover *Charadrius leschenaultii* or Kittlitz's Plover *C. pecuarius* (Flint *et al.* 1997).

### Movements

The Lesser Sandplover is highly migratory, all populations leaving their breeding grounds in late summer and early autumn and migrating south-west, south or south-east to winter widely along the coasts of Eastern Africa, the Indian subcontinent, South-east Asia and Australia. Birds breeding in Central Asia (*pamirensis*) probably migrate non-stop to the coasts of the Red Sea, Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea, as

no inland staging areas have been reported and the species occurs only as a scarce vagrant in the south Caspian region (Snow & Perrins 1998, D.A. Scott unpubl. obs.). Some birds probably stage in the Persian Gulf and Red Sea before continuing on to the East African coast. Birds arrive on their wintering grounds in the Persian Gulf, southern Arabia and East Africa between early August and mid-September. Northward passage in spring apparently involves a non-stop flight from the shores of the Red Sea, Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea to the Central Asian breeding areas. Some non-breeders remain on the wintering grounds throughout the northern summer, but this is apparently rare in Southern Africa, where 95% of the records are in the period November-March (Hockey 1997).

### Population limits

Only one population of *C. mongolus pamirensis* is recognised in *Waterbird Population Estimates*, and this comprises the entire population of the subspecies.

### Population size

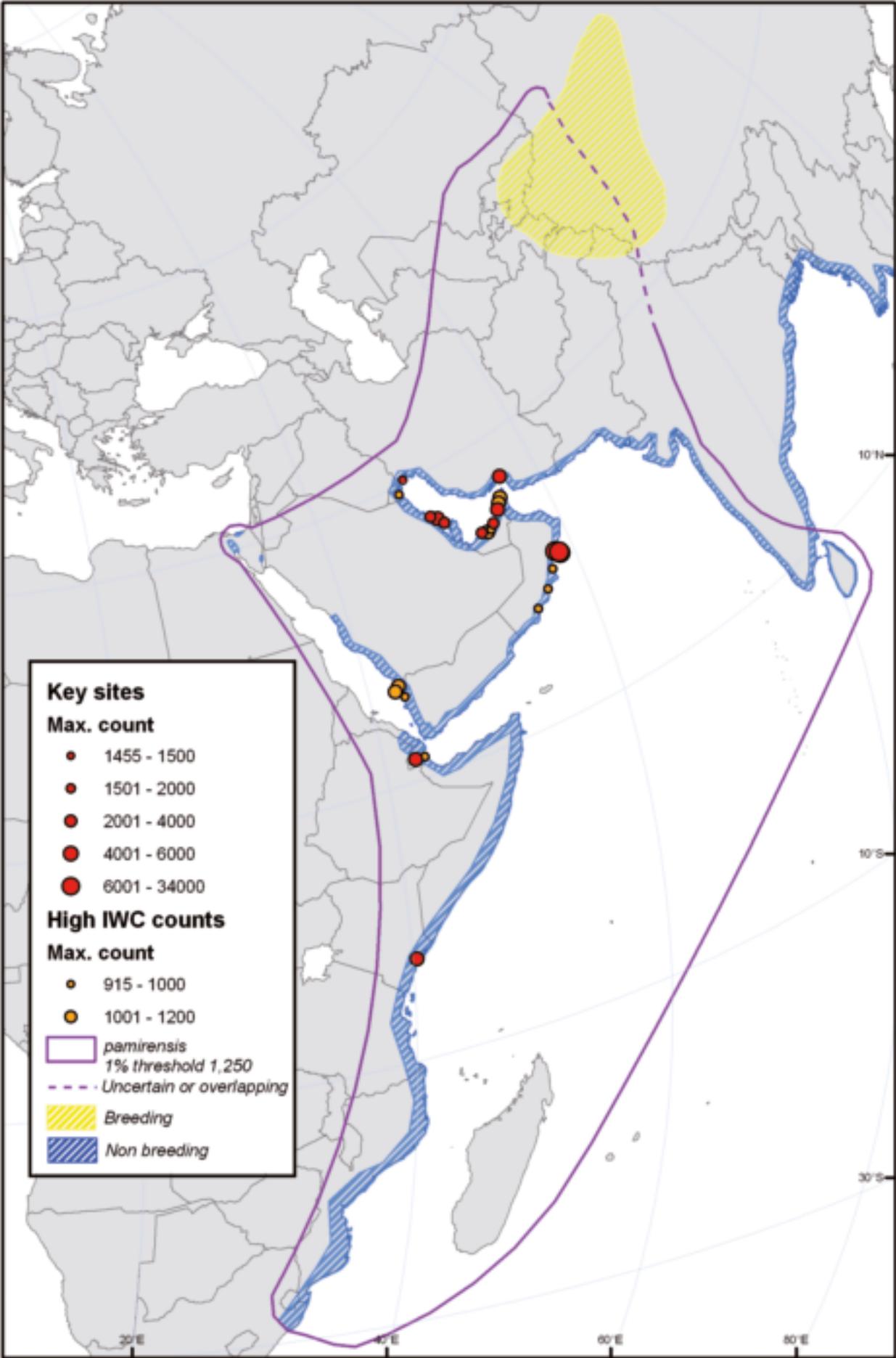
#### 1. *pamirensis*

Population estimate	1% threshold	Population trend
100,000-150,000	1,250	Unknown

Little information is available on the size of this population, as no information is available from the breeding grounds and much of the wintering range is poorly covered by midwinter censuses. Perennou *et al.* (1994) gave a provisional estimate of 25,000, but it is now clear that this was a considerable underestimate. Del Hoyo *et al.* (1996) gave a somewhat higher estimate of at least 30,000 for the total population of *pamirensis*, including an estimated 28,000 along the Saudi Arabian Gulf coast. However, these authors noted that the Lesser Sandplover is one of the commonest waders on the coasts of Pakistan and India, and locally common to abundant from Ethiopia to Tanzania, with thousands in Kenya.

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Dodman (2002) reviewed counts in Africa, and concluded that there were at least 20,000 on the Red Sea and Indian Ocean coastlines of Africa. Up to 2,340 have been recorded at the Tana River Delta in Kenya (Bennun & Njoroge 1999). There are regular records from Eritrea, and presumably a sizeable number may be found along the Somali coast. This seems especially likely given a recent count of 1,368 on the mudflats around Djibouti City in February 2001 (Welch & Welch 2001). A total of 476 was recorded in coastal Mozambique in January 1998, with 470 at Benguera Island in the Bazaruto Archipelago (Dodman *et al.* 1999). The species is also an annual migrant to Seychelles, occurring throughout the islands in small numbers from September to April (Skerrett *et al.* 2001). Small numbers also occur on other Indian Ocean islands and in Madagascar. Dodman (2002) therefore proposed a somewhat higher population estimate of 30,000-50,000, and this was adopted by Stroud *et al.* (2004) and WPE3.

However, even this appears to have been an underestimate, as it did not take into account the large numbers of *pamirensis* wintering on the coasts of Pakistan, western India and Sri Lanka. The situation in South Asia is confusing, as *C. mongolus atrifrons* is also known to winter in India and Sri Lanka, and has been recorded as far west as Pakistan. S. Balachandran (*in litt.* 2005) has recently estimated the wintering population of *pamirensis* in India at 100,000. This figure was taken into account in the new estimate of 100,000-150,000 for the total population of *pamirensis* adopted in WPE4.

### Conservation status

This species appears not to be under threat. It uses a variety of coastal habitats and its range in Central and South-west Asia and Africa includes a lot of remote regions with sparse human populations. However, few of the preferred sites have been counted consistently or frequently enough to allow calculation of population trends.

### Habitat and ecology

The disjunct breeding range is mainly in the mountains of south-central and eastern Asia up to 5,500 m in altitude. Nesting is invariably above the tree-line (latitudinal or altitudinal), in barren valleys and basins, elevated tundra and mountain steppes, mainly near water (e.g. bogs) on moist

but well-drained gravelly, rocky or sandy substrates with little vegetation (del Hoyo *et al.* 1996). Egg-laying in *pamirensis* commences in mid-May. Breeding densities of one pair per sq km have been recorded, and rarely 3-12 nests only 100 m apart. The nest is placed in a scrape or cattle footprint in bare sand or shingle, sometimes beside bushes or big stones. Incubation is by both sexes, but in most cases only the males tend the chicks (del Hoyo *et al.* 1996). Outside the breeding season, the Lesser Sandplover is strictly coastal, frequenting tidal mudflats, especially in the vicinity of mangroves, sandy beaches and estuaries; also occasionally rocky shores with tidal pools. It feeds in typical plover fashion, either solitarily or in scattered flocks, often in company with other small waders including Greater Sandplover *C. leschenaultii*. Outside the breeding season, the diet consists of insects, crustaceans, such as crabs and amphipods, molluscs, particularly bivalves, and polychaete worms (del Hoyo *et al.* 1996, Snow & Perrins 1998).

### Network of key sites

Ten key wintering areas have been identified in South-west Asia: two on the Persian Gulf in Iran, one in Bahrain, three in the United Arab Emirates, two on the Gulf coast of Saudi Arabia, and two on the Arabian Sea coast in Oman. The two sites in Oman, Barr Al Hikman and Masirah Island, are much the most important, supporting up to 13,000 and 6,400 birds respectively. Only two key sites have been identified on the African coast: the coastal mudflats at Salines Est in Djibouti and the Tana River delta in Kenya.

### Protection status of key sites

The two key sites in Iran, have been protected as Wildlife Refuges and Shadegan Marshes and Khor Musa was designated as a Ramsar site in 1975. Tubli Bay in Bahrain is partly protected in a small Wildlife Reserve. Sabkhat al-Fasl Lagoons in Saudi Arabia are protected within a large Wildlife Sanctuary, but Tarut Bay apparently remains unprotected. In the United Arab Emirates, Khor Dubai is protected as a Bird Sanctuary, while in Oman, Barr Al Hikman and Masirah Island have been proposed for protection in National Nature Reserves. Neither of the key sites on the African coast is protected; the Tana River delta is seriously threatened by major agricultural developments.

Table 35. Key sites for Lesser Sandplover. Sites where 1% or more of a population has been recorded

Country	Site	Lat.	Long.	Season	Max total	Year max	Average total	Basis for average	Source	Population(s) at site
Bahrain	Tubli Bay	26.18	50.57	Migration	2000	1991				Evans 1994
Djibouti	Salines Est	11.50	42.50	Non-breeding	2012	2002		1258	2001-02 (2)	AfWC database
Iran	Rud-i-Shur, Rud-i-Shirin & Rud-i-Minab Deltas	27.08	56.75	January	3066	2005		2009	2004-07 (3)	DOEI / WIWO
Iran	Shadegan Marshes, Khor-al Amaya & Khor Musa	30.17	48.67	January	1455	2004		818	1004-05 (2)	DOEI / WIWO
Kenya	Tana River Delta	-2.50	40.33	Non-breeding	2340	1993				WBDB
Oman	Barr Al Hikman	20.63	58.47	January	34000	2008		7560	1993-01 (5)	IWC database R. Klaasen & J. de Fouw <i>in litt</i>
Oman	Masirah Island	20.50	58.75	Non-breeding	6443	1990		3355	1994-01 (5)	IWC database
Saudi Arabia	Sabkhat al-Fasl Lagoons	27.00	49.67	April-May	1800	1992				Evans 1994
Saudi Arabia	Tarut Bay	26.67	50.17	Non-breeding	2160	1993		1704	1993-96 (3)	IWC database
U.A.E.	Khor Dubai	25.21	55.33	Non-breeding	3000	1992		1195	1995-99 (5)	IWC database
U.A.E.	Merawah Island	24.33	53.25	Non-breeding	1939	1996		998	1994-98 (4)	IWC database
U.A.E.	Sadiyat, Ghurab; Jubayl (inshore islands)	24.50	54.50	Non-breeding	1530	1995		569	1995-98 (3)	IWC database