

From Asia by air, rare bird visits Huguenot

Sighting of greater sand plovers brings a surge of birders to Huguenot Memorial Park

BY STEVE PATTERSON STORY UPDATED AT 1:44 PM ON FRIDAY, MAY. 15, 2009

On a Jacksonville beach full of birds that fly thousands of miles, there was one Thursday that was really far from home.

Bird enthusiasts at Huguenot Memorial Park said they discovered a greater sand-plover, a shorebird from Asia documented in the Western hemisphere only one other time.

"This guy should be in Hong Kong," said Duval Audubon Society president Carole Adams, one of the birders who spotted and identified the plover.

"This is a first-ever in your lifetime [experience]. ... We just could not believe it. We were jumping up and down, we were so excited."

A report of the plover's sighting spread by e-mail to birders around the state and triggered a surge of people to the city park just north of the St. Johns River.

That area is highly prized by nature enthusiasts as a stopover for countless shorebirds. This month, it has red knots, charismatic birds that migrate from the southern end of South America to the Arctic, then back.

Adams said she and several friends saw about 400 red knots, then noticed a gray, brown and white bird that seemed unlike any others. Though some types of plover are common in Northeast Florida, said this one stood out because of its long legs and pronounced beak.

"It just didn't fit," Adams said.

The celebrity plover spent the day catching fiddler crabs on the beach of a cove at the Fort George Inlet, while onlookers came to watch. It seemed healthy, Adams said.

How an Asian shorebird would reach Jacksonville is a mystery.

The greater sand-plover breeds from Turkey to Mongolia and Siberia, and winters in parts of Africa, Australia and Asia, according to the American Birding Association, which quickly blogged word of the Jacksonville discovery. It's also reported rarely in western Europe.

A single greater sand-plover was documented in 2001 in Marin County, Calif.

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