Species:  Pacific Golden-Plover

Observers:  Originally Mark Faherty, Matt Garvey, Marshall Iliff, Luke Seitz, Tim Spahr, Jeremiah Trimble, Peter Trimble, approximately 5 minutes later Ian Davies and Jessica Johnson

DISCOVERER:  I'd credit Marshall with the bird.  I am unaware of the rumblings at the other end of the line of birders.  I was closest to Marshall and heard his comments as the situation unfolded.  This does not mean some others might not have a good claim, simply that I was unaware of it at the time.  I certainly don't think I deserve any of the credit.  All I knew was based on call note it wasn't an American Golden-Plover, but I'd not even said this by the time Marshall called the bird a Pacific.

Location:  Plymouth Beach, within 1/2 mile of the northern tip.

Date and time of discovery:  July 20, 2013, approximately 7:30 PM

Conditions: Nearing sunset, with some clouds and haze.  Otherwise quite still with little wind.  Listening conditions corrupted somewhat by a loud party and music to the west, and dozens to hundreds of birds in the immediate vicinity, including begging juvenile terns of at least 3 species, a few fresh juvenile gulls, and a great mix of shorebirds.

Optics:  Perhaps the greatest collection of optics ever present at the exact discovery of a megararity like this, not to mention at least 3 iPhones recording calls, and 2 others doing videotaping.  Diagnostic photos or recordings were made apparently by 7 or 8 of the 9 present.  (THIS SURE MAKES MARC MEMBERS LOOK GOOD IN TERMS OF PROPERLY DOCUMENTING SHORT-STAYING RARITIES!!!!)  Personally I used my iPhone to obtain recordings, and used my trusty Nikon 10X42 binoculars.  No personal camera or scope present at this time.  4 of the participants had top-notch Canon cameras and lenses, including 400mm lenses.

Experience:  This was a life bird for me, but I've been studying shorebirds quite carefully now for about 5 seasons.  Assembled in the group are many top-notch field birders, most of which had seen many Pacific Golden-Plovers before.

Narrative:

By some quirk or twist of fate, after a cancelled pelagic, a monster thunderstorm, and the urging of Marshall, a group of birders descended on the tip of Plymouth Beach after a bumpy 4 wheel drive ride on the evening of 20 July 2013.  Ostensibly this was a gathering of friends of Ian to chat about trips to Alaska and Peru and such.  But as it was, the birding with an approaching full-moon high tide was too good to get much talking in.

After about a mile walk up the beach, within 1/2 mile of the tip, the group stopped to study gulls, the shorebirds coming to roost in the closed areas, and also the begging juvenile terns.  In the mix were dozens of Short-billed Dowitchers, hundreds of Sanderlings, thousands of Semipalmated Sandpipers, and at least few of each Semipalmated and Piping Plovers.  All of this made actually listening for anything unusual quite difficult.  Personally my ear gets "tired" with this much noise.

At approximately 7:30, while scanning the closest shorebirds with my binoculars (I was hopelessly looking for a molting adult Western Sandpiper), I heard an odd flute-like call note from high overhead.  It sounded vaguely Plover-like to my ear, perhaps something like and odd and longer version of a Semipalmated Plover flight call.  Marshall had already said something about this note (I cannot remember exactly what) and then said a few seconds later "Golden-Plover".  I turned quickly to the north and located the bird by size as it wheeled overhead, quickly dropping to find a spot on the beach.  It flew nearly straight overhead, and landed about 200 or 300 meters to the south of the group.  My impression in the air was that of an adult Pluvialis Plover in fairly high plumage, and at this point I was really excited since I'd never seen an American Golden-Plover in full alternate plumage.  Nagging in the back of my mind, though, was that call note.  I was convinced the bird was not an American Golden-Plover.  In principle it lacked any of the 'urgent' or 'pleading'  nature of the call of the American, and it did not sound high enough in pitch.  After a second or two Marshall had identified the bird as a PACIFIC; I was definitely not anywhere near that yet, even though in hindsight I was running out of options if the bird was not an American!

Somewhere in here Marshall had called up the call note of the Pacific on his iPhone and had begun playing it.  Either this prompted the bird to land, or it had chosen to do so on its own.  As it settled it again took flight a few seconds later,  flying a touch closer, allowing prolonged and excellent scope views.  Marshall was urging everyone to get looks, and to give Ian and Jessica a call, since they'd wandered off approximately to the tip of the beach to photograph shorebirds in the falling evening light.  Before they arrived, the bird took flight and flew just to our east, above the horizon but at close range, offering just stunning views.  It banked and flew straight overhead, and at this point I pulled out my phone to begin recording the flight calls.  The bird headed west, and I figured it might be gone for good, when it turned back again and flew right overhead.  During this time Ian and Jessica had arrived, and Ian snapped excellent some photos as it flew by.  They both got good looks and photos through scopes, when the bird took off and eventually disappeared to the south.  I would imagine it was only in view for a total of 5-10 minutes.  Of note was just how restless and agitated the bird seemed when on the ground.  It gave several short false flights, and looked at the sky frequently.  One wonders if this bird stopped here only very briefly before heading on another long flight, as the species is capable of spectacularly long migratory flights.

Key identification features:

Short version:  Adult alternate-plumaged Pluvialis plover showing signs of molting.

--Showed gray underwing linings in flight, not white.

--Largely black underneath, with some white beginning to show through.

--Fairly even width white stripe extending far down the side, connected to the white supercilium

--in flight, showed well-defined white undertail coverts

--gold spangling on back and upper wing surfaces

--largely black throat, chest, and belly, but cheek whitish

--elegant posture, upright stance

--long legs, particularly the tibia

--flight photos show toes projecting well beyond tail tip

--rather long bill for a Pluvialis

How to eliminate other species on appearance:

European Golden-Plover is eliminated by the gray wing linings; European have bright white linings.  Further, the EUGP is easily eliminated by the larger bill, long legs, and more or less even-width white side stripe.

American-Golden Plover can be eliminated by the white undertail coverts, the long toe projection beyond the tail, the long legs, particularly the tibia, the upright stance, the length and extent of the white stripe on the side, as well as the characteristic short primary projection and long terials.

Black-bellied Plover is eliminated by the golden coloration on the back, the long legs, and the large but thin bill;  adult Black-bellied Plover bills are much stouter.

Hybrid plovers were not really considered, as this bird fits rather easily into the Pacific category even without considering call notes (see below).    There is apparently a single October record of a juvenile Pacific X American Golden-Plover from New Jersey (see O'Brien, Crossley and Karlson pp 312), but I see no reason whatsoever to invoke that combination for the Plymouth bird.

PHOTOS AND VIDEOS:  All obtained by other birders, but assembled as links here.

Ian Davies:  <http://www.flickr.com/photos/uropsalis/sets/72157634728291881/with/9333330783/>

Luke Seitz:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/grallaria/9330037857/in/photostream/>

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/grallaria/9330038035/in/photostream/>

Jeremiah Trimble:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/jrtrimble/9341265031/in/photostream/> <http://www.flickr.com/photos/jrtrimble/9338145349/in/photostream/>

<http://vimeo.com/70789563>

(I imagine there will be more photos and videos posted)

SOUND RECORDINGS:

I boiled down my 1 minute and 22 second iPhone recording to just 21 seconds.  During this trimmed recording, the Pacific-Golden Plover calls several times between 2 and 15 seconds, but the loudest call, a rather Semipalmated Plover-type sound, is at around 7 seconds.  I have compared this spectrally with a xenon-canto recording (file 118151, recordist Thijis Fijen, location Oman, 24 November 2012) of a Pacific Golden-Plover and included the image below.  While no expert in audiospectrographic analysis, this looks like a pretty darn good match to my eye.   Plymouth bird on the left, Oman Pacific-Golden Plover on the right.  For posterity I've included my trimmed version of the Plymouth bird's calls as well.

