



WADER
GURU



'What is a 'Plover's page'?'

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Short answer: The Dunlin *Calidris alpina* is sometimes called ‘Plover’s page’ because of its close association with the European Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria*.

Long answer: Associations between different wader species are not uncommon, especially in those species breeding in the Arctic tundra. There are two main reasons for this happening. A timid species may gain protection from a bolder species that is accustomed to giving a staunch defence of its territory against predators, or, one species may benefit from the other as an early warning system.

Grey Plovers *Pluvialis squatarola* are one such bold species and they have smaller less feisty species sometimes nesting close to them (Curlew Sandpipers *Calidris ferruginea* for example) in order to benefit from this defence of a territory from predators by the stronger bird.

The European Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria* (hereafter Golden Plover) is not a bold species but is itself rather timid, so clearly that is not a reason for another species to associate with it. In the case of the Golden Plover, one species is particularly known to stick close to it, especially on the breeding grounds, and that is the Dunlin *Calidris alpina*. So frequent is this pairing that in some places the Dunlin has been named ‘Plover’s Page’ or ‘Plover’s Provider’. Indeed the name for Dunlin in Iceland is *Lóupræll*, which means ‘Plover’s slave’.



European Golden Plover with its attendant Dunlin page © [Eino Hyvärinen](#)

To understand why it is so named you need to understand historically what a page is, or does. In Medieval times it was a young boy between the ages of 7 and 14 who was in the service of a nobleman or knight. In return for clothing, board and lodging they would work without pay for the nobleman, who, in addition to keeping the boy fed and clothed, would be responsible for teaching him all the trappings and functions of nobility, with a view to the boy perhaps being knighted himself one day. As a result the page was in close attendance to the nobleman at all times, except in battle.

Dunlins have been observed keeping in close contact with Golden Plovers in this way, giving the impression that they are ‘in the service’ of the Golden Plover. In fact, there is almost certainly no benefit to the Golden Plover at all and this relationship is probably detrimental to their well-being.

So what is happening? Well, this type of relationship fits into the second model mentioned above, where the Dunlin is using the Golden Plover as an early warning system. Look closely at the differing physical structure and feeding methods of the two species and you begin to see how the Dunlin may benefit from the actions of the Golden Plover. Golden Plovers in general adopt a run-stop-peck approach to feeding. Their head is lowered for just a brief moment of vulnerability. They have large eyes, which are very keen, and they will spot predators and other dangers from a great distance.

Contrast that with the feeding action of the Dunlin. Like all Calidrid waders it has proportionally smaller eyes, probes in the substrate for food, and walks with its head down, just occasionally pausing to raise it's head to look out for danger. The period of vulnerability to attack is far greater in the Dunlin than that of the Golden Plover. Studies have shown that a Dunlin that is feeding close to a Golden Plover is able to feed for twice the time without the need to check for danger as that task is, unwittingly, being carried out by the Golden Plover. Dunlins flush at a greater distance at the approach of humans when they are with Golden Plovers than when alone or with others of their own kind.



Note alert posture of the European Golden Plover (left) in relation to the head-down feeding action of the Dunlin (right). Both photos © Elis Simpson

Interestingly, where Eurasian Dotterels *Charadrius morinellus* occur in the same areas as Dunlins the Dunlins do not associate with them despite their structure and feeding action being similar to the Golden Plovers. This is probably because the Dotterel is less wary and famously allows closer approach of humans than the Golden Plovers, affording less protection.

In addition to the alarm factor there is also the line of thought that the Dunlin may benefit from the Golden Plover's feeding action. As the Golden Plover rushes forward it may startle prey causing it to move and reveal its presence. This helps them find food but it also helps the Dunlin too and it is mooted that the Dunlin may steal the prey from the Golden Plover before it has had time to stoop for it. On the breeding grounds Dunlins are more reliant on surface food than on the softer substrates of their winter quarters, as this can be hard and even still frozen on the tundra. As a result they are in direct competition with the Golden Plovers at that time, their food comprising very similar prey items.

If the Golden Plover flushes, the Dunlin goes with it and will accompany the bigger bird in flight. When the Golden Plover lands, the Dunlin resumes feeding close by.

Golden Plovers may be disadvantaged in a number of other ways; they may suffer from greater risk of attack as multiple birds can attract predators more easily; in a predator attack it is the larger target and therefore probably the more desirable as a meal; Dunlins may scatter or cause to freeze, the Golden Plover's prey by being more continually active. Interestingly Golden Plovers with attendant pages appear to flush at a greater distance than when unaccompanied, perhaps because they are feeding less efficiently rendering them more attentive?



European Golden Plover and Dunlin (montage) © Elis Simpson

To conclude, the moniker 'page' is misleading since the relationship between a knight and his page is, on the face of it, mutually beneficial, and there appears to be no advantage for the Golden Plover in its relationship with the Dunlin. It has been suggested that Dunlins should perhaps be referred to as 'Plover's Parasite', 'Plover's Persecutor' or 'Plover's Pest' instead. Alternatively you might feel that 'Plover's Pain' is more appropriate since it looks as though having them close by is a bit of a pain in the cloaca for the Golden Plovers.

Bibliography:

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Dunlin in attendance with its European Golden Plover © Owen Watkins