

# Status of the Mountain Plover in the Central Valley

## -- an Update

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The status of the Mountain Plover (*Charadrius montanus*) for portions of 25 counties that comprise its winter range in northern and central California was recently described by Edson and Hunting (1999). This report updates the information presented in the 1999 report by summarizing reported sightings for the 1999/2000 and 2000/2001 winter seasons. The purpose of this ongoing study is to develop a more thorough understanding of the current distribution of this declining species. I hope that this information will eventually be used to support regional conservation efforts such as the protection of important wintering sites.

The winter range shown on Figure 1 is based on a map prepared by Zeiner et al. (1990). This map depicts the range in northern and central California as two separate polygons: (1) the Central Valley south of Butte County, plus some of the smaller adjacent valleys of the Coast Range foothills; and (2) the inland valleys of Monterey and San Luis Obispo counties. Currently, this is considered the best available range map for this species. However, it should be noted that this map obviously was produced at a low level of detail because it includes areas that are considered unsuitable habitat as well as areas where Mountain Plovers have not been previously documented.

### METHODS

Sources of the reported sightings for the 1999/2000 and 2000/2001 winter seasons include: (1) anecdotal observations by local birders that were reported to the CVBC internet listserv (i.e., CVBirds) and/or local rare bird alerts (e.g., Northern California Birdbox); (2) verbal and written reports submitted directly to the author; and (3) observations by the author. Generally, a report was accepted as reliable (i.e., deemed a correct identification of Mountain Plovers) if it was from an experienced observer and/or written documentation was received.

### RESULTS

The following summarizes the 38 reports accepted for the update period (i.e., beginning with the fall of 2000 through the winter of 2001). The “season” refers to the period of time that Mountain Plovers are likely to occur on their wintering grounds (i.e., October through March). The counties listed below include only those from which Mountain Plovers were reported during the update period. The most recent occurrences for the other counties with documented Mountain Plover sightings since 1997 are presented in Table 1.

**TABLE 1. STATUS OF THE MOUNTAIN PLOVER  
IN NORTHERN AND CENTRAL CALIFORNIA**

County	Most Recent Record <sup>1</sup>	Number of Flocks <sup>1</sup> Reported Since Fall 1997	Largest Flock Reported Since Fall 1997	Current Status
Alameda	86/87	—	—	Exceedingly Rare
Colusa	00/01	1	65*	Rare and local
Contra Costa	88/89	—	—	Exceedingly Rare
Fresno	98/99	3	75	Rare and local
Kern	98/99	1	25*	Rare and local
Kings	00/01	4	170*	Rare and local
Madera	00/01	1	81*	Rare and local
Merced	98/99	3	20	Rare and local
Monterey	97/98	2	7*	Rare and local
Sacramento	76/77	—	—	Exceedingly Rare
San Benito	98/99	2	50	Rare and local
San Joaquin	86/87	—	—	Exceedingly Rare
San Luis Obispo	98/99	9	150	Rare and local
Solano	00/01	8	288*	Rare and local
Stanislaus	00/01	3	66	Rare and local
Tulare	00/01	1	6*	Rare and local
Yolo	00/01	7	187*	Rare and local

**STATUS** Rare and local – Fewer than 10 flocks reported since fall of 1997; no flocks exceeding 300 individuals; only present in small- to moderate-sized flocks at specific locations. Exceedingly Rare – No winter records for at least 10 years, but may have been regular in the past. Accidental – Only known to occur on migration; may have wintered regularly in the past.

<sup>1</sup> Two or more birds observed at the same location

\* Indicates an actual count (otherwise flock size is an estimate)

*Colusa* — No reports were received for the 1999/2000 season. Four reports, considered as one flock with as many as 65 individuals, were accepted for the 2000/2001 season. All four reports were from the same field near the intersection of County Line Road and Emmert Road. This flock was first located on 20 December 2000 and was last reported on 2 January 2001 (JS, LE, PP). This is the first report accepted for Colusa County since 1990.

*Kings* — No reports were received for the 1999/2000 season. One report was accepted for the 2000/2001 season. Approximately 26 were found east of Hanford near the intersection of Avenue 6 and Flint Avenue on 28 January 01 (SG).

*Madera* — No reports were received for the 1999/2000 season. Two reports, considered as one flock with as many as 81 individuals, were accepted for the

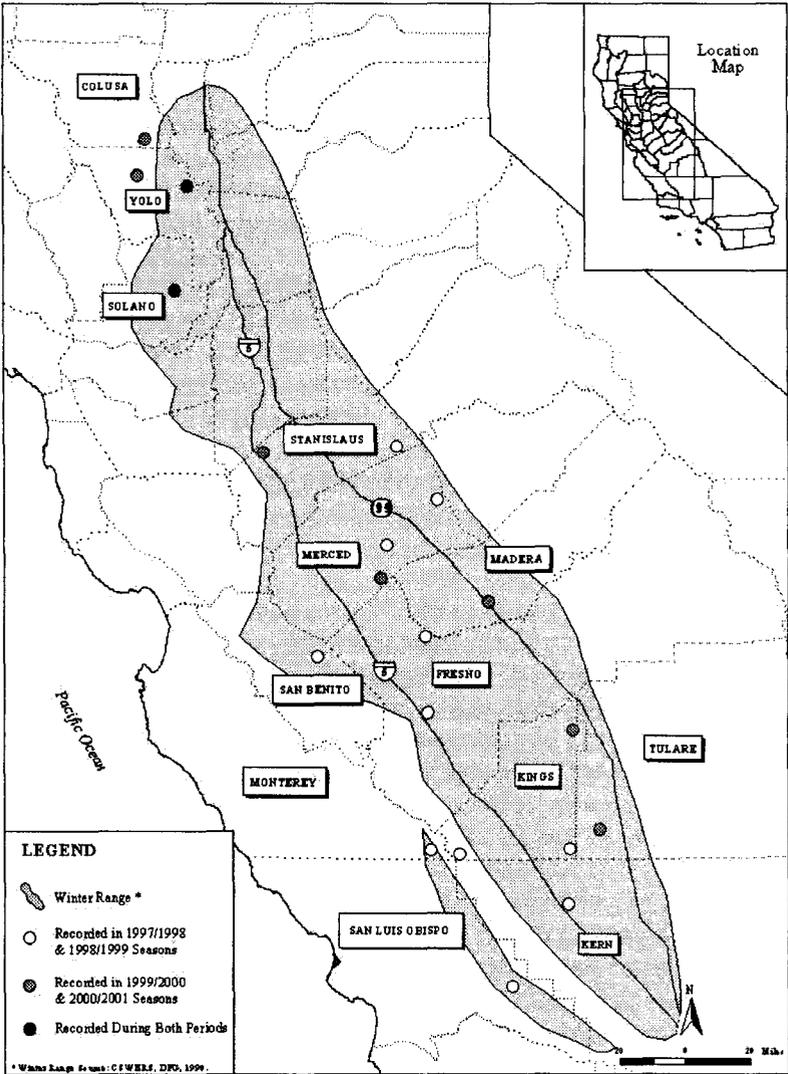


Figure 1. Approximate Location of Mountain Plover Flocks Recorded Between 1998/1999 and 2000/2001 Seasons

2000/2001 season. Both reports were from the vicinity of the City of Madera Wastewater Treatment Ponds, approximately two miles southwest of the City of Madera. This flock was observed first on 21 November 2000 and again on 20 December 2001 (JS). This is the first accepted report for Madera County.

*Merced* — One report was accepted for the 1999/2000 season. Six were approximately 1 mile north of Dos Palos on South Santa Fe Grade Road on 27 December 1999 (BP, KP). No reports were received for the 2000/2001 season.

*Solano*— Three reports, considered as one flock with as many as 288 individuals, were accepted for the 1999/2000 season. All three reports were from the vicinity of the intersection of Robinson Road and Flannery Road. This flock was first located on 16 January 2000 and was last reported on 24 January 2000 (AD, LE, JL). Six reports, considered as one flock with as many as 101 individuals, were accepted for the 2000/2001 season. All six reports were from the vicinity of Robinson Road and Flannery Road between 24 November 2000 and 18 February 2001 (LE, MF).

*Stanislaus*— One report was accepted for the 1999/2000 season. Approximately 66 were near Turlock Lake on 16 January 2000 (HR, JG). One report was also accepted for the 2000/2001 season. Six were along McCracken Road near the Stanislaus/San Joaquin county line on 17 December 2000 (TL).

*Tulare*— No reports were received for the 1999/2000 season. One report was accepted for the 2000/2001 season. Six were at Pixley National Wildlife Refuge on 14 January 2001 (SG).

*Yolo*— Ten reports for three flocks were accepted for the 1999/2000 season. Six reports that included a maximum count of 101 were accepted for a flock present near the intersection of Road 16 and Road 88 between 28 December 1999 and 22 January 2000 (DA, TE, LE, JK, AK). Two reports that included a maximum count of 10 were accepted for a flock located near the intersection of Road 102 and 17 between 11 December 1999 and 12 December 1999 (KG, LE). The third flock, which included as many as 150 individuals, was present approximately 1 mile east of Zamora near the intersection of Road 13 and Road 95 between 17 January 2000 and 26 January 2000 (EH, GS).

Four reports, considered as two flocks were accepted for the 2000/2001 season. Three reports that included a maximum count of 55 were present in the vicinity of the intersection of Hwy 505 and Road 16 between 31 December 2000 and 28 January 01 (SH, BG, CC). A flock that included a maximum count of 100 was reported on three occasions near the intersection of Road 17 and Road 102 between 27 January 2001 and 2 March 2001 (KG, JH, MW).

## DISCUSSION

The decline in the distribution and abundance of the Mountain Plover has recently lead to a proposal for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to list the species as Threatened. The continental population of the Mountain Plovers has declined by about 50 percent since 1966 and is now estimated to be between 8,000 and 10,000 individuals (USFWS 1999). The following data, presented by the USFWS in the proposed rule to list the Mountain Plover as Threatened, supports the widespread belief that the number of Mountain Plover wintering in California has also declined. According to the USFWS, as many as 10,000

Mountain Plovers were repeatedly counted in the San Joaquin Valley during the 1960s. In January 1994, 3,346 Mountain Plovers were counted during a simultaneous survey of 17 sites throughout California. Only 2,179 were counted during a similar survey in 1998.

The results presented in this update provide additional evidence that the distribution and abundance of the Mountain Plover is declining in northern and central California. Flocks of Mountain Plovers were reported from only 8 of the 25 counties that comprise its winter range during the 1999/2000 and 2000/2001 seasons. Large flocks (i.e., exceeding 100 birds) were reported during the update period only in Solano and Yolo counties and the only counties that had reports for both seasons were Solano, Stanislaus, and Yolo. No flocks were reported during the update period from several counties thought to include traditional wintering sites including Fresno, Kern, Kings, Merced, Monterey, San Benito, and San Luis Obispo counties.

There is still much to be learned about the current distribution and abundance of Mountain Plovers in the Central Valley. Most of the suitable wintering habitat for Mountain Plovers in the region is not surveyed regularly and some large geographic areas within the species range may never have been adequately surveyed (e.g., cropland on the west side of the southern San Joaquin Valley). The fact that large numbers of Mountain Plovers have been found recently in portions of northern Yolo and southern Colusa counties that are located outside of the most detailed range map prepared to date suggests that the winter distribution never has been mapped accurately. The report of a wintering flock in Madera County gives rise to hopes that important wintering locations may still be undiscovered.

Thus far, little effort has been made to conserve Mountain Plovers and their habitat in northern and central California. With the continuing loss of suitable habitat due to urban development and incompatible agricultural uses (e.g., vineyards), now may be the time to begin development of a statewide or regional management plan that focuses on the conservation of important wintering habitat if the Mountain Plover is to remain a regular part of our wintering avifauna. The long-term conservation of the Mountain Plover also needs to include developing a better understanding of the regional distribution so that conservation efforts can be concentrated in areas where Mountain Plovers are most numerous and/or most vulnerable. Central Valley birders are encouraged to play a role in the conservation of the Mountain Plover by surveying suitable habitat and documenting their observations.

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