

Diademed Sandpiper-Plover

Phegornis mitchellii

Silvia Vitale and Kristina L. Cockle

One of the most highly sought-after and attractive shorebirds in the world, Diademed Sandpiper-Plover *Phegornis mitchellii* is among the many avian specialties of the high Andes. The authors of this Photospot describe a typical encounter with this often confiding bird, in a remote part of north-west Argentina, the full significance of which only became clear some weeks after the event.

Diademed Sandpiper-Plover *Phegornis mitchellii* is found in Peru, Chile, Bolivia and Argentina; it is difficult to find, and the species lives alone or in pairs, especially in *vegas* or streams between 2,500 and 5,000 m²⁻⁴. This attractive bird is characterised by its dark head, with a white 'headband' (which gives rise to its Argentine name, Chorlito de Vincha), while the nape is reddish, the throat white, the upperparts are grey, and the breast white with black barring⁴. Diademed Sandpiper-Plover lays two eggs^{2,4}.

In February 2009, together with Alejandro Bodrati and Carlos Ferrari, we travelled to north-west La Rioja province in Argentina, where we visited, among other places, the Laguna Brava Provincial Reserve, in dpto. Vinchina¹. Because we were looking specifically for the Chorlito de Vincha, we elected to sleep at Refugio El Peñón, a spiral-shaped hut constructed of rocks, sited at 3,700 m, from where we could both enjoy the landscape and check the surrounding *vegas*.

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We made a first attempt to find the species on the afternoon of 8 February, around 17h30. While walking near a *vega*, Alejandro heard a distinctive whistle coming from the creek. We headed toward the sound and found a pair of Diademed Sandpiper-Plovers.

To take photographs, we sat quietly against a hillside where the birds wouldn't notice us. They were favouring one part of the stream, and calling frequently. It was easy to photograph them, because they would only run c.30 m and always came back to the stream. If one individual left, the other individual would stay. We wondered if they had a nest, which Carlos and Alejandro tried to find without getting too close, but without success. At about 19h00 we returned to the refugio for the night, and the next day we continued to Laguna Brava.

Like many photographers, Silvia usually downloads her photographs to her laptop as soon as possible, which she did when we reached the town of Villa Unión the following day.

The photographs revealed quite a surprise—close to one of the adults, there was a chick camouflaged against the rocks in the stream. It must have remained absolutely still, because incredibly we had not seen it the whole time we were there.

And there were more surprises to come! Two months later, back home in Buenos Aires, Silvia was thinking about the fact that Diademed Sandpiper-Plovers are reported to lay two eggs, and she began to wonder if there might have been a second chick. Taking a closer look at the 200 photos she'd taken, there it was—in the same stream and a few metres from the first chick—a second chick, absolutely still and camouflaged against the rocks.



Clockwise from above:

Figure 1. Diademed Sandpiper-Plover *Phegornis mitchellii* in profile; note the white headband and the rufous at the back of the neck, and also one of the chicks to the right (Silvia Vitale)

Figure 2. Diademed Sandpiper-Plover *Phegornis mitchellii* in the vega, with one chick below it and another in the lower left of the photo (Silvia Vitale)

Figure 3. Diademed Sandpiper-Plover *Phegornis mitchellii* from the front; note the black-barred breast, the white neck and headband, and the rufous nape; one chick is visible in the foreground (Silvia Vitale)

Figure 4. Diademed Sandpiper-Plover *Phegornis mitchellii*, río El Peñon, La Rioja, Argentina, February 2009 (Silvia Vitale)

Figure 5. Kristina and Silvia watching Diademed Sandpiper-Plover *Phegornis mitchellii* in the vega (Carlos Ferrari)

Figure 6. Vega of the río El Peñon (Silvia Vitale)





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