WINDBREAKS FOR PLOVERS

JIM WEDGWOOD, 610 Leslie Avenue, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. S7H 2Z2

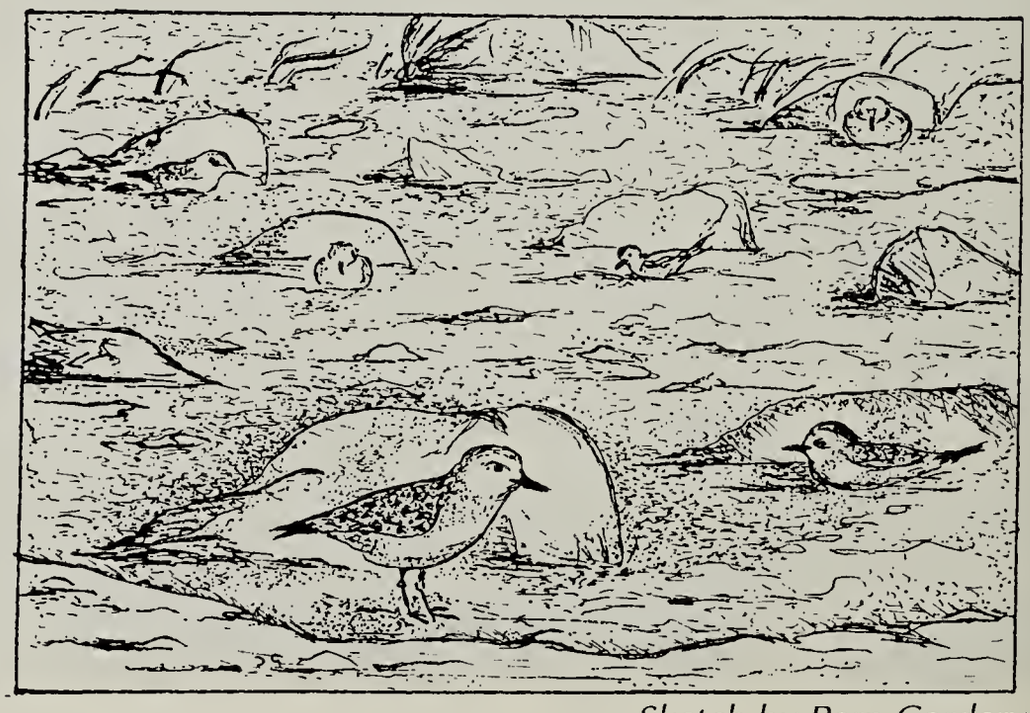
Radisson Lake was low in the fall of 1988, and a stony mud flat had become exposed on its west side. While walking towards this shore on 1 October, I saw in the distance a gray lump beside a stone, then more lumps, each beside a stone. Closer, the lumps became Black-bellied Plovers. The day having turned very windy, the birds were using the stones as windbreaks.

Nineteen plovers, each in the lee of a stone, were hunkered down out of the wind. They had selected stones 30 to 45 cm high, bypassing lower ones, but also avoiding higher boulders (predator fear?). The chosen stones were within 3 m of the water. All stones used had tops sloping up away from the wind and steep, downwind sides, that is, those making better windbreaks.

No plover was against or touching a stone. Instead, the bird was 15 to 30 cm away; and the higher the stone, the greater the distance. First, through choice of a stone with an optimal shape, then by positioning itself in relation to the ston height, the birds demonstrated a k sensitivity to air currents, locating th selves where the wind was minimum. circulation pattern downwind from stone would be similar to that on the side of a snow fence (maximum sn depth, i.e. minimum air currents, occ not at the fence but rather a distance f it, the space increasing with height of fence.)

The birds faced randomly, not nec sarily into the wind, an indication of effectiveness of the stones as wi spoilers. A further demonstration was birds' obvious reluctance to move w I neared them. Peter Matthiessen, ofthe great writers on shorebirds, ca the "the birds of the wind." [1] That day displayed another sense of the wind.

[1] STOUT, G.D., PETER MATTHIESS A.V. CLEM and R.S. PALMER. 1 Shorebirds of North America. Viking P 270 pp.



Sketch by Pern Cordery