

Rarity Finders in the Field

The Sighting of Javan Plovers at Tawau, Borneo

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It all started off when Dave Bakewell alerted me in October 2023 about the possibility of Javan Plover *Anarhynchus javanicus* in Tawau, Sabah, Malaysia, after stumbling upon several photos of mine in my 'unknown ID' photo album on Flickr. The earliest of these was from July 2017, and, with the benefit of hindsight, clearly shows a Javan Plover.



Plate 1: Javan Plover, Tawau, Sabah, Malaysia, Sept 2025.

Prior to this, the known distribution of Javan Plovers was limited to Java, the Kangean Islands, Bali, west and central Lesser Sundas east to Timor, with recent discoveries in southern Sumatra and southwestern Sulawesi (Eaton *et al* 2016; Wiersma & Kirwan 2023). There is one report of a sighting, with breeding, from Singapore in June 2021 (Bird Society of Singapore 2025).

So, for the next 2 years, I kept looking but I was probably looking in all the wrong places. Come early March 2025, I got the opportunity to search for them at a privately owned shrimp farm, whose owner kindly gave me permission to access their property to observe the thousands of shorebirds roosting there. March is also the month when numerous shorebirds converge here in large numbers, displaying their splendid breeding plumage. And as a result, picking out a Javan Plover became a much harder task, especially when there are 64 ponds here to look through. I was struggling at first - I had to familiarise myself with the diagnostic features of Javan Plover which separate them from the very similar Kentish Plover *A. alexandrinus* (Iqbal *et al*. 2013) - and then faced the arduous task of picking a Javan Plover out amongst the thousands of shorebirds gathering there at the time.

Finally, when I spotted one, my eyes grew wide open in awe, I was filled with excitement and jubilation (Plate 1). The find gave me revitalising energy and confidence to look for more.

As the migrant shorebirds started their northbound journey, by the end of the season, it got easier to spot Javan Plovers and I managed to confidently identify 13 at this one location alone. Another group of Javan Plovers were discovered 7 km east of the first site, at another shrimp farm, with two adults and two successfully fledged juveniles (Plate 2).



Plate 2: Two fledged juvenile Javan Plovers, Tawau, Sabah, Malaysia, April 2025.

At a third site, on the beach, 7 km west of the first site, a single Javan Plover was observed mixing with the Kentish Plover (Plate 3). In total 18 Javan Plovers have been sighted for this season.

The record was submitted to the MNS BCC Records Committee and was accepted unanimously. I strongly suspect that there are more Javan Plovers out there and I have continued to observe their presence on the coast of Tawau (Plate 4).



Plate 3: Javan Plover (right) on the beach with Kentish Plovers, Tawau, Sabah, Malaysia, May 2025.



Plate 4: Javan Plover, Tawau, Sabah, Malaysia, July 2025.

Reference

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