

The nervousness of plovers, the confidence of dunlin, a...

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I read recently about the relationship between two small wading birds found on our shores: the dunlin and the ringed plover*. There is something to be learned from them.

The dunlin is a small sandpiper that spends most of its time foraging gregariously on mudflats for food. It tends to be focused, head down, working the ground for invertebrates. Its concentration is its strength: it is an efficient feeder. That is, maybe, why there are so many of them, usually concentrated in flocks of some size. That focus is, however, also a weakness because it reduces the birds' awareness of predators.

The ringed plover is different. It pecks at food on the surface rather than probing, but what is most notable is its nervousness. It is highly alert. It spends much of its time scanning the horizon. It takes flight at the first sign of danger, and its warning does not go unnoticed. When one ringed plover takes flight in fear, so too do all the other ringed plovers that are nearby.

Something else also happens, though, as I have seen: the dunlin also benefits from the plover's nervousness, and when the plover lets out its warning call, the dunlin also heads for the air, where there is safety in both numbers and movement. When they forage together as species, as they often do, the dunlin can feed more effectively, knowing that the plover is keeping watch. The plover's vigilance acts as an early-warning system for the dunlin, protecting them as well. Together they are stronger, each contributing a skill that the other lacks.

Fourth, the lesson for humanity is obvious. We too need different skills, sensitivities and temperaments if we are to flourish. Some of us may be focused on detail. Others are cautious and alert. Some can take risks, others insist on accountability. We are not all the same, and that difference is not weakness, but strength. It is precisely in the combination of perspectives that safety and resilience are to be found.

The danger arises when we assume that only one type of skill or one form of awareness is valuable in our society. Economists often assume that efficiency is the only factor that matters in our world. Politicians sometimes pretend that boldness is the only virtue

of value to them. Businesses insist that profit alone is the measure of success. But that might be as foolish as a flock of dunlin feeding without the benefit of the warning calls of the plovers who might be in amongst their number.

We need the nervous, the cautious, the challengers, the whistleblowers, the questioners. We need those who say “stop and look around” as much as those who press on. Together, we can make a society that is safe, sustainable and just. Alone, any one temperament leaves us exposed.

The plover and the dunlin remind us that diversity of behaviour is not a problem to be solved but a condition for survival. We would do well to remember that, most especially in a world where diversity, equality, and inclusiveness are now seen as enemies of society, when in fact they are the bedrocks on which it is built.

** This behaviour is also noted with the golden plover. I am not sure about the little ringed plover. We observed it last week with ringed plovers.*

*** Jacqueline Murphy contributed the ideas that underpin this post.*

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