THE GREATER YELLOWLEGS: A NEW ZEALAND SIGHT RECORD

By C. A. FLEMING

Between Porirua and Mana, State Highway No. 1 is constructed on embankments linking successive headlands of the indented shoreline of Porirua Harbour, thus cutting off the embayments as ponds varying in size, depth, and salinity.

Most of the ponds are regularly flushed by sea water, but some are imperfectly drained and tend to be stagnant, though fluctuating in level with the tide. The bird described in this note was observed immediately south of a headland prominent for its kowhai and manuka scrub, on two adjacent shallow ponds supporting a vigorous growth of the alga *Enteromorpha,* which formed a discontinuous cover on all but its deepest parts and covered the shores as a dead and decaying mat up to a former high water level. The ponds are destined for reclamation and have already received some spoil and garbage.

Whilst driving past in the late afternoon of November 11, 1962, I noticed a strange wader feeding actively on the northern pool. Obesrvation was restricted by the evening light and by lack of binoculars. Next morning, in fine weather, observations were continued for some hours with binoculars and 30x telescope. For half an hour I was joined by A. Blackburn, Brian Bell, A. T. Edgar (O.S.N.Z.) and a party of R.A.O.U. visitors, including J. B. Hood, N. Wettenhall and H. R. Officer. A. Blackburn, A. T. Edgar, J. B. Hood and H. R. Officer and C.A.F. (independently) made further inspections on the following day (Nov. 13). I returned for some hours on Nov. 17 and was later joined by Peter Harper and I. G. Andrew, who took the photographs that accompany this article. J. M. Cunningham watched the bird between 6 p.m. and 7 p.m. on Nov. 16 in bright sun fading to twilight and again, with R. A. Falla, in bright sun at midday on Nov. 17, when several rather distant colour photographs were obtained and a close view of fresh foot-prints. Later on the same day I watched the bird for the last time, but could not find it at all during the following week.

I am grateful to all the ornithologists who saw the bird for their notes and comments, which have been used in the following account, to Dr. R. A. Falla and Sir Gilbert Archey for loan of museum skins, to Dr. W. Cottier, D.S.I.R., Nelson, for insect determinations, to Mr. I. G. Andrew for his excellent photographs, and to Dr. Nagahisa Kuroda, Tokyo, for confirmation of the lack of Asiatic records. Dr. Joseph Hickey, University of Wisconsin, was good enough to arrange for comparisons between foot prints of the Porirua bird and the Urner collection housed at the American Museum of Natural History, and Mr. J. Bull of the latter institution kindly carried out the comparisons. Mr. N. A. Beatus produced undistorted natural-scale enlargements from a colour transparency of foot prints.

Although no other birds were present for comparison, all observers agree that the Porirua yellowshank was a long-legged wader, generally grey above, with speckled fore-wings, of medium size, judged appreciably larger than a Turnstone, Knot, or Terek Sandpiper (A.T.E.), but smaller than a female Bar-tailed Godwit or Whimbrel. I.G.A. and C.A.F. thought it somewhat larger than a Tattler, with relatively longer

legs. In retrospect, C.A.F. considers it was as tall as a male Godwit. J.M.C. considered its body plumper and perhaps longer than that of a Stilt. Its yellow legs were conspicuous.

The beak, black with a paler brownish base and a nasal groove extending a third its length from the base, was estimated to be 2¼in. long, and certainly more than 2in. by comparison with a measured stick that the bird walked over (J.M.C.). It was longer and less slender than the drawing of *T. flavipes* in Witherby's Handbook (p. 329) (A.T.E., C.A.F.). To most observers the bill appeared very slightly upturned (G.B.H., A.B., A.T.E., N.W.); on close scrutiny the dorsal profile of the basal half seemed to be concave upwards (C.A.F.).

The head pattern was not as clear-cut as shown in illustrations and specimens of yellowshanks, perhaps owing to fading or youth. The feathering around the base of the beak, both above and at the sides, was whitish, broken by a narrow median stripe of darker feathering expanding backwards over the crown, above a whitish superciliary streak, defined below by a dark stripe running from just above the gape through the eye. The eye itself was black and large, and emphasized by a narrow surrounding ring of white (J.M.C., C.A.F., I.G.A.). The back of the neck seemed less streaked than the crown, and the back (interscapular area) appeared a uniform grey-brown, without conspicuous spots or streaking. The white foreneck and belly were separated by an obscure grey wash across the chest, paler in the middle, formed by grey-streaked feathers. The folded wings had a conspicuously speckled appearance due to white spots on the grey feathers of coverts and secondaries, overlying dark grey-brown primaries. The rump was invisible and the tail inconspicuous when the wings were folded; the latter was ¼in. shorter than the closed wings (J.M.C.). In flight a white rump was conspicuous but did not extend forward between the wings, its anterior boundary with the brown plumage of the back being a straight line between the ends of the scapulars (I.G.A., C.A.F., J.M.C.). as well shown by one of the photographs taken by I.G.A. The spread tail was transversely barred in brown and whitish (J.B.H.). The legs were variously described as very bright yellow, orange yellow, not lemon (C.A.F.), bright ochreous yellow, more orangey than lemon (I.G.A.), a very bright yellow, but slightly muddy, though no greenish tone (J.M.C.), fairly deep yellow, not lemon yellow (A.T.E.), and gamboge yellow (R.A.F.). J. M. C. noted the elevated hind toe but could not discern webbing between the front ones; fresh prints of the toe mark were sketched and photographed (see below).

Generally, the yellowshank fed very actively, moving rapidly in several inches of water or on the surrounding mud, jerking its whole body in an exaggerated "bobbing," frequently darting its bill at insects on the surface of mud or water or on driftwood, but was never seen prodding the mud. The walk was wide-legged, somewhat bandy and awkward-looking in 2-3ins. of water, and twice the bird stumbled and saved its balance by suddenly opening its wings (C.A.F.). Occasionally it raised a leg to scratch its face, and it commonly preened while feeding. In the evening of Nov. 16 it was wary of passing traffic but fed avidly in water up to the belly at times, lunging at insects on the surface, its head often partly submerged, making 47 lunges in 2 minutes, preening repeatedly between lunges, but next morning it fed more leisurely in shallower water or on dry mud, and allowed closer approach (J.M.C.). Not as prone to perch on elevations as the Waikanae Tattler (Andrew,

1926), it nevertheless once perched on a half-submerged drum (C.A.F.).

When alerted, the yellowshank uttered a single abrupt rather loud high note "tleu," and when flushed generally took flight with a single note repeated rapidly in quick succession at least 3 or 4 times (A.T.E., H.R.O.) and often 7 or 8 times, the notes then phrased in groups of 2 to 5, having a melodious labial quality (tleu, tleu, tleu, etc.), and continued to fly silently. Flight was direct and purposeful, feet trailing beyond tail, neck and bill stretched forward, bill held down at a small angle to the flight-line. On landing (sometimes with the repeated call) the bird raised its wings and held them for a moment above the body before closing them.

The bird appeared to be feeding on insects that abounded around the pond: flies (*Ephydrella* cf. *aquaria* and its larvae, Anthomyidae n. det.) and nymphs of a pond skater (*Microvelia* sp.), but seemed to ignore snails (*Ophicardelus*).

The identity of the Porirua bird as one of the two species of Yellowlegs was suspected once its white rump mark was seen in flight, bounded by a transverse line in front and not extending between the wings as in the Greenshank and Marsh Sandpiper; the Wood Sandpiper, with a similar rump, being a much smaller bird. The Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs are closely similar in every way except size and some published accounts of field distinctions are conflicting. Identification as a Greater Yellowlegs or Yellowshank (*Totanus* or *Tringa melanoleuca* (Gm.), and not as a Lesser Yellowlegs (*T. flavipes* (Gm.)) was considered more likely by A.B., N.W., J.B.H., H.R.O., A.T.E., J.M.C., C.A.F., after considerable book-work and some changes of mind (between Greater and Lesser).

The bird is here recorded as a Greater Yellowlegs because the field observations of behaviour and opinions of several observers accustomed to judging the size of waders are consistent with the objective evidence derived from a photographs of tracks. In body size, the Porirua Yellowlegs was compared with a Stilt (13-15in.) and considered certainly larger than a Knot (10-11in.), thus agreeing with the Greater (13-15) rather than the Lesser ($9\frac{1}{2}$-11) (Peterson). J.M.C.'s observation on bill length (longer than 2in., i.e. 50mm) confirms this (bill 53-57mm is Greater, 34-40mm is Lesser). Three observers (I.G.A., C.A.F., P.H.) agreed that it fell between the sizes of two unsexed specimens of the Greater from the Dominion Museum that were taken into the field for comparison, and the party on Nov. 13 also found a skin of great assistance in deciding in favour of Greater Yellowlegs (A.B.). Dr. R. A. Falla has emphasised his opinion that the Porirua bird was appreciably smaller than the museum mount of the Greater. In March, 1963, J.M.C. attemped to photograph this mount, a mounted Stilt and a mounted Marsh Sandpiper (*T. stagnatilis,* from Ceylon, wrongly catalogued in Auckland Museum as *T. flavipes*) in the same positions as he had photographed the Yellowlegs, with the same equipment, but a higher water level hindered comparisons. It is quite certain, however, that the Porirua Yellowlegs was somewhat smaller than the rather over-stuffed *T. melanoleuca* (probably a female) and larger than the Marsh Sandpiper. It is thus more likely to have been a male than a female *melanoleuca.* A female skin of *T. flavipes* subsequently received by the Dominion Museum from the American Museum of Natural History is only slightly larger than *T. stagnatilis* and confirms the writer's opinion that the Porirua bird ("larger than Knot or Tattler") was *T. melan-*

oleuca. Dr. R. McNeil, Michigan, who knows the Yellowlegs well in the field, considers the photographs of the Porirua bird resemble the Greater more than the Lesser, from the stoutness of its bill, thus agreeing with field observers who considered the bill more like the sketch of the Greater than that of the Lesser in Witherby (p. 320).

The polysyllabic call of the Greater is contrasted with that of the Lesser, which is rarely more than two syllables (Witherby, Peterson, Pough). From the descriptions of call notes made in the field Mr. J. Bull (American Museum) considered "that the bird sounds like a Greater Yellowlegs." Pough states (p. 231-2) that the legs of the Lesser appear more lemon-yellow than the orange-yellow legs of the Greater, but as Fuertes' illustrations show the reverse, this may be an unreliable distinction. The Greater is more given to plover-like bobbing of head and neck and feeds by snatching, not by probing (Witherby); the Porirua bird bobbed and snatched constantly when feeding.

J. M. Cunningham's oblique photograph of fresh footprints in coherent mud, with a half-crown for scale, provides the most objective data for identification. Three of the four prints are deep ones showing the indentation formed by the elevated hind toe. The bird walked with its weight on the toes, so that the heel is not sharply defined but palmation can be clearly seen between the outer toes. The prints closest to the coin were enlarged to a natural scale and the obliquity of the view was compensated by tilting the printing paper so as to restore the circular outline of the coin from its elipsoidal shape in the original transparency. The prints fall between those illustrated by Hickey (1943, pl. 2) for the Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, but fall within the range of 18 Greater Yellowlegs footprints (Hickey, 1943, p. 185, table A). Moreover, the "stride" of the Porirua bird (105 to 120mm) is longer than recorded for the Lesser (84-87mm). The individual toe prints are much wider (4-5mm) than those made in plasticine from a Lesser Yellowlegs skin (2-3mm). When the relaxed foot of a female Lesser Yellowlegs (mid toe 33mm, thus near the maximum for the species) is placed over the photograph with its hind toe on the hind toe mark, the tip of the middle toe fails to reach the corresponding tip of the midtoe of the print by about 5mm.

In reply to my enquiry, Dr. J. J. Hickey reported that the C. A. Urner Collection of Shorebird tracks is now in the American Museum of Natural History, where the Porirua photograph was subsequently studied by Mr. J. Bull, who writes as follows: "Your identification of the wader as a Greater Yellowlegs, *Totanus melanoleucus,* appears to be correct on the basis of footprint size. Urner's range of variation in length of middle toe is 37-46mm., while that of the Lesser Yellowlegs, *Totanus flavipes,* is 33-36.5mm. As near as I can determine from your print, the measurement is approximately 41mm, which is well within the range for Greater Yellowlegs, but considerably above maximum for Lesser Yellowlegs. As the heel in the photograph is not sharply defined, the measurement of 41mm. is necessarily approximate."

The Greater Yellowlegs breeds in Southern Alaska and Canada and winters from southern U.S.A. through Central America and South America south to the Straits of Magellan (Peters). It has occurred accidentally in Greenland and in the British Isles, and at Jaluit Atoll in the Marshall Islands in the Pacific (Kuroda, 1934). It is not recorded from Japan, China, Australia or any other west Pacific

countries. Its occurrence in New Zealand thus extends its range by more than 3000 miles, which must be the excuse for the amount of tedious description given above. Field notes have been deposited with the O.S.N.Z. The American Whimbrel and Hudsonian Godwit are two other waders with entirely American breeding range, normally migrating to South America but occasionally reaching New Zealand on the west side of the Pacific.

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THE SATIN FLYCATCHER: A NEW RECORD FOR NEW ZEALAND

By A. BLACKBURN

On 12/6/63 I received a telephone call from Mr. Raeburn Hansen, of Hexton, which is six miles out on the flats from Gisborne, to say that he had noted a strange bird feeding on insects in his orchard. I went out immediately, but on arrival the bird was not to be seen. However, after half an hour of waiting, it appeared, busily feeding on flying insects, and at first closely attended by a pair of Fantails *(Rhipidura fuliginosa placabilis),* one of which briefly attacked it. My immediate reaction was to identify the bird as a female Leaden Flycatcher *(Myiagra rubecula),* a species with which I am fairly familiar, having observed it in various parts of Eastern Australia, the Northern Territory, and New Guinea. The latest occasions on which I had the species under close observation were at Fog's Dam on 2/10/62, and at Borroloola on 8/10/62, both in the Northern Territory. Subsequent events have proved that I was in error, and have shown beyond any doubt that the bird was a female Satin Flycatcher *(M. cyanoleuca).*

The following is a description of the bird according to my field notes at the time of the observation: Throat and breast, bright rust red, the colour sharply defined from the dark head in a straight line from either side of the bill. The colour somewhat intensified on the lower part of the throat, or the upper breast. Head and nape, dark bluish grey, merging to dark brown on the lower back, and on the primary and secondary wing feathers. Underparts, including under tail coverts, dull white, and sharply defined from the colour of the breast. Tail, dark brown with very narrow white outer edges. Eyes black. Legs and feet, black or very dark. Bill, broad and short, barely half an inch long, with typical flycatcher hairs round the base. The feathers at the rear of the crown slightly raised, but not forming a crest. On the Fantail's brief attack, however, these feathers were raised to form a distinct crest. Size, slightly longer than a Fantail (i.e. six inches plus) and noticeably larger in the body.

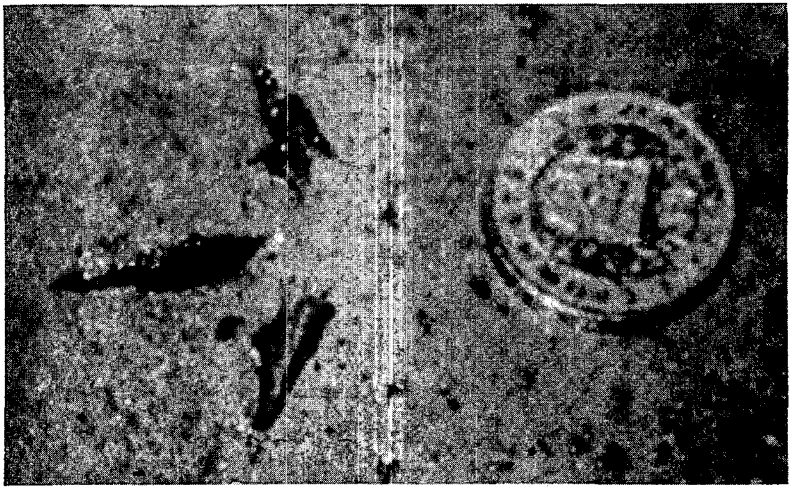
The bird was under observation for about fifteen minutes, much

H. G. Andrew

XXV (a, b, c) — The one and only Greater Yellowlegs **(T. melanoleuca)** so far recorded in the south-west Pacific.

[I. G. Andrew

XXVI — (a) Greater Yellowlegs at Porirua, November, 1962.



(b) Footprint, natural size, from a transparency by J. M. Cunningham.