

REPORTED FIRST SIGHTINGS OF LESSER YELLOWLEGS IN NEW ZEALAND

I: LESSER YELLOWLEGS AT NAPIER

By NORMAN MACKENZIE

On the morning of the 3rd November 1963, I was one of a small party of O.S.N.Z. members and friends visiting the Ahuriri Lagoon, Napier. The time was 0600 hours with a clear bright sky and excellent visibility.

On our arrival at the Domain pond it was decided to investigate a flock of Godwits on the western shore. The water in the pond, which is brackish and tideless, was very low and many birds were to be seen on the extensive mudflats to the south of the causeway.

While the rest of the party, Messrs. B. D. Hankins, L. S. Shailer, T. H. Davies and Roderick Mackenzie, stayed behind to watch this group, K. W. Varney and I moved further south towards another concentration of birds. As we came within 100 yards or so of this group my attention was quickly drawn to an unusual wader that was feeding on the distant outskirts of the flock. At this part of the pond the muddy margin narrowed considerably, because of a point of land projecting into the water. There was plenty of cover nearby and it took only a short time to get within 30 yards of the strange bird.

It was busily feeding in shallow water in association with a small flock of Curlew Sandpipers (*C. ferruginea*) on the outskirts of a flock of Bar-tailed Godwits and a scattering of Pied Stilts.

The following description was compiled by B.D.H., K.W.V., and myself over the next three days.

First seen at 0600 hours 3/11/63 and watched intermittently all morning in clear bright sunlight and on 4/11/63 seen again from 1700 hours to 1800 hours with the light behind us. On 5/11/63 seen at 1100 hours in high wind and clear light when the bird took shelter behind some salicornia. Seen on the first day at 30 yds. range with binoculars and 20 x 50 telescope and on the other two days at varying distances.

SIZE: A little larger than Curlew Sandpiper, but smaller than Pied Stilt.

HEAD: Small, with slight striations or feather margins on dark fawn crown. A white superciliary stripe above and slightly beyond the eye appearing to join in front above the bill. Cheek and side of face paler in colour than the crown, toning off in density of colour to the upper breast.

BILL: Long and slightly tapered. Black generally with horn colour near base.

EYE: Dark.

BREAST AND SHOULDERS: Pale fawn.

UNDERPARTS: White but not as white as Curlew Sandpiper.

NAPE AND FORWARD PART OF BACK: Dark uniform fawn.

WINGS: Primaries: brown/grey.

Secondaries and Coverts: Lighter in colour, coverts with slight white margins; no white wing bar shown.

UNDERWING PATTERN: Darker on primaries, lighter on secondaries and axillaries.

RUMP AND TAIL: Not visible when standing. Very white in flight and noticeable to the naked eye.

LEGS: Very long and slim, at first sight light yellow but as the light varied, deepened to a deep orange; frequently appeared to be slightly bent.

TOES: An elevated hind toe.

GENERAL: While it appeared only a little larger in the body than the Curlew Sandpipers, its unusually long legs made it tower above them. The Curlew Sandpiper is generally considered to be about $8\frac{1}{2}$ inches long and we agreed without difficulty that the stranger must be a good 10 inches and at first were inclined to say still larger. The head appeared small and when the bird was actively feeding the neck appeared elongated and thin.

CALL: Too many Godwits, Curlew Sandpipers and Pied Stilts to catch any notes.

FLIGHT: Fairly swift and erratic. Seen to fly on many occasions, mostly short distances and often back to the starting point. The white tail was very noticeable.

HABITS: During the three days this bird was seen at Ahuriri it was nearly always in the same place and at the most not more than 400 yards away. Nearly always seen standing in the water and feeding actively on or near the surface, and occasionally on the muddy bottom. Often waded up to its belly. Carried its bill almost vertically over the water while feeding and occasionally buried its head under the surface. Fed by quick darting and jabbing and did not at any time deliberately probe like a Godwit. When active its neck appeared long and thin. Bobbed occasionally. It preened while in the water and now and again scratched itself. In general it conveyed an impression of elegance and activeness.

DISCUSSION

There is a number of birds which more or less fit this description and the following were considered:

Wilson's Phalarope, Stilt Sandpiper, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Marsh Sandpiper, Wood Sandpiper.

Most of these can be ruled out either by size as in the case of the Greater Yellowlegs and Wood Sandpiper, colour in Wilson's Phalarope, or the shape of the bill in the case of the Stilt Sandpiper. This leaves two: The Marsh Sandpiper (*Tringa stagnatilis*) and the Lesser Yellowlegs (*Tringa flavipes*).

The Marsh Sandpiper (9 inches) an accidental visitor to this country from its breeding grounds in Eastern Europe and Asia has as its principal diagnostic features, long legs generally considered to be a greenish olive-yellow; a long, fine, straight bill; white cheeks and face; a white tail and rump and a white wedge running up the back between the wings.

Although the literature available to me states that the legs are always a colour varying from green to dusky olive, it has been reported (*pers. comm.* R. B. Sibson, H. R. McKenzie) that a Marsh Sandpiper seen in the Firth of Thames recently had legs which at times appeared

yellow; so this is evidently an unreliable character. The Ahuriri bird had a long, straight bill but had a pale fawn cheek and side of face and a uniform dark fawn-brown colour on the back down to the area of the rump or upper tail-coverts, that is to an approximate line between the trailing edges of the extended wings. The illustration of the Marsh Sandpiper in the *Handbook of British Birds* Vol. IV, plate 119, shows a bird with a great deal of white on the face and a white throat, while the white on the lower back is most conspicuous.

The Lesser Yellowlegs ($9\frac{1}{2}$ -11 inches) has not as yet been recorded in New Zealand. Its breeding grounds extend from north western Alaska to Ungava Bay and south to Manitoba and Quebec, while its normal migration route lies to the East along the Atlantic seaboard as far south as Chile and Patagonia. On the return trip it tends to travel inland up the Mississippi valley region but is seldom seen west of the Rockies. It has been recorded a number of times in Great Britain and Europe.

It is generally agreed that in appearance there is little to distinguish the two species of Yellowlegs except size and that the differing points are too minute and perhaps are too variable to be always useful in the field. The photograph of the Greater Yellowlegs at Porirua (*Notornis* X, plate XXVa, I. G. Andrew) shows a bird with rather conspicuous speckling on the wings and coverts, a feature which was not quite so noticeable in the Ahuriri bird. We were fortunate to get such a good comparison in size with the Curlew Sandpipers and can dismiss the larger species with some confidence.

The Lesser Yellowlegs shares the general conformation of the Marsh Sandpiper but is slightly larger and more robustly built. Its legs are invariably yellow, the amount of colour evidently being subject to slight variation, as various artists portray it in varying intensities. The face and breast are an ashy brown and the back entirely lacks white as far down as the rump or tail coverts. The *Handbook* Vol. IV, p. 317, states that the tail has transverse brown bars and in flight appears white.

This is a description that fits the Ahuriri wader well, particularly the general darker colouration about the head, the always brightly-coloured legs and the lack of white on the lower back. The Ahuriri bird flew frequently and we had many fine opportunities for a good look into this point.

During the previous season a Tattler (*H. i. brevipes*) (*Notornis* 10: 237) was seen in this area and in my initial efforts to identify it I had made myself familiar with the diagnostic features of both the birds now under discussion. The amount of white on the lower back is perhaps the most important single feature distinguishing the two species and I watched for it with great care.

Some little time later I was interested to hear that John Kendrick of Hamilton had photographed the Firth of Thames Marsh Sandpiper on 8 m.m. colour film and Mr. Kendrick obligingly ran the film through for me several times. It is of course difficult at a later date to evaluate comparative sizes but when the opening sequence showed the Marsh Sandpiper between two Pied Stilts it appeared to look slightly smaller than the Ahuriri bird. However, any lingering doubts I may have had about my tentative identification of the Ahuriri bird as a Lesser Yellowlegs soon disappeared when I saw firstly the much whiter head and

secondly the very extensive amount of white on the back of the Marsh Sandpiper while it was in flight.

We feel that the description of the Ahuriri wader and consideration of the various points mentioned above lead to the conclusion that this wader is most likely to be the Lesser Yellowlegs, *Tringa flavipes* (Gm.) and that, if so, it will be the first recorded in New Zealand.

REFERENCES

- Condon and McGill: Field Guide to the Waders, 2nd Ed. 1930.
Fleming: *Notornis* 10, 258-262, plate XXVa.
National Geographic Society: The Book of Birds.
Peterson and others: A Field Guide to the Birds of Britain and Europe.
Wilson: American Ornithology.
Witherby and others: The Handbook of British Birds, Vol. IV.



II: A LESSER YELLOWLEGS AT LAKE ELLESMERE

By G. A. TUNNICLIFFE

A wader, which was later identified as a Lesser Yellowlegs (*Tringa flavipes*), was first seen on 20/1/64, roosting with a flock of Pied Stilts (*Himantopus h. leucocephalus*) and Banded Dotterels (*Charadrius bicinctus*) near the Lower Selwyn Huts on the western edge of Lake Ellesmere, Canterbury. This is of interest because this species has not been recorded previously in New Zealand,* though Fleming (1963) has recently published a record of a bird tentatively identified as a Greater Yellowlegs (*T. melanoleuca*).†

On my first examination, through 8 x 30 binoculars at about 30 yds. distance, I recorded the following details: the beak was black, straight, narrow, and about half the length of a stilt's; face, pale brown with white eyebrow stripe; posterior to the eyebrow stripe was a small dark grey patch; back, dark grey; underparts, white; breast, dark grey; wing coverts, faintly barred; and the leading edge of the folded wing was dark brown. In flight, a pattern of white rump and a uniformly dark brown tail showed clearly. The legs were yellow and projected like a stilt's in flight. It had a body shape slimmer than a stilt's, and it stood half the height of a stilt. The bird was identified provisionally as a Lesser Yellowlegs.

Six days later, 25/1/64, I was joined by Messrs. D. H. Brathwaite, D. Dawson, and J. Hilton, and saw the bird in the same area. With the aid of D.H.B.'s powerful telescope, further points were noted. The face was mottled, and D.D. and D.H.B. observed that the white eyebrow stripes converged above the base of the beak. Mottling occurred along the lower edge of the dark grey area on the breast, and on the flanks (D.H.B.). The legs were yellow, with a tinge of orange.

The bird fed on organisms in shallow water more actively than a stilt, and the action consisted mostly of probing, as well as frequent snatching from the water surface. Regurgitation of material occurred twice (D.H.B.). On two occasions a Pied Stilt chased the bird when the latter approached too closely.

When on the ground, a short monosyllabic call was given, with irregular intervals between calls. In flight, a disyllabic call was given twice, and then repeated once more but after a considerable interval.

* But see Mackenzie in preceding paper of this issue.—Ed.

† But see Falla in following paper of this issue.—Ed.

D.H.B. described the ground call as 'ti,' and the flight call as 'ti tu' (—). This is similar to the 'kit to' (—) described by Saunders (1951) for the call of Lesser Yellowlegs.

Thus the characters which distinguished this bird as a Lesser Yellowlegs, and not a Greater Yellowlegs, were based on field observations of its general body size, the relative length and definite straightness of its bill, and the nature of its call.

The Lesser Yellowlegs breeds in Canada, from North Quebec to Manitoba and Alaska. It migrates throughout east North America, and winters in South America. The Greater Yellowlegs breeds in areas from Labrador and Hudson Bay South to the Gulf of St. Lawrence and South Manitoba. It migrates throughout the United States and winters along the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts north to the Carolinas — occasionally further.

I wish to thank Dr. Stonehouse, Mr. E. G. Turbott, and Mr. D. H. Brathwaite for their help and the considerable interest they have shown.

REFERENCES

- FLEMING, C. A., 1963: *Notornis* X, 6: pp. 258-262.
SAUNDERS, 1951: A Guide to Bird Songs.



THE PORIRUA YELLOWLEGS

By R. A. FALLA

As one of the many observers of the vagrant wader near Porirua in November 1962, I have studied with interest the paper by C. A. Fleming (1963) in which are advanced the reasons that led to a conclusion that it was a Greater Yellowlegs, *Totanus melanoleuca*. It would not be helpful to consider any further the subjective evidence. The bird was apparently always alone and my own impression was that, apart from the length of leg, it was little bigger than a tattler or a knot. This opinion has about the same chance of being wrong as that of those who thought it was larger.

Furthermore the ingenious device of estimating the length of the bill by comparison with a measured stick which the bird walked over must be regarded as liable to some margin of error.

The main purpose of this questioning note is to comment on the objective evidence — the photograph of a footprint in soft mud (Fleming 1963, pl. XXVI b), and the skin of a female Lesser Yellowlegs, *Totanus flavipes*, sent to the Dominion Museum at Dr. Fleming's request by the American Museum of Natural History. The soft mud has clearly depressed into a V-shaped groove totally unlike the impression made by a dried foot in plasticine. The grooves in the mud are much wider than the toes and could be slightly longer, so that an estimated mid-toe length of 41 millimetres may be excessive. In the dried skin of *T. flavipes*, collected in 1899, the normal shrinkage of up to 1 mm. at each of the five joints of the middle toe must be reckoned with. Its present length of 33 mm. is consistent with an original flesh length of 35mm. or more. The span between the tips of the spread outer toes is 50 mm. even in the dried foot, and this is the actual extent of span in the photographed footprint.

In the accompanying diagram, which is natural size, the dotted lines are the dimensions of the dried toes of the specimen of *T. flavipes*