

RECORDS OF RARE WADERS WITH REPORTS ON SIGHTINGS OF THREE SPECIES HITHERTO UNKNOWN IN NEW ZEALAND

BLACK-TAILED GODWITS AT INVERCARGILL

On 15/12/63 my husband and I were out on the shell-banks of the Invercargill Estuary, opposite the Woodend Phosphate Works. Most of our field-work is perforce done with two young children, one on my husband's back and one at heel, and on this occasion my husband was near the shore-line with the children and I was alone on Horseshoe Spit (a shell-bank which those who attended the January '63 Field Week in Invercargill will remember as a happy hunting ground for Little Tern (*Sterna albifrons*). As I neared a curve in the shell-bank, a flock of 25-30 Godwits went up from the steep far side of the bank, and with them a black-tailed godwit. I had good views of the bird in clear light, as the small flock made three wheeling turns over the shell-bank before shearing off to the south. Although it was some eight years since I had last seen a black-tailed godwit (on the Firth of Thames), I had no doubts about this bird; my uncertainty was whether it was an Asiatic (*Limosa l. melanuroides*) or a Hudsonian (*haemastica*). Field notes taken on the spot included the following: "White wing bar; white rump above tail; black tail tip; legs extending further than bar-tailed; almost white on underside." Upon returning home and checking the field differences between the two forms (Sibson, *Notornis* VIII, 58, and VIII, 161-162) we decided that this bird was almost certainly an Asiatic (*melanuroides*).

On 22/12/63 B. D. Heather, C. E. Barlow and Mr. Ben King, a visiting American, found a black-tailed godwit on the estuary, which they identified as a Hudsonian.

On 28/12/63 I was again on the Estuary, with B.D.H. and C.E.B. While B.D.H. made his way to a distant spit crowded with birds, C.E.B. and I watched another large group of Bartailed Godwits, Turnstones and South Island Pied Oystercatchers. On the fringe of this group, but slightly apart, was a bird, slimmer and darker than the other godwits. It obligingly raised a wing showing its dark underside. This it did on several occasions, and we knew that this was a Hudsonian. B.D.H., upon nearing his shell-bank, sent "his" birds over to us; they came, obligingly enough, in four or five groups — a mixture of godwits, a few Knots, Turnstones and South Island Pied Oystercatchers. As the last group came over, the entire flock, i.e. c. 1000 Godwits, some hundreds of S.I.P.O., about c. 200 Turnstones and 20 Knots, went up, and we lost sight of the Hudsonian almost immediately among so many oystercatchers. When B.D.H. waded his way to us again, we found that he, too, had had a Hudsonian, and it had come over to us with one of the later groups of "his" birds. As we were watching "our" Hudsonian for some time before his birds started to come over, we decided that there were two Hudsonians there that day.

Eight further visits to the Estuary between January and April produced no further sighting of either Asiatic or Hudsonian.

As far as I know, these are the most southerly recordings of the Hudsonian Godwit in New Zealand. — MAIDA L. BARLOW

[In January, 1963, B. D. Bell found an Asiatic Black-tailed Godwit on Enderby, one of the Auckland Islands. — Ed.]

SUSPECTED COMMON SANDPIPER NEAR NEW PLYMOUTH

On the afternoon of 24/10/64, while W.J.P., R.W.M., and B. J. Tucker were taking part in a Beach Patrol during the Labour Week-end Study Course, about one mile south of Paritutu, New Plymouth, a small unusual wader was seen. It appeared to be a species of sandpiper, but could not be identified. At this point the coastline is very rugged, with steep cliffs and a rocky beach. The weather was dull and overcast. Strong sea-breezes laden with salt spray and dark rocky backgrounds produced conditions which were unsuitable for really accurate observation of details.

On the next day the same three observers, together with Miss M. Johnston and D.V.M. hopefully returned about 10 a.m. to the same stretch of coast and quickly located the unknown wader at the mouth of a small stream. The weather had improved but still left much to be desired. A strong nor-wester was blowing, but the light was good. When first seen the sandpiper was flying from a small rocky freshwater lagoon on the beach upstream to a dune pond about fifty yards inland. When flushed it flew back to its previous haunt. By a more stealthy approach through lupins, we were able to gain a position within twenty yards of the bird and from this vantage point to watch it under favourable conditions for the greater part of an hour, as it fed in shallow water along the edge of the lagoon, which it seemed reluctant to leave. Occasionally it would flit off upstream to the dune pond or rest on the coastal rocks further on; but it was easily retrieved by one of us whenever it made these short excursions.

It was an active wader of typical sandpiper size (D.V.M.). Both W.J.P. and R.W.M. thought it about the size and length of a Banded Dotterel (*C. bicinctus*); but much more slender in shape (R.W.M.) or more graceful in general body contours (W.J.P.). The bill was about an inch long, straight, narrow and dark brown or black. To two of us the legs appeared slightly larger than those of a Banded Dotterel; but D.V.M. thought they were comparatively short and noted their colour as yellowish-green.

At first sight the plumage appeared to be of only two colours: the upperparts from head to tail being a flat even light-grey-fawn (W.J.P.), plain grey-fawn (R.W.M.) or light even greyish-brown (D.V.M.), and the underparts clean pale grey or off-white. The greyish-brown of the upperparts extended down past the bend of the wing, but gradually faded out, leaving the breast white. The colours of the upperparts and underparts were distinct and did not merge. The eye was dark and through the eye was a slightly darker line. The folded wing showed a darker leading edge; but in flight a conspicuous white bar became visible from above and below, running from the body to near the wing-tip, about 1/3" wide and nearer the trailing edge of the wing (W.J.P.). Seen in flight from behind, the 'sandpiper' showed much white; for beside the white wing-bar, the edge of the outer tail-feathers was white. The wing beats were rapid and the flight swift, low, straight without undulations, with the wings sometimes curiously bowed in frequent glides. The wings did not beat much above horizontal but the down-beat was quite deep.

Its stance and movements distinguished it from other sandpipers seen in New Zealand. It often stood with tail and back sloping upwards; and it was most noticeable that that tip of the tail was about the same level as the top of the head. The posterior was held high with

a continual bobbing of the tail (D.V.M.); and the flicking of the tail and back upwards continued whether the bird was standing or moving (R.W.M.). It would feed, often running, amongst the stones at the edge of the lagoon or along the sandy border of the dune pond. Once it explored the timber of a big log heap in the lower stream bed. No calls were audible above the wind. The arrival of some children and a dog put an end to our observations.

From both its appearance and behaviour, and after consulting many books, we are convinced that our unknown wader must have been a Common Sandpiper (*Tringa hypoleucos*).

— W. J. PENGELLY

— R. W. MACDONALD

— D. V. MERTON

[This composite description is based on three separate accounts. Each of the three authors submitted his own story of the Paritutu sandpiper.—Ed.]



PROBABLE SIGHTING OF A RUFF

At Karaka on the the Manukau Harbour on 11/4/64 a bird which we are satisfied was a Ruff (*Philomachus pugnax*) was closely studied with binoculars at thirty-nine yards. It was standing with its body facing half-right away from us and its head at about right angles in a small clear patch in a flock of hundreds of Knots and Turnstones, with the nearest Knot only a foot away. Both of us were attracted to it at the same time, realising that it was a bird we had not seen before. There was ample time to study it and write notes with the bird in a standing position. Unfortunately, a Harrier (*C. approximans*) put up the whole flock and it was covered up by the other birds so that no flight pattern could be seen. No call was heard. The locality agreed rather well with that of its choice as described by Witherby, i.e., near the mouth of a large tidal drain where it debouched on to a sandy-muddy tide-flat.

The size was carefully discussed. N.B.Mack. described it as like a Knot (*Calidris canutus*) but larger and longer in the neck and legs. H.R.McK. took the body size to be about that of a Greenshank (*T. nebularia*) but having a much shorter bill. It was finally decided to compare it with the Sharp-tailed Sandpiper (*C. acuminata*), this being a smaller bird than the two above, but more like a Ruff in general appearance and proportions and a bird well known to both of us.

The note of the bill as taken down on the spot was: "Compared with Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, longer and somewhat heavier but in smaller proportion to the greater size of the bird. Similar in shape and colour." Witherby gives length of bill as, Ruff 34-38, Reeve 29.5-33. That of the Sharp-tailed Sandpiper is 23-27. The bill alone is sufficient to separate it from all other waders of like size and shape.

The side and back of neck were noted as having "thin striations moving diagonally to the rear." Illustrations vary in this respect, apparently because of the different ways the head may be held. A drawing in "Emu" 63, 38 shows rather over emphasised striations moving forward. Witherby, IV, 280 shows them more or less horizontally crescentic, if such a term may be used. In any case they were definite fine markings.

The upper surface was described as: "Wings brownish. Faint light margins on wing coverts. Back more uniform dark grey, not much pattern. Transverse brownish or grey-brown bars on upper rump, but rump not seen in flight." Illustrations show much white at sides of rump and tail with broad patterned centre stripe. The white would not be spread out except in flight and this we did not have the opportunity of seeing. Only the patterned centre was visible with the bird on the ground.

Of the under surface it was noted: "Mid. to lower breast rufous tinge on grey-brown. No pectoral line. Drab white under. Speckled on side of body below rear- and fore-wing gap between, bird standing on ground." After study of many books it has been decided that the speckling on the side is best shown in the illustration of the Reeve, plate 40 in "Collins Pocket Guide to British Birds," by Fitter and Richardson. In the bird we saw, the moult was not so far advanced, for it had speckling below the rear- and fore-wing, instead of the continuous markings along the side. It also did not have the barring right down on the breast.

It was agreed that the legs were: "Longer by say one inch than those of a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper." They were much heavier, in fact appearing to be disproportionately thick. Witherby gives the male tarsus as 45.5-52 but omits the female. That of the Sharp-tailed Sandpiper is 23-27.

The difference in the average of the two species is 24 m.m. which is only 1 m.m. less than one inch. The long stoutish legs were the first thing to attract our attention. This would indicate that it was a male, or Ruff. A mounted specimen of a female, or Reeve, in the War Memorial Museum, Auckland, is much smaller, paler and more lightly built than the bird we saw at Karaka. H.R.McK. made the leg colour something like bluish-grey or lead-grey but N.B.Mack, after prolonged study, decided that they were of no definite colour. The books allow for almost any colour.

The more upright stance of the figures in Witherby portrays the position in which we saw our bird but the best picture so far found is a reproduction of a photograph in the English magazine "Country Life," Oct. 22, 1959. This really portrays the bird as we saw it.

The prospects of occurrence of this species in New Zealand are not entirely remote. At least two Reeves have recently been collected in Australia and any species of migratory arctic wader going there, even if in small numbers, can be expected to straggle to New Zealand sooner or later.

— N. B. MACKENZIE

— H. R. MCKENZIE

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A RECORD OF THE WESTERN SANDPIPER ON FAREWELL SPIT

During a visit to Farewell Spit in early October, 1964, the attention of one of us was drawn to a bird resting in a tight flock of 31 Red-necked Stints (*Calidris ruficollis*), on account of its distinctive bill. A long period of observation at 18 to 20 feet with 10 x 50 and 7 x 50 binoculars, and subsequent reference to the literature, has enabled us to identify the bird as a Western Sandpiper (*C. mauri*). During the period of observation the bird was put to flight more than once, so that the wing and tail pattern could be noted; and it was at all times

in close company with Red-necked Stints, thus allowing a detailed comparison. Three Curlew Sandpipers (*C. ferruginea*) were nearby.

The following description is taken from our field notes: Size, very slightly larger than a Red-necked Stint; bill black, much longer than that of *ruficollis*; at least $1\frac{1}{2}$ times as long, heavy at the base, and tapering fairly quickly when the bird is observed head-on, and slightly down-curved at the tip; plumage very similar to *ruficollis*, but slightly more rufous; pale forehead, with the crown darkish and faintly streaked longitudinally; very pale sides of neck and nape, and a light superciliary bar; legs black. In flight, there was little to distinguish the bird from a Red-necked Stint, the tail pattern appearing identical, but the wing bars were extremely faint. The manner of feeding was the same as that of its companions.

The Broad-billed Sandpiper (*Limicola falcinellus*), which is known to both of us, has a noticeably heavier bill, and the crown is distinctly striped, compared with the faint markings observed on the crown of the Western Sandpiper.

The Western Sandpiper has been observed once in Great Britain, and so is included in Hollom's "Popular Handbook of Rarer British Birds," where an excellent description is to be found. This tallies very closely with our observations, except that the legs are described as "dark olive, but usually looking black." Also the toes are partially webbed, which we did not observe, mainly because the bird was for most of the time in very shallow water. The length is given as $6\frac{1}{2}$ ins., compared with 6 ins. for the Red-necked Stint as stated by Condon and McGill in "Field Guide to the Waders." Hollom describes it as "a confiding bird," which was definitely our impression during the long period of observation.

The Western Sandpiper breeds on the coasts of north and west Alaska, according to Peterson's "Field Guide to the Western Birds," and winters from San Francisco Bay southwards; so it is a species which, along with the Hudsonian Godwit, Yellowlegs, Wandering Tattler, and others, may be expected as an occasional visitor to New Zealand.

— A. BLACKBURN

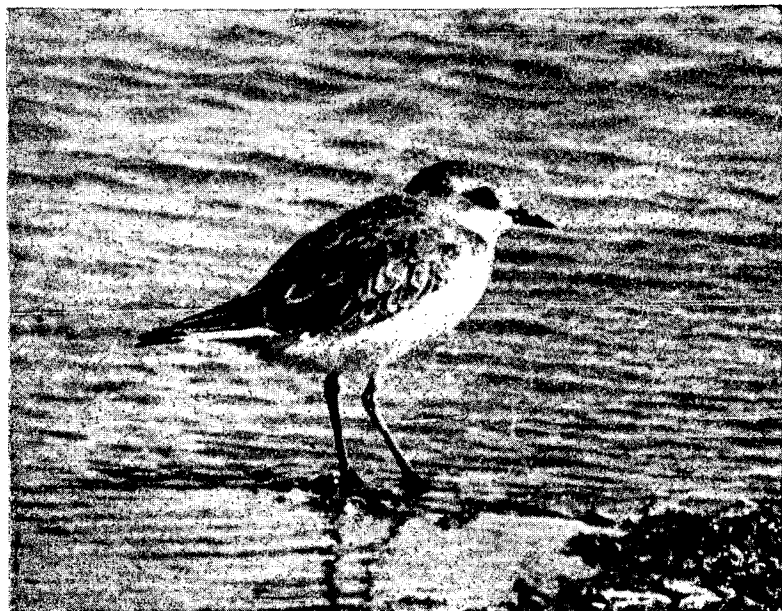
— B. D. BELL



LITTLE WHIMBREL AT MIRANDA

On a routine check of the birds of the Miranda coast on 13/10/64, a dark brown bird was seen on the pools just north of the old Miranda wharf. It was smaller than a godwit and too large for any of the sandpipers which frequent those pools. Mrs. B. Brown and Miss A. J. Goodwin approached it carefully and soon noted its down-curved bill, which then became evident to the rest of the party in the car on the road. (Mrs.) Dr. K. Heinroth of West Berlin, Mrs. McKenzie and the writer. The bird was alone except for an almost fully red Curlew Sandpiper (*Calidris ferruginea*) about two chains away. It allowed close inspection; and was clearly a Little Whimbrel (*Numenius minutus*). It is considered that it was most likely the same bird as the one seen at Karaka, Manukau Harbour, on 28/3/64 (*Notornis* 11, 99).

— H. R. MCKENZIE



[A. Wright

XVI — Large Sand Dotterel (*Ch. leschenaulti*) near Miranda limeworks,
Firth of Thames, 27/12/63.



[A. Wright

XVII — Curlew Sandpiper (*Calidris ferruginea*) and Wrybill at Miranda,
27/12/63.