

The reason why Wandering Tattlers are attracted to the Rewa estuary in such numbers must be an abundant food supply produced by the deposition of river silt over the adjacent reefs. Moreover there is shelter from any wind among the mangrove-covered islands. In mid-May 1965 I spent more than a week at Natandola Harbour in the south-west of Viti Levu. Here the extensive reefs are exposed to the full sweep of the ocean tides; there is no alluvial silt and little shelter; and Wandering Tattlers were scarce, not more than five scattered over several miles of reef.

Is there among the Pacific Islands any concentration of Wandering Tattlers comparable with that just north of Suva? For instance no such local density is suggested for Hawaii by Munro, who writes (Birds of Hawaii, p.57): "It frequents rocky shores of all islands of the group, generally singly or in pairs, but occasionally small flocks are seen." At Suva Point and around Nukulau, even in winter these tuneful waders may be seen in flocks of some size, and in summer the numbers run into hundreds. The Fiji Islands have much to offer the ornithologist. I would place the unusual concentration of Wandering Tattlers just north of Suva high among their attractions.

— R. B. SIBSON



LETTERS

THE FIELD IDENTIFICATION OF STINTS

Sir,

I should like to suggest that more diagnostic data be given when new first record sightings are claimed. The sight record of a Western Sandpiper on Farewell Spit recently published (A. Blackburn and B. D. Bell, Notornis 12 (2) 109) would have been more convincing if the authors had explained why they had ruled out two other likely visitors which are known to be easily confused with *C. mauri*, namely the Semipalmated Sandpiper (*C. pusilla*) and Baird's Sandpiper (*C. bairdi*). Unless the bill of the Farewell Spit bird was very markedly decurved ("Slightly down-curved at the tip" is the phrase used) there is nothing in the description given that is inconsistent with either Semipalmated or Baird's Sandpipers. One or two points even suggest *C. pusilla*: both the 'pale forehead' and the 'very pale sides of neck and nape,' would normally apply better to *pusilla* than to *mauri*. Baird's Sandpiper may be a shade too large to be considered in the present context, but should it be held that the estimated bill size of the bird seen — "at least $1\frac{1}{2}$ times as long" (as *ruficollis*) — makes *pusilla* unlikely, then *bairdi* would have to be considered and reasons given for eliminating it. Recorded bill sizes show the possibilities — *ruficollis*, 16-18 mm; *pusilla*, 16-23; *bairdi*, 22-25; *mauri*, 23-28 m.m. The Semipalmated has a tendency to decurve (Handbook of Brit. Birds, 4, 251) and Baird's rather more so; both show it more at some angles than others.

It is a salutary exercise to follow what Bannerman (1963, 392*) calls the 'appalling muddle' whereby a bird has been officially declared to be *C. mauri* by the British Records Committee some seven years after the specimen had been caught and examined by competent

observers and recorded as *C. pusilla*. This is not to suggest that we accept a reverse judgment for the New Zealand sighting, but merely that published records should show more awareness of the real problems of identification in this particular group of waders.

— R. A. FALLA

Dominion Museum,
Wellington.

Sir,

We are grateful to Dr. Falla for giving us the opportunity of replying in this issue to his letter of 16th August. We fully agree with what he says regarding the necessity, when describing an unusual species, to give reasons for excluding any closely similar species with which it may be confused. But in the Western Sandpiper (*Calidris mauri*), the bill is the diagnostic feature, and so readily distinguishes the bird from both the Semipalmated Sandpiper (*C. pusilla*) and Baird's Sandpiper (*C. bairdi*) that we did not consider it necessary to refer to these last two species. Petersen's "Field Guide to Western Birds," p. 120, provides an excellent sketch comparing the bills of the Western and Semipalmated Sandpipers, and describes the bill of the Western as "longer, thicker at the base, slightly drooped at tip." Furthermore, Peterson, Mountfort and Hollom's "Field Guide to the Birds of Great Britain and Europe," p. 296, describes the Semipalmated as "in winter usually indistinguishable from Little Stint but bill is very slightly stouter and broadened at tip." Dr. Falla's reference "Handbook of British Birds" 4, 251, refers to an illustration (line drawing) which does in fact show a tendency of the Semipalmated's bill to decurve. However in the text, in two places, pp. 255 and 258, the description gives "straight." Under Field Characters and General Habits, the Handbook says "bill broader and straight," and under Measurements and Structure "bill short stout straight, and considerably expanded at tip." The slightly rufous colouring of the Western, as noted by us, distinguishes it further from the Semipalmated, which is described by Hall in "A Gathering of Shore Birds" p. 178, as greyish brown. There are thus distinguishable differences which enabled us to be certain of our identification, after several hours of close observation over two days.

On distributional grounds, *mauri* is more likely to reach New Zealand than *pusilla*. According to Vaurie (Birds of the Palearctic Fauna, p. 393) the breeding range westwards of *mauri* includes north-eastern Siberia, where *ruficollis* also breeds. *Pusilla* is a nearctic breeder. Moreover, whereas *mauri* is common along the coast west of the Rockies, *pusilla* migrates mainly east of the Rockies; and in fact is omitted from Hoffman's "Birds of the Pacific States."

We described the size of the Western Sandpiper ($6\frac{1}{2}$ ins.) as very slightly larger than a Red-necked (Little) Stint (6 ins.), whereas Baird's Sandpiper is very noticeably larger, Peterson giving its length as 7 to $7\frac{1}{2}$ ins., i.e. almost the size of a Sanderling (*Crocethia alba*). But here again the bill of the Western Sandpiper provides a completely distinguishing characteristic. Peterson describes Baird's Sandpiper as "larger than the Western, paler, with a rather short bill. No tendency of the bill to decurve is mentioned in the text, nor is any shown in the illustrations in his "Field Guide to Western Birds" pp. 115 and 119. Dr. Falla has shown that the length of bill in *C. bairdi* and *C. mauri* can overlap; but whereas the recorded sizes of 22-25 mm. give the

impression of "a rather short bill" on the larger *C. bairdi*, it was the unusual length of bill on *C. mauri* which first drew our attention to the bird.

— A. BLACKBURN

— B. D. BELL

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NOTICE

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The attention of members is drawn to the provisions of the Wildlife Act 1953 in relation to the retention of storm-wrecked sea birds. As these birds are absolutely protected under the terms of the Act, an authority is necessary to retain the specimens.

Such an authority is obtainable from one of the four major museums, namely the Dominion Museum, Wellington; the Auckland Institute and Museum, Auckland; the Otago Museum, Dunedin; and the Canterbury Museum, Christchurch.

The authority is issued only to bona fide ornithologists, and a copy is retained by the museum concerned and by the Wildlife Branch, Department of Internal Affairs. The conditions of the authority must be strictly followed.

DEPARTMENT OF INTERNAL AFFAIRS