

A "DIFFICULT" STINT NEAR NAPIER

We believe that a 'stint' or 'peep' which we saw at Westshore Lagoon, Napier, on 14/1/66 was a Semi-palmated Sandpiper (*Calidris pusilla*), an American species not hitherto recorded in New Zealand. We had met at noon; and after examining six Sharp-tailed Sandpipers (*C. acuminata*) on the northern side of the causeway we turned our attention to the extensive shallows on the southern side. Four Wrybills (*A. frontalis*) were quickly identified; and we were approaching three Red-necked Stints (*C. ruficollis*) in a quiet bay, when a fourth 'stint,' which looked just a little bigger, flew in and settled about five yards beyond them. At first it kept alert and did not feed. Viewed from head on it showed an unusually stout bill; and broad whitish superciliary stripes, which gave the crown a streaked look. One of us (R.B.S.) was at once reminded of a Broad-billed Sandpiper (*Limicola falcinellus*); but when we had moved some yards closer and were in a position to view the newcomer from the side, it was clear that the bill was only as long as that of a Red-necked Stint; but was much heavier and thicker. The shortness and shape of the bill ruled out *falcinellus* at once; and also, so it seemed, Western Sandpiper (*C. mauri*).

We realised that we had before us, a difficult stint and a problem of identification. We were both impressed by the difference in the size of the bill; and we are certain that we were not misled by the heat haze or the shimmer over the water, as we were now within twenty yards of the four birds and the stranger had joined the three Red-necked Stints which had the typically fine bills of their species. Other features which we noted were that chest and underparts were very white; and the white on the flanks reached towards the shoulder and round the bend in the wing. Its legs were black or very dark. We did not hear it call.

Subsequently when we were able to consult books, especially 'The Popular Handbook of Rarer British Birds' and 'Audubon Water Bird Guide' we both independently reached the same conclusion that if the 'difficult stint with a difference' was not a Semipalmated Sandpiper, we did not know what it was.

On 25/1/66 R.B.S. was able to study at close range a flocklet of fourteen Red-necked Stints in Manukau Harbour, paying particular attention to bill-size and head-pattern. None of them resembled the puzzling stint which was seen at Westshore Lagoon.

We are aware of the need for extreme care in identifying all stray waders, whether large or small. Apart from the heat, we were able to watch this stint under very favourable conditions, with the bright sun behind us. The Semi-palmated Sandpiper breeds on the arctic coast of North America (possibly also in N.E. Siberia), evidently in immense numbers for it has been described as the most abundant of the shore-birds over much of North America. Since Red-necked Stints are regular annual migrants between Siberia and New Zealand, it is well within the bounds of possibility that both the Western (*mauri*) and the Semipalmated (*pusilla*) Sandpiper should occasionally reach New Zealand; for their breeding grounds are contiguous with those of *ruficollis* and may indeed overlap; and far travel is part of their nature and way of life.

— R. B. SIBSON

— N. B. MACKENZIE