

SIGHTINGS OF TATTLERS

(a) PAPANUI INLET

On 9/5/65 Mrs. D. G. Buchanan found a small plain grey wader with some Pied Stilts in Papanui Inlet. It remained in the locality throughout the winter; and was studied there by several observers.

On 4/7/65 I watched it from 30 yards with a 40 x 60 telescope. It was quite tame, returning on one occasion after a dog had put it up. When put up on another occasion it flew off and perched on the only snag visible in the mud of the whole inlet.

A slender bird, it was almost invisible against the mud ripplemarks, moving quickly about in company with three Stilts on one day (it came up to the level of their bellies) and with two or three Pied Oystercatchers and a Bar-tailed Godwit on another day — the Godwit chased it briefly on one occasion. In flight it showed a neat bullet-shaped body with long sharp wings and a small neat tail with the legs not trailing beyond it. On the 4th it called twice in flight, a high sweet "Too-it, tuit" and on the 5th it called once before flying and three times in flight with similar calls well spaced apart. Some calls were double notes and one or two a slurred single note. This would indicate it to be *brevipes* and not *incanus*.

Description: Crown, nape, back, rump and tail an even medium grey with a touch of brown. Wings the same brownish grey both above and below including the axillaries. Coverts very lightly tipped with white and outer primaries showing quite black in flight. Underparts whitish. Flank finely barred with longitudinal bars of brownish grey on the whitish colour of the under parts. Head and breast; black stripe through eye to angle of the bill, whitish superciliary stripe running forward on to the forehead, so that from front on the bird has a neat white V on the forehead, cheeks diagonally streaked with brown, this brownness running down the side of the neck and breast, leaving chin and throat and a narrow line down the mid-breast a whitish colour. Brown of breast runs back to the front angle of the wing and looks quite smooth, no sign of barring. Bill medium length, i.e. not as long in proportion to the head as in Stilt or Godwit, straight, darkish brown, nasal *aperture* a long oval near the base of bill nearly a quarter the length of the bill, nasal *groove* not seen, bill a bit darker at the tip (feeding in mud and so bill could be muddy). Legs quite a bright yellow in some lights, dull horn colour in others, not much of tibia showing below feathering of flanks.

Mr. W. Poppelwell's description of it from brief viewing of it on 5th July. "Back grey with a tinge of brown. Whitish underparts. Across breast very light grey. Bill black. White superciliary streak. Small white V on forehead. White stripe down throat and breast. Legs dull yellow." Mr. G. Chance was trying to photograph it but did note: "Poking bill into mud deeply. Legs looked black. Beak dull pink at base to about half way down and dark tip."

The photographs in British Birds 54: 24-25 agree well for shape, proportion and plumage except for the way the brown on the breast and flank is barred and the lack of white under the chin and down the mid-line of the breast. Since the photographs are of adults at nesting

sites in Siberia, the lack of barring in our Papanui bird may indicate that it is an immature. The fact that it is "summering" here would also indicate this.

The drawing in Condon and McGill "Field Guide to the Waders" is not satisfactory as the shape is too plump compared with both our bird and the photographs in British Birds. Also the white flecking on the wings in non-breeding plumage is not so prominent in our bird but this again may be due to its probable immaturity.

24/7/65. Mr. Chance located the bird at a small sand-spit half way down north side of inlet at full tide. Later it flew up to the head of the inlet when about 30 yards of mud edge was showing, where Mr. Chance again stalked it to photograph it.

I noted that the shading that runs forward on to the breast is quite distinctly darker than the shading along the flank below the line of the wing. It flew a short distance along the edge three times without calling. Each time as it landed it briefly held its wings vertically up as high as possible as if stretching them before folding them — a very graceful movement.

25/7/65. Mr. John Allan found the bird in the same places at the same stages of the tide. He obtained a measurement of the footprint in the mud. The hind toe left a neat hole like a match stick and the full length of this print from the hind toe mark to the front of the longest toe was 32.1 mm. measured with vernier calipers.

— G. HAMEL

(b) TARAWERA RIVERMOUTH, BAY OF PLENTY

On 24/9/66, at the mouth of the Tarawera River, I was watching two Banded Dotterel (*C. binctus*) when a larger wader flew past and across to the sandy upper beach on the east side. There it stood facing into a westerly gale, silhouetted against the sea. The long pointed wings with easy springy flight, the elegant shape, the stance and the length of bill were so familiar to me as to leave no doubt in regard to genus. It did not call so the species could not be determined. The general colour, including the underparts, was so dark as to indicate that it could be an Alaskan Wandering Tattler (*Heteroscelus incanus*) having just arrived, still in full or nearly full plumage. The type of habitat was unusual for a Tattler so it may have only just made a landfall. Although the wind was westerly at the time it had just changed from quite a long period of strong north-easterlies which may have influenced its ocean passage to New Zealand.

— H. R. McKENZIE

(c) NEW PLYMOUTH

The recent occurrence of a Grey-tailed Tattler near New Plymouth adds another locality to those known to have been visited by tattlers in New Zealand.

On 26/12/66 Mrs. J. C. Medway, A. F. Barwell, N. Banks and myself noticed a slim and graceful wader feeding alone along the rocky waterline near the mouth of the Waiongona River just north of New Plymouth. At first sight the most noticeable features were the shortish legs and relatively long, straight, black bill. On closer observation the bird showed a uniform brownish-grey colour above

with white below except for the breast where light greyish colouring was noticeable. In certain lights the white superciliary stripe and yellowish legs were visible.

The Tattler allowed approach to within 30 feet at which distance it was closely observed through 16 x 50 binoculars. A bobbing motion of the head was noticed when the bird stood still and on being disturbed it gave a rapid call of 3 or 4 high notes and flew low upstream. This short call, uttered only once, would appear to distinguish the bird seen from the, at times, almost identical Wandering Tattler (*Heteroscelus incanus*).

The Tattler was also noticed by Mr. and Mrs. G. Medway on 31/12/66, but apparently departed after that date, for it was not seen again although a careful search was made on a number of later occasions.

— D. G. MEDWAY



NEW ZEALAND TATTLER RECORDS

By DAVID G. DAWSON

A sighting by me of a strange wader at the stilt lagoon (near the lighthouse) Kaikoura Peninsula, prompted me to review the New Zealand records of Tattlers. Oliver (1955) lists them as *Tringa incanus* (Wandering Tattler) and *Tringa brevipes* (Grey-rumped Tattler), while the Checklist (1953) lists them as subspecies of *Heteroscelus incanus*. As the two seem to be clearly separable on morphological grounds in the hand if not in the field I will use the former arrangement.

Most sightings have been in the New Zealand spring, summer and early autumn, when these birds are in their "winter" plumage. As is the case with most other arctic migrants some may remain here in the New Zealand winter. If they are adult these birds will be in their "summer" plumage. In this plumage both species show dark grey-brown barring on the undersurface. That of *incanus* is more distinct and extends onto the middle of the abdomen and under-tail coverts, while these areas are white in *brevipes* (Serventy 1944). Two New Zealand sight records mention the "summer" plumage as the criterion used in identification. These are both of *brevipes* (6 and 8). Three records deal with birds that appear to have been juvenile, as they did not show full breeding plumage of either species at a time when adults would be expected to. These are: 16 (17/7/60), 19 (13/5/61), and 21 (25/5/62), in the table.

In the "winter" plumage these two species are most difficult to distinguish. Three criteria have been suggested by New Zealand observers to aid in their identification at this time (our summer).

The first is a difference in habitat preference. This was never considered to be a diagnostic feature. The difference was first suggested by Brathwaite (1955). Sibson (*pers. comm.*) thinks that *incanus* is seldom, if ever, far from the tideline, and an inland Tattler is *more likely* to be *brevipes*. In Fiji, *incanus* may go some way inland up the bigger rivers.