CURLEW SANDPIPERS IN NEW ZEALAND 1969 - 70

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ABSTRACT

Exceptional numbers of Curlew Sandpipers were reported in New Zealand during the summer of 1969-1970. The opportunity is taken to review the history and status of the Curlew Sandpiper in New Zealand.

In B.T.O. News 36, November 1969, there appears a preliminary account of what was obviously an exceptional influx into Britain of Curlew Sandpipers *Calidris ferruginea.* The first were noted about August 23rd. Subsequently they were reported in unprecedented numbers in many different places within the British Isles, especially from the east coast where they made their landfall after crossing the North Sea.

Here in New Zealand at one of the far extremes of the range of the Curlew Sandpiper it became clear, as reports came in, first from the northern harbours and later from Lake Ellesmere and the Southland lagoons that during the summer of 1969-1970 there were more Curlew Sandpipers in New Zealand than had ever been reported since any kind of systematic recording began.

It may therefore be an appropriate time (a) to review briefly the history of the Curlew Sandpiper in New Zealand (b) to gather up the data collected during the recent invasion.

The Curlew Sandpiper was added to the New Zealand list early in the twentieth century but there seems to be some uncertainty about the exact date and place. Stead (1) claims that two specimens which he shot on Lake Ellesmere on 5/4/1903 were the first of the species to be recorded for New Zealand; but Oliver (N.Z. Birds 1930) states that " the first example to be taken in New Zealand was obtained at Lake Te Anau in March, 1903. A month later Stead shot two at Lake Ellesmere." However in his second edition (5) Oliver writes that " the first example to be taken in New Zealand was shot on Lake Ellesmere in February 1902. In March of the following year a specimen was obtained at Lake Te Anau." The matter may be purely academic; but what is the truth ? Incidentally Te Anau is still the only inland locality in New Zealand from which a Curlew Sandpiper has been reported.

In 1923 after twenty years' experience Stead considered that the Curlew Sandpiper 'may be put down as one of our regular migrants.' He had seen it on many occasions and had secured several specimens. " It is usually to be found," he adds, " associating with the Banded Dotterel. On one occasion I saw between twenty and thirty Curlew Sandpipers, which were in a large company of dotterel. When disturbed both species rose and flew around together and when they settled again the Curlew Sandpipers all settled together and slightly segregated from the dotterel."

Falla (2) had little to add except that further specimens had been collected or seen. The species was still unknown in the North Island. But in the early 1940s the big flocks of migratory shorebirds in the Firth of Thames and Manukau Harbour began to be studied

much more regularly and methodically; and one of the byproducts of this study has been a greatly increased knowledge of several of the smaller arctic migrants, one of which is the Curlew Sandpiper.

In the northern harbours Curlew Sandpipers are attracted not so much by Banded Dotterels as by Wrybills *Anarhynchus frontalis*. The first Curlew Sandpiper to be found in the North Island (3) — the date was 27/10/41 — had joined a small lingering flock of Wrybills. This pattern of behaviour is repeated over the years. Stray Curlew Sandpipers as they arrive from the arctic in September-October are drawn, preferentially it would seem, to flocks of Wrybills which have not yet gone south. After the New Year when the flocks of Wrybills are building up in their northern winter quarters, they are habitually joined by such Curlew Sandpipers as may be present; and these stay with the Wrybills, till they themselves leave for their arctic breeding grounds between the end of March and May.

In the Firth of Thames on 12/4/70 at least 20 Curlew Sandpipers together with other small arctic waders were scattered through a gathering of Wrybills, estimated by Ross McKenzie, John Jenkins and John Croxall to contain not fewer than 3500 birds as they rested at full tide over the ridges and among the hollows of a large shellbank. The well-reddened adults were conspicuous enough; but the pale juveniles could easily escape notice in such a dense throng. It is not surprising therefore that the few Curlew Sandpipers that have been found over-wintering in the northern harbours have been in company with Wrybills.

The Curlew Sandpiper is one of those migratory waders in which adults in breeding dress are very differently coloured from adults in eclipse and juveniles. Observations now made over many years show that the times of assumption and loss of breeding dress may vary considerably.

These apparent irregularities may simply indicate that there are early and late moulters and therefore early and late breeders. Adults, in post-nuptial moult and patchily marked with red when they arrive in September - October, are normal; but to see one still in fine nuptial plumage as late as 26/10/59 was most unusual. By the end of January some adults are showing red and some are fully red by the end of March, though in others the moult is far from complete by mid-April. Finally, there is the problem of adults in fine red feathering still present in New Zealand in mid-May. Thus, in the Firth of Thames on 19/5/64, in a flock of nine, four were fully red, two well-reddened and pale; and on 8/5/66 seven out of nine were very red and two pale. If these 'red' birds of mid-May are going to breed the same season some 7500 miles away, they have to travel fast.

In Table 1 the story of the discovery of the Curlew Sandpiper in the North Island is outlined. While the figures undoubtedly reflect a growing interest in the study of the migratory shore-birds and an increase in the number of critical observers visiting likely estuaries, they also show that since the middle 1950's more Curlew Sandpipers have been spending the summer in the Firth of Thames, and by New Zealand standards the numbers have been quite impressive throughout the 1960's. They may, of course, have been attracted to the Firth of Thames from other areas in New Zealand where

TABLE 1 — Curlew Sandpipers in the North Island

Summer	F.O.T.	Manukau	Comments and Sightings Elsewhere.
1940-41	-	-	Regular counts of wader flocks begin.
1941-42	1	-	First North Island record.
1942-43	-	-	
1943-44	-	-	
1944-45	-	-	
1945-46	-	-	
1946-47	1	-	Second N.I. record
1947-48	13	-	
1948-49	6(1)	-	First record of over-wintering
1949-50	4	-	
1950-51	2	-	
1951-52	2	-	
1952-53	2	-	
1953-54	2	-	1 at Paua on 2 Sept.
1954-55	2	-	
1955-56	5	-	
1956-57	5(2)	1	First Manukau record
1957-58	9	1	
1958-59	6	9	
1959-60	9	4(1)	
1960-61	10	-	Manawatu estuary. Feb-April Max.4
1961-62	8(3)	1	" " 3 on 24th Feb.
1962-63	8	3	" " 1 on 2nd Mar.
1963-64	11(9)	-	Ahuriri lagoon, Napier. 5
1964-65	13(2)	1	
1965-66	11	2	
1966-67	17	2	
1967-68	15	-	Manawatu estuary. 1 - Dec. 23rd.
1968-69	11	-	Manawatu estuary. 1 - Oct.Nov.
1969-70	20 (10)	14 (2)	Paua, present Oct-Feb. max.8 (A.T.E.)
			Rangaunu Bay 6 on 1st Nov. (J.S.)
			Muriwai Lagoon, Gisborne. 1 on 9th Dec. (A.B.)
			Whakaki Lagoon, H.B. 1 on 20th Jan. (A.B.)
			Westshore Lagoon 3 on 12th Dec. (I.G.A.)
			Waitotara estuary 4 on 11th Dec. (D.M.)

Figures in brackets are for birds over-wintering.

feeding grounds have deteriorated. But it is reasonable to suppose that the figures for the Firth of Thames are good evidence that for some years the number of Curlew Sandpipers annually reaching New Zealand has increased. It is regrettable that a comparable set of figures is not available for Stead's historic area, Lake Ellesmere; but the record count (60+) made there late in October 1969, suggests that conditions there are as favourable as ever. A somewhat similar increase in the number of Red-necked Stints *Calidris ruficollis* has already been described (13). The two species, of course, are often found in close company and, despite a considerable difference in size, may be able to travel together on their long oceanic flights.

In the well-matched assemblages of waders in Manukau Harbour, no Curlew Sandpiper was identified till 1956; and in only two years since that first finding have palpable flocks been noted as present. In the summer of 1958-59 the many acres of shallow water provided by the partly constructed ponds of the A.M.D.B. acted as a magnet to great numbers of waders, both large and small, and an environment which was exceptionally favourable existed for a while. Up to nine Curlew Sandpipers stayed for some weeks in the latter end of summer.

A possible reason for the scarcity of records of Curlew Sandpiper in Manukau Harbour may be that whereas in the Firth of Thames a sizable flock of non-breeding Wrybills usually remains between September and December when it is boosted by the first migrants returning from the South Island, Manukau seldom seems to retain such a non-breeding flock throughout spring and early

summer. Knots *Calidris canutus* however are usually plentiful; and if Curlew Sandpipers associate with them, the scarcer and slightly smaller species is easily overlooked. In the Firth of Thames and Manukau, it is not unusual for flocks of Knots to contain thousands of birds. They are less approachable than the smaller flocks of Wrybills. At full tide Knots tend to pack densely and they have been described as covering a shell-bank like a vast swarm of bees, even clinging uncertainly to its steep sides. Among them Curlew Sandpipers, being smaller in body, though much the same in length of bill and leg, and cryptically coloured in all plumages, virtually disappear.

During the spring of 1969 a dwindling company of Wrybills when driven off the Puketutu flats by the incoming tide, used as a loafing ground some acres of dredged and roughly levelled shell beside No. 4 pond, A.M.D.B. It was here that the biggest flock of Curlew Sandpipers so far recorded in Manukau Harbour gradually built up and gave the first hint that the 1969-70 season was to be an exceptional one. On Sept. 18 about 140 Wrybills had been joined by a single Curlew Sandpiper. It was lean, tired and sleepy. When flushed it flew a short distance to a patch of swamp, played at feeding for a short while; then returned to the Wrybills and resumed its dozing. On October 2nd there were four Curlew Sandpipers among 70 Wrybills; then six on October 24th when the Wrybills had declined to 33. By November 4th the Wrybills were reduced to about 20 but the Curlew Sandpipers had increased to nine. Twenty-four Wrybills were still present on November 16th, but none could be found thereafter till well into the New Year. On November 20th and 28th at least eight Curlew Sandpipers were seen, once in a typical darting flock calling with a lively twitter as they turned and twisted. But by now they were much more difficult to find on the ground at their roosts as Godwits and Knots were now plentiful; and usually it was only possible to track down the few Curlew Sandpipers among the hundreds of Knots when they moved to the fringes of the resting flocks. With the return of the Wrybills after the New Year the search for Curlew Sandpipers was simplified. Throughout February, 12 - 14 associated with flocks of roosting Wrybills which varied in number from 25 to c. 400. Curlew Sandpipers were last seen here in early March. During the late summer and autumn the acres of dredged shell, now a small artificial desert thinly vegetated also proved attractive to more than a hundred Banded Dotterels. The flocks of Wrybills and Banded Dotterels tended to roost apart, as is normal. It was noted by many observers that the Curlew Sandpipers showed little interest in the Banded Dotterels, and generally rested right among the Wrybills.

Meanwhile Curlew Sandpipers were being found in the North Island on other estuaries and coastal lagoons from which they have seldom or never been recorded in the past. A. T. Edgar was visiting Paua on Parengarenga almost monthly; Dr. John Seddon came upon a small flock near Kaimaumau. On the east coast several likely localities were investigated by Dr. Ian Andrew, A. Blackburn and B. D. Heather; on the south-west coast David Medway found some at Waitotara, but curiously enough, none was reported from the Manawatu where they have come to be expected with some regularity.

Apart from the isolated Te Anau record, there still seem to be only three localities in the South Island where so far Curlew Sandpipers have been recorded. Although Lake Ellesmere is an historical area for them and it is likely that they are regular summer visitors, there are actually few years in which flock counts have been made or numbers assessed. At Farewell Spit few could be found during surveys of waders conducted by the O.S.N.Z. in 1961 and 1967. For subsequent reports we are indebted to B. D. Bell and other Wildlife officers. In the far south persistent field work by a team of local observers, led by Mrs. M. Barlow and Roger Sutton, has shown that small numbers may be expected annually, since they were first discovered on the roomy Southland lagoons in January 1963 (14). Here, as in the north, the 1969-70 season was well above average.

TABLE 2 — Counts of Curlew Sandpipers in the South Island since 1960

Summer	*Farewell Spit*	*Lake Ellesmere*	*Southland Lagoons*
1960-61	2		
1961-62			
1962-63	1		3
1963-64		27	
1964-65	7		14
1965-66			5
1966-67	4		7
1967-68	4		3
1968-69			
1969-70		60+	12

It is perhaps worth mentioning that while the summer of 1969-70 may have been a ' vintage year ' for Curlew Sandpipers in New Zealand, our bumper crop of perhaps 150 is a very modest one by Australian or Tasmanian standards. In south-east Tasmania, S. lat. 43° Thomas (15) suggests that there has been an increase in the 1960's. For one specially favoured locality he gives the following figures:— 244 in 1964-65; 414 in 1965-66; 769 in 1966-67; 950 in 1967-68; 606 in 1968-69. One thing of which we may rest assured is that the Curlew Sandpiper has been enjoying a series of successful seasons on its arctic breeding grounds.

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