

## A SIGHTING OF BAIRD'S SANDPIPER IN NEW ZEALAND

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The 1969-1970 summer was notable for the number of vagrant arctic waders recognised. An unusual influx of Curlew Sandpipers *Calidris ferruginea* (Notornis 17, 291-296) may have brought with it several other species commonly breeding in Siberia or northwest America. Of the vagrants there have been two tentative records of Dunlin *Calidris alpina*, one at Karaka and one at Puketutu, Manukau Harbour, the latter a bird with patches of black remaining on the belly; a record of two White-rumped Sandpipers *Calidris fuscicollis* at Karaka (Notornis 17, 236-237); and again at Karaka a solitary bird taken to be a Baird's Sandpiper *Calidris bairdi*. A second record for New Zealand was of two Great Knots *Calidris tenuirostris* at Miranda, Firth of Thames (Notornis 17, 299).

On 28/3/70, M.E.McK., B.J.B., S.M.F. and H.R.McK. were making a routine check of shore-birds at Kidd's Shellbank, Karaka, Manukau Harbour, when a strange sandpiper was found and carefully studied at leisure for over two hours. It was first noticed by H.R.McK. when scanning a loose assemblage of Turnstones, Red-necked Stints and New Zealand and Banded Dotterels on the short growth of the semi-marine flat just behind the beach. Too small for Sharp-tailed, *Calidris acuminata*, one of which was present so that comparisons could be made, it was the size of a White-rumped Sandpiper. It left the paddock before it could be studied and reappeared on the tideflat among several species of scattered waders, right in front of the other three watchers at about twenty yards. M.E.McK. drew attention to it as a stranger and with B.J.B. and S.M.F. carefully listed important details.

The short, dark, straight, rather thin bill was the shape of a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper's but smaller. The crown was sparingly streaked dark and there was a definite but not prominent eye-stripe. The neck all round and sides and front of breast were strongly buff-brown, the lower breast, belly and under tail, white. A striking scaly pattern, not striped, on the back was particularly noted and described by the ladies as beautiful. This was amply confirmed when a skin was later examined in the Auckland War Memorial Museum. The two inch long "scaly" area had small rounded feathers with distinct white edgings, the centres being a dark or chocolate brown. The sides of the breast were brown and a peculiar line between the brown and the lower area of white ran from the lower breast to the upper flank. This field note was later explained by study of the skin and of illustrations which showed that the white under surface runs up into the brown breast in a definite bay. This is well illustrated by Peterson, Robbins and Godfrey.

After differing opinions were considered on the spot, the legs were described as indefinitely yellowish brown, a little yellowish upper and the rest brown, one observer mentioning slate. In the

literature mentioned below the colour is given as "blackish or dark slate" (Witherby); "blackish" (Peterson); "legs and feet very dark" (Stout *et al.*). The study skin in the Auckland War Memorial Museum has dark red-brown legs, which, if they had the same colour in life, would look very dark at even a short distance. The vagaries of the light make leg colour notoriously difficult to ascertain. The difference in this case from the usual description could well have been caused by the westering sun making reflections from the shiny mud surface just uncovered by the falling tide.

Feeding was by pecking and the bird moved actively. It was fully tolerated by the other waders nearby. As to be expected from the published accounts it was particularly tame.

We returned to the car, from which the bird was to be well seen at about sixty yards with the aid of a large telescope. B.J.B. had at hand a copy of "Birds of North America: A Guide to Field Identification." From this book Baird's, seen on migration by H.R.McK. in May 1969 by the Mississippi River, U.S.A., was quickly selected. Because the rump and upper tail pattern needed closer observation, B.J.B. and S.M.F. went out onto the flat to put the bird up, keeping between it and the sun. It allowed their approach to thirteen yards and made several short flights, giving excellent views of the rump and upper tail pattern each time. The broad blackish band all down the middle of the rump and tail and the dark across the end of the tail, the lighter brown on each side of the dark band and the rather small area of white on the sides of the upper tail tallied with the illustration in the book. These features were fully and clearly noted and the two observers were pleased to be able to examine without hurrying this important feature.

In size the nearest to it of the straight-billed sandpipers is the White-rumped *Calidris fuscicollis*, which is eliminated by having a white rump. The Least and Semi-palmated, which have a somewhat similar rump and tail pattern, are definitely too small. All with down-curved bills are ruled out. The buffiness of the fore-parts of Baird's, with white under, is not shared by any other and the tail pattern, described above, and so well verified by two of the observers, who were assiduously concentrating on it, is firm evidence.

Since Baird's Sandpiper breeds in north eastern Siberia, north-west Alaska and northern Canada, it could easily be caught up with the regular migrants and the strays above-mentioned and come to New Zealand. Its main migratory fly-way is along the Mississippi Valley, but it uses other routes as well. Stragglers have occurred in England and Scotland, one in South Africa, one in the Falkland Islands and one has been collected in Tasmania.

Bird photographers D. A. Urquhart and N. Douglas came the next day to try to record it and the Sharp-tailed Sandpiper but they had gone, possibly having set out on the long journey to their breeding grounds.

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[When the original account of the discovery of this small sandpiper was submitted to the Rare Birds Committee, some misgivings were felt about the identification, mainly because the legs were described as "indefinitely yellowish brown." However, since either this or another Baird's Sandpiper has now been found, studied and photographed in the Firth of Thames, the Convener of the Rare Birds Committee is of the opinion that this claim to the first sighting of Baird's Sandpiper in New Zealand should be published. — Ed.]



## SHORT NOTE

### WHITE NELLY ASHORE ALIVE IN HAURAKI GULF

On 8/8/70 a White Nelly *Macronectes giganteus* was found ashore at Orere Pt., Clevedon, by Mr. and Mrs. H. Volk of Manurewa. It appeared to be hungry and somewhat exhausted. Some bread was accepted, but strangely enough, mussel was refused. The bird was then taken to Mr. T. A. Jenkins, taxidermist, was reported to me and identified. A plan to revive the bird with a view to liberation was decided upon. T.A.J. made a pen for it on his lawn and cared for it till August 25. Mr. Volk met all expenses; the Rosses of Kawakawa Bay provided fish offal; my wife and I kept up a supply of seawater for drinking. Codliver oil was used. Improvement was rapid and the Nelly began climbing the wire-netting of its pen and trying to escape.

An added interest was that the bird carried a band reading "5033461 British Museum S.W.7." This was not removed. But a report to the British Museum was answered by the B.T.O. to the effect that the banding had been done at Signey Island in the South Orkneys on 5/3/70 when it was still non-flying. Thus when it came ashore it was only five months out of the nest.

The plumage was not entirely white. There were scattered spots of black and a few two-inch black feathers except on head and tail. The webs of the feet had pale spots. The bill was light tan white. Measurements in m.m. were:— Bill 100; wing 520; tarsus 100; tail c. 200; mid-toe 145.

Arrangements to release the bird well out to sea were made with the very helpful officers of M.V. Pukeko at Onehunga. This was done at 0010 hours on August 26 about 36 miles north of New Plymouth. The wind was light, S.W., 3 knots and the sea was slight with a low swell. The Nelly slowly came out of its carton and wandered around for a few minutes before flying about fifty yards and settling quietly on the sea. Further observation was impossible because of the darkness.

Sibson (Notornis 16, 46) has shown that white Nellies rarely come as far north as the Auckland coast and Capt. John Jenkins tells me that during his many voyages in New Zealand waters he has not yet seen a white specimen among the hundreds, even thousands, of brown Nellies which have followed his ships.

— H. R. McKENZIE