

SHORT NOTE

LESSER YELLOWLEGS AT TIMARU

During the course of a visit to Washdyke Lagoon at Timaru on the morning of 1/2/71, I noticed an elegant and active wader feeding amongst Pied Stilts *Himantopus leucocephalus* in shallow water fringing a small mudflat. Observed through 10 x 50 binoculars and against the light at a distance of nearly 100 yards, the bird resembled a Greenshank *Tringa nebularia* in build, but was a smaller and darker bird.

I altered my position so as to have the sun behind me and was able to approach the bird to within 35 yards. The upper parts, including head and neck, were greyish brown with the feathers on the mantle having whitish tips, giving a spotted effect. The wings were a similar colour and without a white wing-stripe, but when seen in flight the fore-edge and especially the wing-tip were noticeably darker. The tail was pale and rump was white, and contrasted with the mantle and wings when the bird was in flight. There was no distinctive eye-stripe. The chin and throat were whitish while the chest and upper breast were a brownish colour. There was an indistinct border between the brownish chest and the rest of the underparts which were white, although there were obscure greyish shades on the belly.

The bill was black, straight, markedly fine but stouter at the base. I estimated it to be about the length of its own head and $\frac{1}{2}$ - $\frac{2}{3}$ the length of the bill of a Pied Stilt. The long legs, which were yellow with a reddish tinge, were one of the bird's most notable features. From my previous position the legs had appeared red, probably because of poor light, but in good light the yellow showed up distinctively. In flight the legs trailed behind the tail to a very similar length as in a Greenshank. (A Greenshank had spent the summer a few miles further north at the mouth of the Opihi River, allowing me to make some useful comparisons.)

By this time I was convinced the bird was a Yellowlegs and for some time watched it feeding. It was particularly active with jerky movements and preferred to feed in shallow water, stabbing with its beak. Occasionally it waded into the water to its belly and was seen to plunge its head beneath the surface. The Yellowlegs was more touchy than the Greenshank mentioned, and did not show as much confidence amongst the stilts as that bird had. During my presence it was twice pursued momentarily by a stilt. On more than one occasion I thought I had lost the bird after something had startled it into flight over the lagoon, but each time it returned. No calls were heard from the Yellowlegs; if it did call the notes were lost amid the clamour of gulls and stilts. Other waders in the vicinity were South Island Pied and Black Oystercatchers, Banded Dotterels and a pair each of Spur-winged Plover and Turnstone.

After consulting reference books I concluded that the bird I had seen was a Lesser Yellowlegs *Tringa flavipes*. The length and form of the bill answered that of this species, and eliminated the Greater Yellowlegs *T. melanoleucos* which has a longer and more strongly built bill. The absence of white up the back, darker body-colouring and the colour of the legs ruled out the Marsh Sandpiper *T. stagnatilis*.

The Lesser Yellowlegs was not present that afternoon, nor on 2 and 4 February 1971, so a photograph was not obtained. On 2/2/71 I continued to the Opihi River, but the Greenshank was the only arctic wader to be found.

— RAY PIERCE