

### A COMMON SANDPIPER NEAR NEW PLYMOUTH — THE THIRD NEW ZEALAND RECORD

The *Annotated Checklist of the Birds of New Zealand* (OSNZ 1970: 48) accepts two sight records of the Common Sandpiper (*Tringa hypoleucos*) for New Zealand — the first at New Plymouth in October 1964 (Pengelly et al. 1965) and the second at Kerikeri in March 1969 (Edgar 1969). Since then a third Common Sandpiper has been recorded near New Plymouth between February and April 1972 and more recently, in November 1972, Dr C. A. Fleming saw at Waikanae a bird which he describes as almost certainly a Common Sandpiper (Fleming 1973). Another Common Sandpiper was observed on the Kaipara Harbour in February 1974 and an account has already been given in *Notornis* (Brown 1974). My original manuscript was completed during 1972 but apparently was lost in transit so that, chronologically, my New Plymouth bird represents the third record in New Zealand.

Since the 1972 New Plymouth bird was seen on five separate occasions, and on some observed for considerable periods at close quarters, it seems appropriate to place on record such observations as were made.

A strange 'black and white' wader was first seen by W. F. Cash at the mouth of the Waiongona River, about 5 miles north of New Plymouth, on 13 and 27 February 1972. No detailed observations of the bird were made on those occasions. On 5 March the writer and W. F. Cash returned to the Waiongona River mouth. Almost immediately upon our arrival we disturbed a solitary wader resting on a sand bank about 300 yards from the mouth of the river. The bird flew low and swiftly down-stream and was found at a small salt water lagoon near the mouth of the river. Such lagoon was surrounded almost entirely with a great quantity of logs, branches and boulders with very little open sand. Here the bird was found and observed for a short time, initially feeding on the only sandy portion of the lagoon edge. The first noticeable feature in addition to a bobbing up and down motion of the head was an independent frequent up-and-down rythmical motion of the whole of the hind part of its body. The wader was slim and graceful appearing to be about the size of a Banded Dotterel (*Charadrius bicinctus*). Its legs were yellowish-green, the bill longish, dark brown or black and straight. The underparts including the rump were pure white except for the upper breast which was brownish. The upper parts were brown, the eye dark with a dark streak from the bill through the eye with a white streak above the eye. A white patch on the body at the angle of the wing was noticeable. The bird fed actively, picking in the sand just above the water's edge. It appeared to be very alert and shy. After some ten minutes of observation the bird was put up and it flew low away from us showing a clear black and white upper surface pattern.

It was not found again that day or on 26 March. However, on 1 April the river mouth was again visited and the bird disturbed feeding at a very small sandy inlet close to the edge of the river. It flew rapidly downstream away from us about two feet above the water. Shortly after it was found again at the salt-water lagoon where it was feeding on the sandy margin. It was disturbed by our approach and flew very low over the lagoon. It flicked its wings rapidly, glided for a short distance, then flicked its wings again. During the gliding motion the wing tips were seen clearly to be curved downwards. The white wing bar was noticeable and the bird was a strong flier. After a wait of almost two hours the bird returned to the lagoon, flying in at a low level, quietly and swiftly. It was then observed closely at a distance of as little as 40 yards for almost thirty minutes. Again it was seen to feed very actively, walking and occasionally running with a frequent bobbing up and down of both the head and the whole hind part of the body. It picked and occasionally probed in the sand just above and in the water and among the logs and branches at the lagoon edge. As it moved along it frequently stood on logs lying on the ground and occasionally perched for short periods on them before feeding again. As on previous occasions it appeared to be very alert and shy, unlike the Kerikeri bird which apparently did not appear at all shy.

Under ideal conditions a closer inspection of the bird was possible. The dark brown straight bill, dark streak from bill through dark eye, white streak above and a white ring around the eye were all noticeable. The whole of the under parts were white except for the upper breast which was white flecked with brown. The upper parts were a uniform mottled brown and the white shoulder patch was again noticeable. The legs were greenish yellow. When the bird was disturbed and flew away from us its dark upper parts with white wing-bar and white sides and tip of tail were very noticeable. The bird was followed and found perched on a log a few feet above the edge of the river. When disturbed it flew rapidly and strongly downstream about three feet above the level of the water.

The sandpiper was seen again by the writer on 9 April when it was disturbed in the same inlet as previously and flew rapidly downstream about 18 inches above the water. It was found at the salt-water lagoon where it was again disturbed and flew in a low direct flight about 300 yards back to the river and upstream where it alighted on the sandy edge. It was further disturbed from there and flew some 200 yards upstream and out of sight. The well defined and distinct black and white upper body pattern was again most noticeable.

At no time on any occasion when the bird was under observation was it heard to call and on every occasion it was solitary, shy and alert. It was obvious that its favourite feeding area was the salt-water lagoon where it was most frequently observed. It was not seen again after 9 April.

We found that one of the most useful aids in the initial identification of our bird was the excellent description of the bird seen by Edgar at Kerikeri. Such identification was further confirmed by consultation of the authorities to which Edgar and Fleming have referred and in addition Hollom (1962: 206-8). There remained only one problem. The Common Sandpiper closely resembles the Spotted Sandpiper (*Tringa macularia*). While no difficulty in identification of the respective species presents itself when the birds are in breeding plumage most authorities hold the view that immatures and adults in winter plumage are indistinguishable in the field. I am indebted to Mr F. C. Kinsky for drawing my attention to an article by Wallace (1970) who reaches the conclusion that previous statements that in immature and winter adult plumages Spotted Sandpipers are not separable in the field from Common Sandpipers have not been borne out, at least in the case of immatures, and that certain diagnosis is possible. Even more important in reaching a final determination of our bird were the excellent photographs of Spotted and Common Sandpipers accompanying a note by Bonham (1971). A close comparison of the appearance of the New Plymouth bird with those illustrations leaves me in no doubt whatsoever that the bird seen by us was a Common Sandpiper, a conclusion which is supported even further by a consideration of the known distribution of the two species.

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DAVID G. MEDWAY

P.O. Box 476,  
New Plymouth