

SHORT NOTES

SIGHT RECORD OF A DUNLIN IN NEW ZEALAND

On 24 February 1974, a party of South Auckland members, J. A. Brown, E. D. Metherell, Pamela Walter, D. M. Walter and the writer (BB), visited Taporā, Kaipara Harbour. On the large sand island we found a wader unknown to us resting on dry light-coloured sand with a loose flock of New Zealand Dotterels (*Charadrius obscurus*). Scattered sedge clumps made it necessary to approach in spread-out formation, but each person was within a few metres of the next. Observations were made from 30m, using binoculars variously sized from 7x35 to 20x50 during about ten minutes at approximately 1300 hours. The weather was fine and the position a sheltered one.

First impressions, occurring independently to BB and DMW, were of a snipe-like bird in a squatting position. The heavy-billed head hung forward and down in an attitude totally different from that of any wader known to us. The bird then stood, stretched slightly, walked slowly about 1m, showing a plumpish body and short legs and sat down again. At this stage one observer who was clear of the sedge and closest to the bird saw the dark marking on the belly clearly. During these movements the bird's curiously slouched posture was maintained. Shortly after this a sudden panic among Wrybills (*Anarhynchus frontalis*), Knots (*Calidris canutus*), Golden Plovers (*Pluvialis dominica*) and Red-necked Stints (*Calidris ruficollis*) which fed at the waters edge, 50m distant, put up all birds in the vicinity. The stranger hesitated and then flew without attaching itself to any of the several small flocks which crossed to the mainland. Good views of the upper surfaces were obtained as it flew back and forth over the beach in front of us at varying heights. It crossed to the beach on the mainland, returned and repeated the back and forth flights giving the appearance of being strange to the area. It finally re-crossed to the mainland and went down at a considerable distance from us. Many scattered birds fed here and we were unable to find it again. The description which follows was compiled from field notes.

Size: Closely approximating that of a Curlew Sandpiper (*Calidris ferruginea*).

Bill: Moderately long, black, broad at the base, with a decurved tip, in length slightly shorter than that of *C. ferruginea*.

Crown and upper surfaces: Greyish, with dark scaly pattern and some rufous chestnut apparently just showing through.

Face: Greyish.

Eye: Dark.

Superciliary: White, not strongly marked.

Neck: Shorter and thicker than that of *C. ferruginea*.

Upper breast: Dusky grey right across, overlaid with some darker vertical streaking and with at each side, a buffish tinge on the grey.

Lower breast and belly: White at the sides, with a disconnected central patch of greyish-black heavy mottling.

Remaining undersurfaces: White.

Rump and tail: Sides of rump white, in the centre a well-marked dark strip running up the back from a dark terminal band.

Alar-bar: White, of moderate width.

Legs: Short, very dark.

Voice: No calls heard.

Stance: Hunched and dumpy, short of neck and leg, head held forward with the heavy bill drooped downward.

All observers present agreed that: The bird was about *C. ferruginea* size, but lacked the fully white rump of that species, was of plumper build, had shorter legs, had a moderately long heavy black bill slightly decurved at the tip, had a white alar-bar, had the general appearance of a bird assuming breeding plumage, acted as if strange to the area and had a stance unlike that of any wader previously seen by us; and further that it was too large to be either a Western Sandpiper (*Calidris mauri*) which is about Red-necked Stint size, or a Broad-billed Sandpiper (*Limicola falcinellis*), lacking the noticeable striped patterning on the back and y-shaped white stripe above the eyes of the latter species and both of which we have studied in the Firth of Thames (BB, JAB); that it had a white-sided dark-centred rump and tail (BB, DMW, PW); and had an almost black heavily mottled patch placed centrally on the lower breast and belly (JAB).

Visibility was such that details of breeding plumage of a splendid Golden Plover which stood 20m beyond the bird, were clearly seen and commented upon.

Two previous possible sightings of a Dunlin (*Calidris alpina*) are mentioned by McKenzie (1971, *Notornis* 18: 58), commenting on the number of vagrant arctic waders seen in the summer of 1969-1970. Referring to the Karaka bird, McKenzie does not consider that he saw enough of it to be sure of its identity (pers. comm.).

The other was that of J. P. Croxall at Puketutu, Manukau Harbour, on 19 November 1969. Unfortunately Dr Croxall was alone at the time. He has kindly made his notes available, which read as follows:

“Size of Curlew Sandpiper, smaller than Knot; stands lower and squatter than former, not reaching up like C.S., and looks much plumper as a result.

Bill dark and slightly downcurved (shorter than C.S.?). Supercilium present but indistinct. Upperparts show scalloped darkish pattern much as C.S. Wing tips and tail darker than back, white patch at

side of tail seen when tail and wings 'settled.' Face darkest round eye and nearly as dark as crown. Rest of face and throat white; upper breast quite heavily streaked and lower breast with greyish flush. Rest of underparts white save for 6-7 dark tips to belly feathers. Legs dark, shorter upper joint than C.S. In flight shows white wing bar clearly at least as far as wing bend, white sides to dark centered tail conspicuous.

Watched for nearly 10 minutes at 50 yards at magnifications up to x50. Curlew Sandpipers and Knots available for comparison."

Dr Croxall was from England where he was thoroughly familiar with Dunlin.

The *Handbook of British Birds*, Vol. 4 (Witherby *et al.* 1940: 239), discussing resting of the Dunlin, mentions "where surface is dry, settling down belly to ground." When first seen the bird was in just this situation, settled belly to ground alongside New Zealand Dotterels (*C. obscurus*).

The Southern Dunlin (*C. alpina schinzii*), according to Witherby has a length of 6½ inches, while the Northern race *C. a. alpina* is up to 7½ inches in length. *C. a. sakhalina* occurs in north-eastern Siberia and northern North America.

Peterson's *Field Guide to the Birds (Eastern Land and Water Birds)*, second edition (1963: 97), under the names Red-backed Sandpiper (*Erolia a. pacifica*), gives its length as 8-9 inches and states — "The only Sandpiper with a black belly." Godfrey's *Birds of Canada* (1966: 155) says that it is "likely to be confused with only the Rock Sandpiper *Erolia ptilocnemis* of the West Coast which has vague black blotches on the lower breast, not on the abdomen . . . and its legs are yellowish not black."

Our estimate of size as about that of *C. ferruginea*, stated by Falla *et al.* in the *Field Guide to the Birds of New Zealand* (1966: 142) to be about 8½ inches, would indicate that the bird may have been of the American race which according to Peterson "Breeds from n. Alaska (Pt. Barrow) south along coast to Hooper Bay, Nunivak; also n. Mackenzie." It winters south to the Gulf of Mexico. Slater (1970: 306), in the *Field Guide to Australian Birds*, Vol 1, says that the only records of Dunlin south of the equator are of vagrants near Hobart in Tasmania, at Melbourne, Victoria, and at Cape York.

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FINE BIRD BOOKS

A new catalogue entitled "*Fine Bird Books for the Connoisseur and Collector*" has been received from David Evans, The White Cottage, Pitt, Winchester, Hampshire, U.K. Anyone wishing to be placed on Mr Evans' mailing list is invited to communicate with him.