

TWO LESSER YELLOWLEGS IN NEW ZEALAND IN SUMMER 1973/74

A Lesser Yellowlegs (*Tringa flavipes*) found at Karaka, in the Manukau Harbour, on 28 October 1973 by Mrs Joan Trollope and the writer was confirmed by R. B. Sibson next day. The bird remained in the vicinity of the shellbanks and was seen by at least fourteen members during the first six weeks. Toward the end of this period it was absent at times and was seen to fly in from the west with Turnstones (*Arenaria interpres*) and Bar-tailed Godwits (*Limosa lapponica*). It was last seen on 9 March 1974.

Preliminary identification was made on the following points: It was an obvious "shank," in some ways reminiscent of a Marsh Sandpiper (*Tringa stagnatilis*) seen in the Firth of Thames in 1963; long necked, slim of body, but a much browner bird with long bright yellow legs; body length that of a Turnstone; in flight, an eye-catching white patch on rump and upper tail and long legs trailing well beyond the tail; straight bill, less needle-like than that of *T. stagnatilis*, wing coverts conspicuously spotted with white.

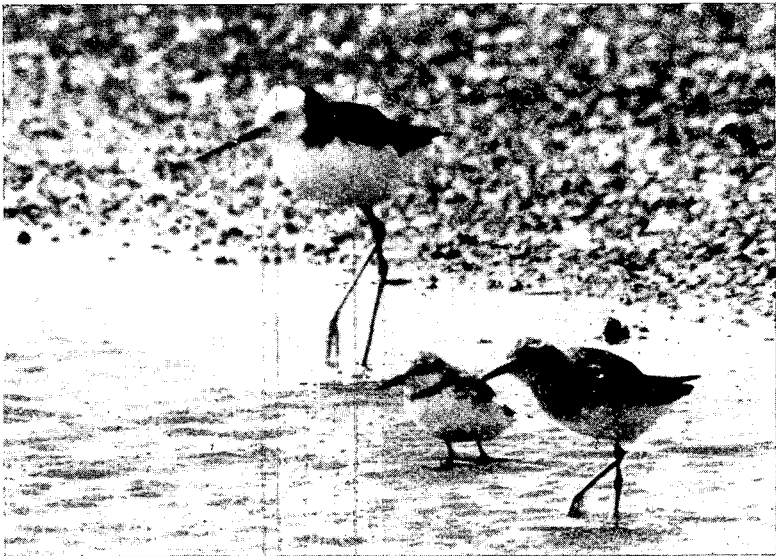


FIGURE 1 — Pied Stilt and Wrybill with Lesser Yellowlegs, Karaka, November 1973.
Photo: J. A. Brown

When first seen the bird was seemingly still in breeding plumage. Colour and monochrome photographs, taken by J. A. Brown in the first week of November, show it in a partially faded stage with other waders, Pied Stilt (*Himantopus leucocephalus*), Red-necked Stint

(*Calidris ruficollis*) and Wrybill (*Anarhynchus frontalis*) giving useful size comparisons (Fig. 1). Its almost ceaseless activity made it an extremely difficult camera subject.

Crown: medium grey-brown with paler streaking.

Cheek, throat, side of neck, nape and hind-neck: pale grey-brown.

Chin: whitish.

Ear coverts: dark.

Superciliary: light line from above eyes to bill. A dark line through eye.

Eye: large, dark.

Bill: black, straight, comparable in length with tibia.

Breast: pale grey-brown overlaid with vertical brown striations forming a barely defined "bib," less obvious in the field than in photographs, and a whiter area forward of scapulars.

Sides and flanks: some fine dark spotting showed below the folded wing.

Belly and undertail: whitish.

Mantle: medium grey-brown with darker centres to feathers.

Scapulars: similar to mantle, but a little darker.

Wing coverts: warm brown with pale centres to feathers giving a strikingly spangled effect. This faded but was still discernable five weeks later.

Primaries: blackish brown.

Primary coverts and secondaries: dark brown.

Back: medium grey-brown.

Rump: a large white area whose forward edge curved upward while the sides were level with the scapulars.

Tail coverts: white.

Tail: brown tipped, with lighter brown appearing as fine barring when viewed laterally.

Underwing: primaries dark, coverts light fawn and axillaries white.

Legs: bright yellow, showing an orange cast in some lights, long and slender with an elevated hind toe.

Flight: fast and erratic, at times difficult to follow. Often led other birds in flight i.e. Turnstones and Stilts. When alarmed it would take off, jink erratically over a wide area before settling into a long smooth descent to alight near its take-off point.

Voice: mainly silent, not heard until 2 December 1973 when it uttered a soft two-syllabled call three times as it flew. There

was a longer interval between the second and third, than the first two parts of the call.

Size: when first seen at 30 to 40m the head was turned away and my first thought was that it was a Terek Sandpiper (*Tringa cinerea*). Total length would be two-thirds that of a Stilt, about 10 inches (254 mm), with bill length about 1½ inches (38.1 mm). Once, as it slept on a shellbank between two Turnstones, all with heads turned back, only the long legs revealed its identity.

It was an extremely active bird which fed avidly over the mud or waded, at times up to the belly in water, usually picking on or just under the surface, although on more than one occasion the entire face was submerged. It fed with quick "dabs" stepping sideways on the small pebbles at the edge of a stream, or sometimes crouched and reached well forward. Once or twice the bill was dabbled with a chewing action and it took small shellfish and probably a snail. On the first day it was very wary but soon became a little more settled, feeding more continuously and frequently than any of the other waders with which it formed a loose association. It was often chivvied by stilts and would bob nervously or fly off a few feet. Its height, as it fed slightly crouched among these, was slightly less than the stilts' leg length. The leg joints seemed to protrude sideways giving it an oddly gawky appearance. On the larger tides it roosted in a field with other waders.

Preening occurred frequently with much scratching of the face. The bill was dipped into water and the sides were preened repeatedly, revealing the white chin. As the weeks passed the plumage faded, although it remained brownish rather than grey, while the spotting faded until it was faintly visible only at close range. The last sighting was made by Mrs Juliette Urquhart on 9 March 1974, when a large tide held mixed waders on the grassy flats. Notes made on this day describe the pattern on the back as "very clearly defined, scaly rather than spotted, in brown with lighter colour intermingling."

On the same day J. A. Brown, Mrs Sylvia Reed and I identified a strange wader at Farewell Spit as a Lesser Yellowlegs. All of us had spent considerable time watching the Karaka bird. This bird had been found on the previous day by R. M. Weston. There was some hesitation over the identification because the bird had a scaly, rather than spotted pattern on the wing coverts, but otherwise resembled the Karaka bird on the last occasion on which we had seen it.

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[Other photographs submitted were not reproducible but usefully show a Red-necked Stint with the Yellowlegs, a side view of a Yellowlegs and a group of Stilts with a Yellowlegs. Readers wishing to examine the interesting detail of these photographs should contact Mrs. Brown. — Ed.]