RECORDS OF HUDSONIAN CURLEW IN N.Z.

By H. R. McKenzie, Clevedon.

To begin with a summary, a space of seventy-five years separates the first and second records in New Zealand of the Hudsonian curlew—the American subspecies of whimbrel **(Numenius phaeopus hudsonicus).** The first was a specimen shot by S. C. Liardet at some time before July 25, 1874. The second was found on Ohiwa Harbour, Bay of Plenty, as recorded below, when I was bird observing with a fellow-member of our Society, P. H. Basley.

The name "Hudsonian curlew" is American. The British subspecies is the whimbrel **(N. p. phaeopus),** and the American bird could also be called a whimbrel. Authorities vary as to its specific status: thus Bent ("Life Histories of North American Shore Birds, Order Limicolae," part 2, p. 113), gives its full specific rank as **Numenius hudsonicus,** Latham; Peters ("Check-list of Birds of the World," Vol 2, p. 261), Witherby et al ("Handbook of British Birds," Vol. 4, p. 176), and Peterson ("A Field Guide to the Eastern Land and Water Birds," p. 89) list it as **Numenius phaeopus hudsonicus** Latham, making it of equal rank with **N. p. phaeopus** and other subspecies. One of these, the Eastern Asiatic whimbrel **Numenius phaeopus variegatus** (Scopoli) is the one which occurs most frequently in New Zealand, as explained below. Reference might also be made to the bristle-thighed curlew, **Numenius tahitiensis** (Gmelin), which winters in the Pacific, and is superficially at least little different from these subspecies of **N. phaeopus.** For clarity I will refer to the two New Zealand birds as **N. p. hudsonicus** and **N. p. variegatus,** and not by the vernacular names.

The breeding range of **N. p. hudsonicus** is from the north Alaskan coast eastward to Mackenzie and across to Fort Churchill on Hudson Bay. The migration south begins in early July, according to Bent, and the first birds arrive at Chile in mid-August. The winter range (northern hemisphere winter) is along the Pacific coast from southern California to Chiloe Island, Chile, on the Galapagos Archipelago and along the Atlantic coast from British Guiana to the mouth of the Amazon (Peters and Bent). The fact that it has occurred at least twice in New Zealand now makes it possible that its range is greater than has been believed. It is hardly likely these birds have crossed over from South America: more probably they have come with other migrants via Hawaii and the other Pacific Islands which are situated more or less in line between Alaska and New Zealand. In this case there is a further possibility that this bird may yet be found in the Pacific Islands; and more will probably be observed in New Zealand from time to time. The increasing activity in bird-watching in this country is already revealing the occurrence of quite a few rare birds which have previously been missed owing to lack of observers, especially in the North Island.

It may be suggested also that the occurrence of Hudsonian godwit, **Limosa haemastica** Linn., wandering tattler **(Heteroscelus incanus incanus)** (Gmelin), as well as **Numenius phaeopus hudsonicus,** points to a bird line from Alaska to New Zealand, a slim one, perhaps, but one which may yet bring us the bristle-thighed curlew **(Numenius tahitiensis)** and others not yet seen here. A possible alternative is that these birds, together with others observed here in small numbers for some time, may breed in Siberia as well as in Alaska, and could thus become absorbed in the migratory stream of godwit and knot which come down to us by the westerly route. The grey plover **(Squatarola squatarola)** Linnaeus ("black-bellied plover" in America) has been found recently in New Zealand by R. B. Sibson ("N.Z. Bird Notes, Vol. 3, No. 4, p. 82, and Vol. 3, No. 8, p. 208). It could reach here by either route as it is known to breed in certain localities all round the Arctic. The case of **N. p. hudsonicus** is perhaps in favour of the Alaska to New Zealand route, as this sub-species has not yet, to my knowledge, been recorded in Australia. This applies also to the Hudsonian godwit, **L. haemastica.**

The identification in the field of **N. p. hudsonicus** is difficult. The wholly brownish upper surface contrasts with the pale (not white) blaze up the lower back to between the wings, characteristic of **N. p. variegatus.** This is very hard to see, so that failing a good view of the lower back it has been necessary in a number of cases to identify such whimbrel-like birds under the general heading **Numenius phaeopus.** The only occasions when this light back and rump marking can be seen are when the bird is making height after taking off, or exposing its back to view as it settles. The pale rump cannot be seen when it is flying level or when it is on the ground. In none of the **N. phaeopus** found in 1942 and 1948 at Miranda, by R. B. Sibson, had this character been seen clearly enough to be identified with certainty. Another bird seen in June and July, 1946, by Bull, Sibson and others at Puketutu, Manukau Harbour (R. B. Sibson, "Whimbrel in North Island," N.Z. Bird Notes, Vol. 2, No. 3, p. 34) was possibly **N. p. hudsonicus.** However, although it was observed at close range it was doubtful whether the lower back was pale or dark.

In the article mentioned in the previous paragraph, E. G. Turbott mentions a whimbrel of the subspecies **N. p. variegatus** which came aboard a ship south of Lord Howe Island and was brought to Auckland on 14/9/42. It lived apparently happily at the Auckland Zoological Park for five years. Its skin is now at the Auckland War Memorial Museum. Those watched by D. A. Urquhart, at Karaka, on the Upper Manukau Harbour, from 1947 to 1950 have been recorded definitely as **N. p. variegatus,** as have also those watched over the same period by myself and others at Clevedon. These identifications have been checked further in all cases by R. B. Sibson. In the south of the North Island, R. H. D. Stidolph ("Whimbrel in the North Island," N.Z. Bird Notes, Vol. 2, No. 3, p. 35) gives a description of a typical **N. p. variegatus** at Ohau River, Manawatu, on November 17 and 18, 1945. A bird recently observed at Petone by C. A. Fleming and later by R. A. Falla, was of this subspecies ("Asiatic Whimbrel at Petone," C. A. Fleming, Notornis, Vol. 4, No. 1, p. 2).

Oliver, "New Zealand Birds," p. 314, up to the date of publication (1930) had only South Island mainland records under the heading "**Numenius phaeopus.**" These were six in number, to which was added one from the Kermadec Islands. All of these had been shot.

With reference to his first record, that of the specimen shot by S. C. Liardet at the mouth of Wairau River, in 1874, Dr. Oliver has advised me that this is a specimen of **hudsonicus,** but that he had overlooked this identification when writing the book. The Dominion Museum register says of this specimen: "799. 21 December, 1874. Specimen of bird **Numenius femoralis** Peale. Shot by Liardet in Wairau. . . W. T. L. Travers." The label reads: "Purchased from Liardet 25th July, 1874," the specimen probably being collected not long before this date (see Buller's reference below in his paper read on February 10, 1875). Dr. Oliver also kindly informs me that this is the specimen referred to in two references by Buller: "Buller, W. L., Trans. N.Z. Inst., Vol. 7, p. 224, 1875. '**Numenius uropygialis** Gould. The first specimen to be noticed is an example of the Australian whimbrel, obtained a short time since by Mr. Liardet in the Wairau, and presented to the Museum by our vice-president, W. T. L. Travers, Esq., F.L.S.' Buller, W. L., Trans. N.Z. Inst., Vol. 25, p. 60, 1893: '**Numenius uropygialis** Gould. (The Australian whimbrel.) This species must be added to the New Zealand list. A specimen (now in the Colonial Museum) was shot by Mr. S. Liardet in the Wairau district, and was presented by Mr. W. T. L. Travers to the Museum. . . .' Descriptions and measurements follow." Thus the first whimbrel recorded in New Zealand was **N. p. hudsonicus.**

The finding of the bird at Ohiwa was not merely by chance. R. B. Sibson had coached me in looking out for odd whimbrels. This we had done ever since he and P. C. Bull had seen the doubtful one at Puketutu, mentioned above. With the help of Mr. E. G. Turbott, ornithologist at

the Auckland War Memorial Museum, we had studied and compared the skins of the respective species or subspecies. I already knew **N. p. variegatus** very well in the field, so I was prepared to identify **N. p. hudsonicus** should it appear. On this day, June 4, 1949, Mr. P. H. Basley and I had rowed a small boat for about nine miles in the western part of Ohiwa Harbour looking for black-fronted tern **(Chlidonias albistriata)** which had been reported in that area, when we came upon the whimbrel feeding alone at low tide on a firm bank beside the main western channel, and some distance N.-W. of Uretara Island. The bird rose at a much greater distance from us that **N. p. variegatus** would do in our experience. I had my glasses focussed on it and looked for any pale marking on the lower back, but saw none. We followed the bird and put it up several times, always distantly but in plain view, and neither of us could detect any light blaze on back or rump. The bird then became lost to us among the widely scattered feeding godwit. It did not seem to mix closely with the godwit, and was at times hotly pursued by two godwit at once. Although satisfied that we had found **N. p. hudsonicus,** we did not consider that we had enough evidence to report it as a certain identification. The next day, however, June 5, we set forth again, hoping to find the bird and obtain closer and better views. The search was at first fruitless and at high tide we anchored for lunch about 40 yards from a party of 144 godwit resting on a small shellbank. Our bird flew in and settled a few yards beyond the godwit. It was restless and presently rose. This time we had a perfect view of the whole of its upper surface as it was rising, then as it zigzagged to gain height, all the time with its back fully exposed. We both watched it, each with good binoculars, until it had flown right away. There was now no room for doubt. We were fully agreed that there was not a single light feather on it. No light pattern on the upper wing could be seen on this occasion. Had it been **N. tahitiensis** the cinnamon cream upper tail would easily have been noted.

Since this is a winter record, it gives added significance to the reading of the label on the skin of the 1874 bird: "Purchased from Liardet, 25 July, 1874." This bird may well have been taken in winter during or shortly before July.

On a further excursion, P. H. Basley and I found the bird again, presumably the same bird, on December 9, 1949, in the vicinity of a large flock of godwit on the sand area at the Ohiwa Heads. It was very restless and flew wildly about, calling much of the time, but giving us no opportunity to observe colour, though we could plainly see the down-curved bill. We returned on December 12, 1949, with another keen observer, Mr. Bernard Sladden, but the bird again acted restlessly. We were not able to obtain a clear view with our glasses so I used my 30x telescope, fortunately focussing as the bird began a long glide to settle beside the godwit pack. Its back was in view all the way and as it further extended its wings to settle there appeared on them a faint light godwit-like pattern, the upper tail, rump and back showing no light at all. Bent mentions a faint light wing marking of this kind, but Peterson ("A Field Guide to the Eastern Land and Water Birds," p. 90, pl. 25) in his sketch of the flying bird shows only a trace of it. From my experience I would say that in ordinary flight, as depicted by Peterson, the light pattern would not be visible in the field at a distance, but that it would be noticeable when the wings were extended beyond the requirements of ordinary flight, as in the extra effort of settling.

The call notes sounded to me the same as **N. p. variegatus.** Unfortunately, I have little skill in this respect and my companions had not heard the call of **N. p. variegatus.** The call was, therefore, of no value to us for separating the two.

Bent. in his very full account of the life history of **N. p. hudsonicus** lays particular stress on its natural wariness. To this he attributes its survival in America where similar species were slaughtered to extinction or near-extinction. The Ohiwa bird, we had learned to our cost, certainly had this characteristic. Much weary rowing, our athletic youth being

many years past, could almost have convinced us that this wariness was indeed a valuable identification means. Actually, I am sure that there is some value in this charactertistic, as **N. p. variegatus** is without doubt very much more easily approached.

It is to be hoped that there will shortly be further opportunities in this country for other observers to study this fine bird. I cordially thank for assistance with notes and reference, Dr. W. R. B. Oliver, Messrs. E. G. Turbott, R. B. Sibson, P. C. Bull and C. A. Fleming. I am also deeply indebted to Mr. Turbott for a great deal of help with the manuscript.

LANDING ON WEST KING.—I have recently returned from my sixth visit to the Three Kings and at last managed to land and spend five hours on the previously unexplored West King. As I was collecting snails and botanical specimens I did not have time to sit down and look for the different birds. And as is usually the case when moving rapidly through the bush, the bird life shifts away and is not observed. I did, however, see a number of bellbirds and red-fronted parakeets. It always seems to me that the parakeet on the Kings is a smaller bird than the ones on the Poor Knights and on the Alderman Islands. I found only one bellbird's nest, and a hollow tree where a parakeet had nested. The West King is a razor-back. One side is a 600ft. cliff and the other a steep bush-clad slope. Practically the whole of the soft soil on this slope is honey-combed with petrel burrows. I found one young fluttering shearwater but did not have time to investigate many burrows. Judging by the mixed variety of trees on the West King I should think that it would have a big population of land birds in addition to the thousands of petrels nesting there. On the highest point, which is 607 feet high, there is a colony of nesting red-billed gulls. I have never seem them nesting at this height before. The landing and climb up the West King was difficult and can only be undertaken under the most favourable conditions. The red-billed gulls are steadily increasing on the Great King and since the extermination of the goats some years ago, several new colonies can be observed nesting in the grass at the tops of cliffs. The gannets on the Princess Rocks show no difference in number, all available nesting places being occupied. On the South-West King there is a slight increase. Last year I first noticed an increase in gannets on the S.W. King and this year there is a still further increase of about 200 to 300 as far as I could judge. There were very few gannets fishing near the Kings. All the birds appeared to be going to and returning from the north-east so there was apparently little fishing for gannet at the Kings when I was there in January. In fact, from Auckland up to the Three Kings I did not see more than a few dozen gannets.. The only bird life at sea between Auckland and the North Cape were thousands of prion. I saw several flocks in which I counted well over 100 birds. A few fluttering shearwaters and a few Buller shearwaters were also seen, but it was not until I was over 12 miles off the east coast that the two last-named were seen in any quantity. On my return trip, when within a few miles of Auckland harbour two sparrows flew into the cabin and took possession. They hopped around and inspected everything. They stayed aboard for over an hour and it was not until the yacht was moored and I was ready to go ashore that they departed.—Magnus E. Johnson, Auckland.

BIRD TICKS—I would be very interested to see specimens of **Ixodes eudyptidis** the common tick on penguins round the N.Z. coast (little blue, white-flippered and crested). The males are especially desired and these are most likely to be found in the nests and not on the birds. Other bird hosts are cormorant (shag), black-fronted tern and red-billed gull. Specimens may be sent dry or in alcohol and should be addressed to Mr. L. J. Dumbleton, Entomological Research Station, Cawthron Institute, Nelson.—L. J. Dumbleton, Nelson.