

## FURTHER NOTES ON CHARADRIUS LESCHENAUTI.

By R. B. Sibson, Auckland.

The large sand dotterel, also called Geoffroy's sandplover, which several observers watched at Miranda, in the Firth of Thames, during 1947-48 (v. N.Z. Bird Notes, Vol. 3, p. 51) was last reported on 15/2/48. During the ensuing winter, although the stretch of coast which it frequented was visited at least once a month by various members of the O.S.N.Z. who were familiar with the bird, it could not be found. It is, of course, possible that it was overlooked, though I think this unlikely. It seems reasonable, therefore, to suppose that soon after it was last seen, in common with other Arctic waders, it moved northwards towards its Asiatic breeding grounds.

However, by 22/10/48, after an interval of eight months, either the same bird or another had reappeared in the same locality. Its behaviour and the circumstances in which it was found strongly suggest that it was a recently arrived migrant. The morning tide had been going out for three hours, and a party of nine wrybills (*Anarhynchus frontalis*) was feeding well down the foreshore; but the large sand dotterel was still resting on a dry shellbank, the breeding ground of several pairs of banded dotterels (*C. bicinctus*) which, though aggressively territorial amongst themselves, paid no heed to the stranger. With it—and this, I think, is significant—was a stint (*Calidris ruficollis*), a juvenile, to judge by its colourless plumage. Between the two birds there had obviously sprung up some bond of companionship, so that wherever the dotterel went, the stint most faithfully went also and settled close beside it. Once they performed together a darting zig-zag flight over the now-exposed flats and, having alighted, fed eagerly side by side. I could not help recalling the curious and well-known association between golden plover (*Pluvialis apricaria*) and dunlin (*Calidris alpina*) which has earned for the dunlin the name of plover's page. The stint had attached itself to the dotterel rather than the dotterel to the stint. Had the two travelled a long way together and, being strangers in a foreign land, welcomed one another's company? But the attachment was short-lived, for by 7/11/48 a second stint had arrived; and what are believed to be the same two stints stayed together for more than a year, being recorded even in winter. They were still together on 24/12/49.

For some months after 22/10/48 the large sand dotterel frequented the same stretch of coast, casually joining parties of wrybills or banded dotterels, but often to be found solitary. On 6/2/49 it was closely watched by several ornithologists from the Pacific Science Congress, which was then taking place in Auckland. It was very satisfactory to have the identification confirmed by Dr. D. L. Serventy, who knows the species well in Western Australia. On 6/3/49, when it was last seen, it was still a pale bird with no trace of breeding colour. On this occasion I was able to point it out to Mr. D. A. Urquhart, who is now convinced that the puzzling dotterel which he saw at Karaka, in Manukau Harbour, in late winter, 1947, and on which he had made careful notes, was a bird of this species. (N.Z. Bird Notes, Vol. 3, p. 95.)

During the winter of 1949 the Miranda coast was under regular observation and again no large sand dotterel was recorded. Then on 15/10/49, Messrs. H. R. McKenzie and P. A. S. Stein found two together. What was especially noteworthy was that one of these was an adult in worn breeding plumage, showing an almost complete collar of a rich tawny or gingerish colour. The shade of the legs was blue-grey. On 21/10/49 this bird was shown to me. It was obvious that the moult out of breeding plumage was proceeding apace. On either side of its chest it now showed a bright tawny tab of feathering, but the collar was distinctly broken in the middle. On 30/10/49 and 8/11/49 it was seen again and traces of breeding colour were still visible.

The two birds were not seen together again after the first occasion, but one continued to haunt the Miranda beaches at least till 26/2/50. It is believed that the other flew over the intervening hills to Manukau Harbour where it settled down on the wader-thronged flats of Karaka; for there, on 18/12/49, one was located by Mr. D. A. Urquhart. Subsequently he noted it several times till 7/4/50, when it was still a pale bird with no trace of breeding dress.

The winter of 1950 passed without there being any further records of *C. leschenaulti*. Then on 4/11/50 two were again located on the Miranda coast. One of these, as reported by Mr. H. Ross McKenzie, was clearly an adult in fading plumage, but still with reddish collar tabs. As in the previous summer, they did not stay together, but a single bird was seen on three occasions, lastly on 10/2/51.

After a lapse of six months, on 26/8/51, H. R. McKenzie and I located one, a very pale bird, with three red-breasted dotterels (*C. obscurus*) on a Miranda beach which *C. leschenaulti* has often favoured in the past. In our experience this is rather a silent species. The call of this bird was heard distinctly and recorded as a soft "treep" slowly repeated three or four times; quite distinct from any call of banded or red-breasted dotterel with which I am familiar. What was probably the same bird was found in mid-December some four miles away, consorting with Pacific golden plover in a ploughed field. Its last appearance was on 13/1/52, when, in company with banded dotterels, four stints and a curlew sandpiper, it was haunting one of the shallow, fresh-water pools which prove so attractive to small waders on the Miranda coast.

To bring the story up-to-date, on 28/9/52 several Auckland and Clevedon members of the O.S.N.Z. had close views under most favourable conditions of a large sand dotterel on the identical strip of beach where the species has now reappeared in spring for six successive years. This was clearly an adult in worn plumage. Its orange neckband, though narrowing in the middle, was not severed. The legs were noted as grey with a hint of green. It was not molested by the numerous banded dotterels which were breeding nearby. When last seen, near Miranda Creek on 7/12/52, it was on the edge of a great concourse of waders which included eleven species.

Hindwood (Emu 49, p. 7) has drawn attention to the varying descriptions of the colour of the legs of *C. leschenaulti*. In October, 1949, McKenzie and Stein noted the legs of a moulting adult as blue-grey. When in August, 1951, McKenzie and I watched a pale (? immature) bird, the legs from the front appeared as grey-blue to one observer, while to the other from the side they seemed "brownish green." The truth may be that in the field the legs are of a somewhat indeterminate shade, and the observer's description depends on the brightness of the light and the angle of observation.

Although the large sand dotterel has not yet been proved to remain in New Zealand throughout the winter, there is strong presumptive evidence that it may do so. The first bird of the species ever to be recorded in New Zealand was found on Aug. 20th, a suspiciously early, though not impossibly early date for a far-travelling migrant from northern Asia. In the same category must be placed the pale bird which was found at Miranda on 26/8/51. If we could be quite certain that Urquhart's strange dotterel of 19/7/47 was *C. leschenaulti* that would provide conclusive evidence of wintering. Lastly, his record of a pale bird in April suggests that it was an immature non-migrating non-breeder. The dates when the large sand dotterel has last been seen in successive summers at Miranda seem to indicate that it moves northwards early.

# SUMMARY OF APPEARANCES OF CHARADRIUS LESCHENULTI.

Season.	Locality.	Dates.	Remarks
1943-44	Manukau. Puke-tutu causeway	20 Aug. and 5 Sept.	With wrybills. Not seen later.
1945-46	Manukau. Puhinui	30 Sept. and 10 Oct.	Alone on fringe of big pack of godwits. Not seen again.
1947-48	(a) Manukau, Kāraka (b) Firth of Thames. Miranda Coast.	19 July—6 Sept. 20 Dec.—15 Feb.	Identity of this bird now believed certain. (D.A.U.) Mainly in association with banded dotterels.
1948-49	Ditto	22 Oct.—6 Mar.	Usually associating with wrybills or banded dotterels.
1949-50	(a) Ditto  (b) Manukau. Kāraka.	15 Oct. (2)—26 Feb (1)  18 Dec.—7 Apr.	The two separated, only one, a moulting adult being seen subsequently. Possibly the second Miranda bird.
1950-51	Firth of Thames. Miranda coast	11 Nov. (2)—10 Feb. (1)	The two again separated. First with three red-breasted dotterels. Later once located on arable with Pacific golden plover.
1951-51	Ditto	26 Aug.—13 Jan.	
1952-53	Ditto	28 Sept.—7 Dec.	An adult moulting out of breeding plumage.

## LITTLE WHIMBREL AT NAPIER.

By D. H. Brathwaite, Napier.

To my previous account (Notornis, Vol. 5, p. 117) of a bird seen at Napier and identified as the little whimbrel (*Numenius minutus*) I am able to add further details. On October 26, 1952, Mr. G. Crawford and I saw what was presumably the same bird on the margin of a small marshy pool, about a quarter of a mile from the place where previously seen. The light was less favourable this time, but the striped crown was clearly to be seen. It was possible to observe the bird against a background of water and the decurved bill could also be seen, confirming my previous impression. When the bird flew away it was again seen to have no perceptible pattern.

On Sunday, April 12, 1953, in company with Miss C. Saxby, of Napier, I saw a smallish wader alight in a pool. We were able to approach to within twenty yards or so and watch the bird through binoculars. It was facing away from us, but, as it turned its head the striped crown and decurved, slender bill, came into view and I realized that it was a little whimbrel, the third occurrence within ten months.

So far as I can ascertain, there are only two waders whose descriptions fit the bird seen, these being the little whimbrel (*Numenius minutus*) and the Eskimo curlew (*Numenius borealis*). As the latter appears to be so rare as to be possibly extinct, its occurrence in New Zealand is hardly to be expected, but in any case descriptions of its call notes do not fit those heard from the bird being discussed. Stead (1923, p. 492) remarked of the little whimbrel that "It is very like a golden plover in its winter plumage, and, excepting for its larger size and its longer and curved bill, might easily be mistaken for that bird at a distance." I was not, at first, in agreement with this statement, but the bird seen in April was standing in rather a hunched attitude, and its resemblance to a golden plover was so striking that until I saw the striped crown and curved bill I thought it was that species, one of which had been seen about half an hour earlier.

The little whimbrel has previously been recorded in New Zealand on only four occasions, all at Lake Ellesmere. One of these was in June (1900, two birds) and the other three in March (1921, 1922 and 1925). It is interesting that, after a lapse of twenty-seven years, the species should be seen three times within one year.

## REFERENCE.

Stead, 1923.—Trans. N.Z. Inst., Vol. 54, pp. 490-495.