

ABNORMAL BLACK-TAILED GODWIT (*L. limosa*) IN THE FIRTH OF THAMES

By R. B. SIBSON

The Black-tailed Godwit which I am going to describe has been present on the Miranda coast of the Firth of Thames for about four years. It is abnormal because it assumes breeding plumage at the wrong season, i.e. in the New Zealand spring, and moults into grey winter dress towards the end of summer when its plumage should be reddening. It has now done this for four successive years. In full breeding dress it appears to be a perfect male specimen of the Asiatic Black-tailed Godwit (*melanuroides*), a race which has a wide, though thin, coastal distribution in Australia but which has not so far been observed in New Zealand. Black-tailed Godwits hitherto recorded in New Zealand have been of the American race, *haemastica*, usually known as the Hudsonian Godwit. However, the possibility that *melanuroides* might occur here has not been overlooked. When I was reporting a Hudsonian Godwit seen in Manukau in 1949 (*Notornis* 3, p. 199) I wrote that it should not 'be assumed that any black-tailed godwits seen in New Zealand will be of the comparatively short-legged American race'.

On 30/8/52 Miss N. Macdonald, Mr J. C. Davenport and I were examining a flock of waders at the mouth of Pukorokoro Creek at Miranda, when we noticed a godwit in breeding plumage which appeared to be bright and fresh. It stood out as a conspicuous red godwit among some two hundred plain wintering Bartails (*L. lapponica*). When the flock took wing our suspicion that the 'odd' godwit had a black-tipped tail was justified. The behaviour of the flock in the air could not have been more accommodating. Sometimes the 'blacktail' was in the lead, and often it was pursued by different 'bartails' as being a bird with a difference, which it certainly was; for besides the rich red of the body and the black and white of the tail, a white bar showed very distinctly in the wing. As the flock circled directly overhead J.C.D. and I were surprised to note that the underwing was a gleaming white with a thin dark edging fore and aft. Four months before in the Manukau Harbour we had closely watched a Hudsonian Godwit, not in breeding plumage, and had been especially struck by the dark axillaries and underwing which were visible in flight (*Notornis* 5, p. 125). We had at first assumed that the Miranda 'blacktail' was a Hudsonian Godwit but as a result of seeing its very white underwing we began to have doubts. Since Asiatic Black-tailed (*melanuroides*) and Hudsonian (*haemastica*) Godwits are of about the same size, the colour of the underwing is an important diagnostic feature. Of *haemastica*, Bent says 'the axillars are jet-black and the lining of the wing is black'; but of *melanuroides* Mathews (*Birds of Australia* 3, p. 188) writes 'axillaries and underwing coverts pure white, the lesser coverts round the margin of the wing dark brown or blackish'. In 1954 I ventured to write to Mr R. T. Peterson and suggest that he should do a painting of the Hudsonian Godwit in flight, showing the underwing. Some months later I received a very courteous reply in which Mr Peterson made this very interesting remark: 'Last year (1954) in Alaska, at the edge of the Bering Sea I found the wing-lining a very useful field-mark when four godwits appeared in a place where neither Hudsonian nor Asiatic Black-tailed Godwit should be. The wing-linings were black and therefore the Asiatic Black-tailed Godwit was eliminated'. The dark axillaries and wing-linings may be seen in specimens of *haemastica* in the Canterbury and Dominion Museums.

Since this somewhat enigmatic godwit was first found at Miranda in August 1952, it has been recorded there on numerous occasions both in summer and winter. It was still in fine plumage on 7/12/52 when Mr H. R. McKenzie and I watched it for some time resting among other waders. I next saw it on 1/3/53 and made this entry in my notebook: 'A big flock of godwits came on to the Miranda lagoon. Among them was the Black-tailed Godwit, now in worn breeding plumage. As far as I could see the underwing was white right to the body. The legs reached a little beyond the tail in flight.' During the winter of 1953 it escaped notice, but on 26/10/53 it was again

found by H. R. McKenzie, who reported that it was 'very red'. On 24/11/53 and 29/11/53 I was able to watch it under most favourable conditions and to make more detailed notes on its superb nuptial dress than I had been able to make before. In these notes I wrote: 'The red of the neck and chest goes up more or less uniformly over the head and does not appear to be as streaked as in paintings of *haemastica* by Allan Brooks (*Book of Birds* 1, 272) and Don Eckelberry (*Audubon Water Bird Guide*, Pl. 34); the underwing is clear white down to the junction with the body; the lower belly and the feathers round the vent are white, whereas Brooks and Eckelberry show them as red in *haemastica*; between this white area and the red of the belly is an area of black and white barring, very bold; the bird has not a proper eyestripe but a dab of white in front of and above the eye; the back and upper wing surfaces are richly mottled, the feathers having black centres and brown edges; in flight the white wing-bar is very conspicuous; the bird is about the size of a male bartail but its legs may be a little longer.' The illustration of *melanuiroides* by Kuroda (*Birds in Life Colours* 3, Pl. 113) is so accurate a likeness that it is difficult to conceive that this Miranda godwit can belong to any other race of *Limosa limosa*.

On 3/1/54 it was closely watched through powerful glasses by Miss N. Macdonald, Mr Geoffrey Allen, a visiting ornithologist from Malaya, and myself. G.A. was familiar with *melanuiroides* in Malaya in winter plumage but had never seen one gorgeously arrayed like this bird. N.M., with a lady's eye for colour, drew our attention to the orange quality of the red. When next I saw it on 19/4/54 it was in winter plumage. Its white underwing was distinctly seen as it rose in flight among Bartails.

As winter passed into spring this aberrant godwit again assumed nuptial dress; so that when in company with Mr and Mrs J. Prickett and Miss Macdonald, I saw it next on 27/12/54, its vivid colouring made it stand out in a host of sombrely plumaged Knots and Bartails. The gleaming white of the underwing was again noted. With the approach of autumn it did not leave with the other adult arctic waders; for any urge to migrate must have been lost, as once again it moulted into eclipse plumage. On 28/5/55 I had an excellent view of it in flight with many wintering Knots and Bartails. On 12/6/55 J.C.D. and I watched it feeding at the mouth of the Miranda creek, first among Stilts and then among Knots. We noticed that in its winter plumage the smooth grey-brown of the back and upper wing-surface was quite distinct from the speckled feathering of the Bartails. H.R.McK. reported it on 26/6/55, when a census of waders wintering in the Firth of Thames was taken; and two months later on 25/8/55 he saw in the same place a godwit unnaturally red for the time of year, which he believed was the 'Blacktail' once again in nuptial dress. Among the host of arctic waders which frequented the Miranda coast from mid-September onwards, it escaped notice till the New Year; but on 2/1/56 an exceptionally high tide of 11ft 6in caused a great concentration of godwits and other waders on the Miranda lagoon. Here Mr and Mrs J. Prickett, J.C.D. and I were able again to watch it closely. It was in fine breeding plumage, perhaps showing slight signs of wear. The orange tone of the feathering on the head and neck was especially noticed; the crown was darker; there was an aura of gold also in the brown of the richly mottled dorsal feathers. Mrs Prickett nicknamed it 'Rusty'. Later on consulting Mayr's *Birds of the South West Pacific* under the description of *melanuiroides* (p. 40), I was interested to read 'Much rust colour on head, back and breast'. On 15/1/56 H.R.McK. was able to show it to A. C. Hipwell.

It is now three-and-a-half years since this remarkable godwit was discovered at Miranda; and as this discovery was made in August, it is likely that the bird had already then been in New Zealand for nearly a year. For four successive southern summers it has worn between August and February what appears to be the breeding dress of a perfect adult, only to lose this colouring just when a normal godwit is acquiring it. Unless the mistiming in its breeding mechanism adjusts itself—and there is no sign of this at present—it is unlikely that this Black-tailed Godwit will feel any urge to migrate and it may well prolong its stay on the Miranda coast indefinitely.