

ASIATIC AND AMERICAN BLACK-TAILED GODWITS IN MANUKAU

By R. B. SIBSON

On 2/11/58 accompanied by Tim Ledgard and Peter Law, I had very satisfactory views of an American Black-tailed or Hudsonian Godwit (*Limosa haemastica*) both in flight and standing near one of the pools on the partially reclaimed Puketutu flats. On the ground it obligingly kept near the edge of a big gathering of Knots and Bar-tailed Godwits, and three or four times raised its wings to reveal the dark underlining and black axillaries.

Some eleven inches of rain spread over December and January freshened the pools, so that when I revisited the once tidal flats near Puketutu on 2/2/59, there were many acres of shallow water which provided perfect conditions for waders. After a quick glimpse around, I made my way towards one of the larger pools in which many Pied Stilts were feeding and beside which a flock of godwits was resting. When the godwits rose at my approach, I noticed among them a single black-tailed godwit with a very conspicuous white alar bar and a white underwing which did not fit the description of the bird seen in November. Fortunately the flock quickly settled not far away and I was able to approach again and to locate on the edge of the flock a small, trim, grayish godwit which looked especially dusky on the breast. I flushed the flock deliberately, keeping my glasses on this bird, which from the duskiness of its underwing, the sootiness of its axillaries and the faintness of its alar bar, was obviously an Hudsonian Godwit, almost certainly the same bird as seen on 2/11/58. The flock resettled across the pool. I was still not quite convinced that there were two distinct forms of black-tailed godwit attached to the flock of Bar-tails, as I had not been able to see the two at once and there is always the chance that the light has been playing tricks.

I decided, therefore, to take a stroll to another part of the reclaimed area and to return after the birds had had time to quieten down. This simple plan worked very well. When I returned some twenty minutes later a single gray-breasted godwit — both forms of black-tailed godwits in non-breeding dress usually have noticeably gray breasts — was standing among Pied Stilts in open water. The Stilts were not timid and flew just a few yards, taking the black-tailed godwit with them. But the flight was long enough for me to see that this godwit did indeed have the conspicuous wing-bar and white underwing of the Asiatic form (*L. melanuroides*), which has not previously been recorded from Manukau Harbour.

Leaving this godwit, whose identity was now satisfactorily proved, among the Stilts, I turned my attention to the resting flock; and when they rose, it was not difficult to spot among them the Hudsonian Godwit with its dark axillaries. From its small size I judged it to be a male.

This is the first time that the two forms of black-tailed godwit

which visit New Zealand have been seen in close proximity. They showed no sign of associating together, though the flock of Bar-tails to which they were attached was not a big one. In fact the Asiatic Black-tailed Godwit readily left the Bar-tails and rested among Pied Stilts, an association which has been noted on several occasions in recent years in the Firth of Thames.

Three days later on a brief visit in the evening, Peter Skegg and I found the same two birds at the same pool. The Asiatic Black-tail was again standing in shallow water among scattered Stilts. Nearby on a shelly spit was a group of Bar-tails; and when we put them up, it was quite easy to discern among them the Hudsonian Godwit, as it showed the characteristic pattern of its dark underwing. Meanwhile the Asiatic Black-tail was still resting unperturbed among the Stilts. Just to make sure, we walked it up and noted the differences, which for purposes of field identification are entirely in the wing.

Six weeks later on 15/3/59, I was able to show the Asiatic Black-tailed Godwit to Mrs. Avis Acres when she was sketching waders near the same pool. Once again it stayed quietly behind among the Stilts after all other godwits had flown away, so that we were able to study it in good light at a distance of little more than a chain. On 18/4/58 Julian Bell and I watched it for some time in the evening, after it had temporarily deserted a big pack of Bar-tails to settle among Stilts.

About this time another Asiatic Black-tailed Godwit, or, as seems more likely, a pair, appeared at the same pools. On 25/4/59 not only was an Hudsonian Godwit present; but also first a single Asiatic Black-tail was watched in flight and seen to settle among Stilts, and then a pair flew past from a different direction and were checked on the ground. These birds were watched at a distance of less than fifty yards by Mrs. L. Fooks, Miss M. C. R. McIntyre, Miss N. Macdonald, A. C. Hipwell, N. M. Gleeson and myself, all Auckland members of the O.S.N.Z.

On the wet squally afternoon of 29/4/59 under appalling conditions Mr. E. G. Turbott and I were lucky to find the two Asiatic Blacktails which keep very much together. They flew in to join hundreds of Stilts and Bartails which were feeding eagerly on an oozing patch of cotula in the lee of close-growing mangroves. Since they showed no real sign of the development of red nuptial dress, it could be assumed that they were immature non-breeders and that they would be staying in New Zealand over the winter.

This forecast was justified. On 13/5/59 Peter Skegg and I spent part of the afternoon examining a variety of waders near Puketutu Island. Two separate Hudsonian Godwits had already been located, but not together, among different groups of Bar-tails, when we noticed among some Stilts standing in shallow water four trim godwits which had the grayish appearance of 'black-tails.' When flushed they flew along the shore together, all four showing the characteristic markings, as we expected not of Hudsonian but of Asiatic Black-tailed Godwits. Although this race of *Limosa limosa* is not included in the 1953 Checklist, recent observations in the Firth of Thames and Manukau Harbour may indicate that it is reaching New Zealand in increasing numbers.