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## BROAD-BILLED SANDPIPER IN THE FIRTH OF THAMES; A NEW BIRD FOR NEW ZEALAND

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For some years Auckland ornithologists have known that when the Wrybills (*Anarhynchus frontalis*) return to the north from their breeding grounds in the South Island, their flocks often serve as decoys to any of the smaller arctic waders which may be in the vicinity. The northward movement of Wrybills is in full swing before the end of the year, so that the flocks in the north usually build up quickly in early January. For an hour or two either side of full tide the flocks of resting Wrybills are often compact and easily approached; and the value of making a slow and critical scrutiny of them was once again proved on 1/1/60, when a group of schoolboys, led by T. G. Ledgard, found what proved to be a Large Sand Dotterel (*C. leschenaulti*) attached to a gathering of about 380 Wrybills. At this time there were exceptionally big tides and the Wrybills had flown over the seawall at Kairito Creek, between Miranda and Waitakaruru, to settle in a recently ploughed and cultivated paddock in which turnips were just beginning to come up. During these big tides, the paddock was visited by a variety of the larger waders and numerous Banded Dotterels (*C. binnickii*) were usually feeding there.

When we visited this paddock on 5/1/60, accompanied by Peter Skegg and Wayne Maxwell, we quickly found the Wrybills, which formed a fairly compact flock of about 850 birds, a big increase since January 1st. The Large Sand Dotterel was standing on the edge of the flock, but withdrew to the centre and sank from view in a hollow, surrounded by literally hundreds of Wrybills. In the course of moving round to obtain a further view, we noted four Curlew Sandpipers (*C. testacea*), one of which, for the time of the year, was showing an unusual amount of red; and while we were still searching for the Large Sand Dotterel, one of us noticed among the clods, a mere fifteen yards away, a brown-gray and white wader, which was smaller in the body and shorter in the leg than any of the nearby Wrybills. It was dozing with its head tucked under its wing. Its mantle was richly stippled and, as it was sideways on, some gray mottling was showing on the side of the chest. An examination of its legs revealed that they were rather short and distinctly green, not a bright green, but a dull green; certainly not the black of the legs of a Red-necked Stint (*C. ruficollis*) which at first this bird was assumed to be. By now H.R.McK. had brought his telescope to bear and was able to confirm the colour of the legs. But the bird remained 'dead to the world.' When at length it did stir, we were surprised by the length and

shape of its bill and by the striped appearance of its head. Neither of us had ever seen a small wader of such proportions. The bill was clearly longer than that of a Wrybill and was suggestive of the bill of a Curlew Sandpiper; but instead of steadily decurving along its whole length, it dipped downward only near the tip. For so small a bird the bill looked perhaps a little ponderous (v. plates 38-40).

Even at a hasty glance it was obvious that the feathering of the head was unusually streaked. Detailed notes were taken of these markings. The middle of the crown was occupied by a dark gray panel which narrowed towards the bill. Along either side of this panel was a relatively broad light stripe also narrowing as it came forwards but widening at the very front where it was also palest, so that on either side of the bill there appeared to be a round white patch — a conspicuous feature. Under the broad light stripe was a gray stripe; and beneath this a faint light superciliary stripe. The streaky effect was completed by a dark line running through the eye and along the lores. The hindneck was richly stippled; the feathers of the back and mantle were grayish-brown with conspicuous whitish margins. Throat and underparts were white, except for some grayish mottling on the side of the chest. A dark line showed along the edge of the wing in the primaries.

With its long bill (c. 1½ ins.), rather short legs and striped crown, the bird gave the impression of a small grayish snipe, particularly when it moved. Two days before we had been closely watching eight Red-necked Stints at Karaka and now to corroborate further our identification of this 'new' wader as a Broad-billed Sandpiper (*Limicola falcinellus sibirica*), we were able to find a single Red-necked Stint on the edge of the Wrybills and to make an on-the-spot comparison of bill-length and leg-colour.

The following table of average measurements in millimetres taken from several authoritative sources reveals something of the distinctiveness of the Broad-billed Sandpiper.

		Wing	Tarsus	Bill
Red-necked Stint	----	98	19	19
Broad-billed Sandpiper	----	107	23	33
Curlew Sandpiper	----	128	30	37
Wrybill	----	117	29	29

When the flock rose, we were quite unable to follow the flight of the Broad-billed Sandpiper among so many whirring wings, so we obtained no notes of its appearance in the air.

On 30/1/60 the Broad-billed Sandpiper was again located in the turnip field alongside Kairito Creek, where it was watched for about an hour by Mr. and Mrs. J. Prickett, R. H. Sibson and R.B.S. An 11ft. 6in. tide forced most of waders off the tidal flats and a 'mixed-bag' — eleven species were ultimately counted — had flown over the sea-wall to occupy the barer parts of the paddock. After the larger waders had been gently persuaded to depart, about a thousand Wrybills, some

Banded Dotterels and a few of the smaller arctic waders were left in possession of the bare patches. The Broad-billed Sandpiper was soon detected as it moved among an outlying group of Wrybills. Then a passing Harrier scared the Wrybills, which rose taking the other small waders with them. However, they returned immediately. This time the search for the Broad-billed Sandpiper took longer, as it was squatting in a hollow with its bill tucked under its scapulars and little visible except its conspicuously striped crown. It seemed intent on dozing, as were many of the Wrybills near it, though some were busily preening.

As we altered our line of approach it would rise to its feet and move a few yards, glancing over its shoulder. In the course of its short walks, it paused near some of the nine Curlew Sandpipers which were scattered among the Wrybills and also near the Large Sand Dotterel and one of the two Red-necked Stints which were present. Thus we had excellent opportunities of seeing what a uniquely proportioned bird it was. When it reached a hollow at what it considered a safe distance, it took a brief look round, squatted and resumed the attitude of sleep. Though it was less than a chain away, we might have difficulty in finding it again if we took our eyes off the spot. It was evidently in congenial company, for at this season Wrybills spend a lot of time 'hole-squatting.' Recently Mr. and Mrs. Prickett had noticed that many Wrybills were squatting in the hoof-prints which a horse had left in the sands of Kaipara.

Eventually it flew a short distance with a Curlew Sandpiper. As it rose it trilled 'pirrr.' Back, rump and central tail feathers appeared dark brown or almost black and the outer tail feathers whitish.

On 1/3/60 it was closely watched by Mr. D. A. Urquhart and H.R.McK. It was more active than before and its movements were elegant and graceful. One additional note was made on the pattern of its plumage. A deep band of fine gray speckling ran right across the chest, not very prominent, but regular; and linking the mottling previously noted on the sides of the chest.

Once again the information given by Hindwood and Hoskin (*Waders of Sydney* p. 32) has been most helpful. "The Broad-billed Sandpiper," they say, "resembles both the Red-necked Stint and the Curlew Sandpiper, being midway between the two in size and not unlike both when all are in eclipse plumage." They go on to mention its snipe-like appearance; and the salient characteristics in the field which they enumerate, agree with our own observations. Until recent years the Broad-billed Sandpiper was considered one of the rarest of the migrant waders which visit Australia. There was evidently an influx into south-eastern Australia in 1953, when seventeen were noted in January at Botany Bay, Sydney, and fifteen in February at Altona near Melbourne.

The occurrence of a Broad-billed Sandpiper in New Zealand once again proves that an arctic migrant which reaches southern Australia can and may also reach this country and that a thousand extra miles of ocean is not an insurmountable barrier to the strong-flying plovers and sandpipers, however small, which breed in north-eastern Siberia.



[Photo by D. A. Urquhart

XXXVII Large Sand Dotterel (*C. leschenaulti*), a rare visitor from northern Asia (v. p. 233) among Wrybills (*A. frontalis*) in the Firth of Thames, February, 1960. The Wrybills are adults in worn breeding dress.



[Photo by D. A. Urquhart

XXXVIII Large Sand Dotterel (left) and Broad-billed Sandpiper (***Limicola falcinellus***) (right) — note the striped crown — among Wrybills in the Firth of Thames (v. p. 234).



[Photo by D. A. Urquhart

XXXIX Curlew Sandpiper (*C. ferruginea*) and Broad-billed Sandpiper among moulting Wrybills resting in a turnip field, recently reclaimed from salt-marsh. The considerable difference in size between these two sandpipers is clearly shown (v. p. 235).



[Photo by D. A. Urquhart

XL (a) & (b) The first Broad-billed Sandpiper to be discovered in New Zealand (v. p. 234). Note the robust bill dipping towards the tip. This distinctive snipe-like sandpiper is a little bigger than a Red-necked Stint (*C. ruficollis*).