

A Ruff in Southland

A Ruff (*Philomachus pugnax*) was present on a freshwater bog behind Colac Bay, Southland, between 9 December 1984 and 16 March 1985. The first report of a Ruff in New Zealand (Mackenzie & McKenzie 1965) was not accepted by the Checklist Committee (Kinsky 1970). Up to two Ruffs were present at Lake Ellesmere, Canterbury, during the period of the Southland sightings (Harrison *et al.* 1985; John Fennell, pers. comm.), and so at least three Ruffs were in New Zealand during the summer of 1984-85.

The "Henderson Extension" of Lake George Wildlife Management Reserve, Colac Bay (see Miskelly *et al.* this issue) was visited by a number of observers between 9 December 1984 and 22 March 1985. A large unidentified sandpiper was first seen by WJC and seven other Southland OSNZ members on 9 December. Subsequent sightings were made on 11 December (WJC) and 20 January (WJC & L. M. Cooper) before the bird's identity was confirmed on 16 March (WJC, CMM & G.J. Eller).

Observations were made as close as 15 m, but usually at 20-30 m, with 20X telescope and 8X binoculars. The following description is based on notes taken on all four dates.

Although generally solitary, the Ruff was seen among feeding stilts (*Himantopus himantopus*) on 16 March and flew to join an Asiatic Black-tailed Godwit (*Limosa limosa melanuroides*) when flushed. It was always alert and was not seen feeding. The bird was about half the size of the stilts and godwit and of similar size to a Knot (*Calidris canutus*). Indirect comparisons were made on 16 March with a Pectoral Sandpiper (*C. melanotos*), which was observed among stilts 5 minutes after the Ruff had flown off.

The Ruff had the appearance of a large calidrine sandpiper, with long legs, slender neck and comparatively small head. The bill was shorter in relation to the head than in *C. melanotos*, though of similar shape, and was dark with a yellowish base. The bird had no obvious markings on the head, although it had a faint supercilium and fine streaking on the crown. The face and throat were yellowish white. The back feathers were brown with buff edges, giving a scaled appearance. The underparts were whitish buff but with more buff on the upper breast, where a faint gorget was formed by dark feather shafts.

The wings and tail were of similar length when the bird was standing. The legs were long and yellowish, but their length could not be estimated because the bird was always standing in shallow water.

In flight, the Ruff showed a dark rump and tail, conspicuous white lateral tail-coverts, and a narrow white wingbar. The underwing was white, and the legs extended beyond the tail. Its flight was fast and level.

The short, sturdy bill and the lack of a pale blaze on the rump or lower back distinguished this bird from the *Tringa* sandpipers. Upland Sandpiper (*Bartramia longicauda*) was discounted because of the straight bill, short tail, and white underwing (cf. heavily barred in *Bartramia*). The similarly sized knots, *C. canutus* and *C. tenuirostris*, were eliminated owing to their bulkier, short-necked appearance and their rump pattern.

Smaller species with which a Ruff might be confused were discounted for the following reasons apart from size: Buff-breasted Sandpiper (*Tryngites subruficollis*) because of the longer bill, whitish underparts and white sides to rump; Sharp-tailed Sandpiper (*C. acuminata*) because of the long, yellowish legs, different proportions of head and bill, and the absence of a rufous cap. Compared with the Pectoral Sandpiper, the Ruff was larger and more upright with a comparatively shorter bill. Also, the gorget on the breast was much paler on the Ruff, being formed only by feather shafts.

This bird was probably a juvenile because it had a yellowish rather than white fore-face, the latter being typical of adults (Cramp & Simmons 1983). By the yellowish base to its bill, the bird may have been a male.

Ruff breed in northern Asia and Europe, mainly migrating to India and eastern Africa. As a few are recorded from Australia in most summers (Blakers *et al.* 1984), more New Zealand records are to be expected.

We thank John Fennell and Paul Sagar for criticising this note.

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Pursuit Diving by Northern Giant Petrels at the Chatham Islands

On 29 November 1984, while we were working on the west coast of South East Island, we saw a Northern Giant Petrel (*Macronectes halli*) on the sea surface 80-100 metres offshore struggling with a long (60-70 cm) animate object. Given a flat sea, excellent weather conditions and an elevated viewing position some 150 metres a.s.l., we were able to follow the contest fairly well with binoculars. A second giant petrel was also on the surface nearby, and the activity attracted a Southern Great Skua (*Stercorarius skua lonnbergi*), Black-backed Gull (*Larus dominicanus*) and Sooty Shearwater (*Puffinus griseus*).

The giant petrel had great difficulty retaining the animal and, in an apparent attempt to lift it completely clear of the water, beat its wings on several occasions. When it lost its hold on the animal and it 'sank' — we were not sure whether it actively swam away or merely sank when released — the giant petrel dived after it from the surface and completely disappeared underwater. We could see the bird make several beats with half-folded wings to propel itself underwater, and we estimated that it went down about 2 metres to retrieve the animal. We are unable to see whether it used its feet.