

SUSPECTED COMMON SANDPIPER NEAR NEW PLYMOUTH

On the afternoon of 24/10/64, while W.J.P., R.W.M., and B. J. Tucker were taking part in a Beach Patrol during the Labour Week-end Study Course, about one mile south of Paritutu, New Plymouth, a small unusual wader was seen. It appeared to be a species of sandpiper, but could not be identified. At this point the coastline is very rugged, with steep cliffs and a rocky beach. The weather was dull and overcast. Strong sea-breezes laden with salt spray and dark rocky backgrounds produced conditions which were unsuitable for really accurate observation of details.

On the next day the same three observers, together with Miss M. Johnston and D.V.M. hopefully returned about 10 a.m. to the same stretch of coast and quickly located the unknown wader at the mouth of a small stream. The weather had improved but still left much to be desired. A strong nor-wester was blowing, but the light was good. When first seen the sandpiper was flying from a small rocky freshwater lagoon on the beach upstream to a dune pond about fifty yards inland. When flushed it flew back to its previous haunt. By a more stealthy approach through lupins, we were able to gain a position within twenty yards of the bird and from this vantage point to watch it under favourable conditions for the greater part of an hour, as it fed in shallow water along the edge of the lagoon, which it seemed reluctant to leave. Occasionally it would flit off upstream to the dune pond or rest on the coastal rocks further on; but it was easily retrieved by one of us whenever it made these short excursions.

It was an active wader of typical sandpiper size (D.V.M.). Both W.J.P. and R.W.M. thought it about the size and length of a Banded Dotterel (*C. bicinctus*); but much more slender in shape (R.W.M.) or more graceful in general body contours (W.J.P.). The bill was about an inch long, straight, narrow and dark brown or black. To two of us the legs appeared slightly larger than those of a Banded Dotterel; but D.V.M. thought they were comparatively short and noted their colour as yellowish-green.

At first sight the plumage appeared to be of only two colours: the upperparts from head to tail being a flat even light-grey-fawn (W.J.P.), plain grey-fawn (R.W.M.) or light even greyish-brown (D.V.M.), and the underparts clean pale grey or off-white. The greyish-brown of the upperparts extended down past the bend of the wing, but gradually faded out, leaving the breast white. The colours of the upperparts and underparts were distinct and did not merge. The eye was dark and through the eye was a slightly darker line. The folded wing showed a darker leading edge; but in flight a conspicuous white bar became visible from above and below, running from the body to near the wing-tip, about 1/3" wide and nearer the trailing edge of the wing (W.J.P.). Seen in flight from behind, the 'sandpiper' showed much white; for beside the white wing-bar, the edge of the outer tail-feathers was white. The wing beats were rapid and the flight swift, low, straight without undulations, with the wings sometimes curiously bowed in frequent glides. The wings did not beat much above horizontal but the down-beat was quite deep.

Its stance and movements distinguished it from other sandpipers seen in New Zealand. It often stood with tail and back sloping upwards; and it was most noticeable that that tip of the tail was about the same level as the top of the head. The posterior was held high with

a continual bobbing of the tail (D.V.M.); and the flicking of the tail and back upwards continued whether the bird was standing or moving (R.W.M.). It would feed, often running, amongst the stones at the edge of the lagoon or along the sandy border of the dune pond. Once it explored the timber of a big log heap in the lower stream bed. No calls were audible above the wind. The arrival of some children and a dog put an end to our observations.

From both its appearance and behaviour, and after consulting many books, we are convinced that our unknown wader must have been a Common Sandpiper (*Tringa hypoleucos*).

— W. J. PENGELLY

— R. W. MACDONALD

— D. V. MERTON

[This composite description is based on three separate accounts. Each of the three authors submitted his own story of the Paritutu sandpiper.—Ed.]



PROBABLE SIGHTING OF A RUFF

At Karaka on the the Manukau Harbour on 11/4/64 a bird which we are satisfied was a Ruff (*Philomachus pugnax*) was closely studied with binoculars at thirty-nine yards. It was standing with its body facing half-right away from us and its head at about right angles in a small clear patch in a flock of hundreds of Knots and Turnstones, with the nearest Knot only a foot away. Both of us were attracted to it at the same time, realising that it was a bird we had not seen before. There was ample time to study it and write notes with the bird in a standing position. Unfortunately, a Harrier (*C. approximans*) put up the whole flock and it was covered up by the other birds so that no flight pattern could be seen. No call was heard. The locality agreed rather well with that of its choice as described by Witherby, i.e., near the mouth of a large tidal drain where it debouched on to a sandy-muddy tide-flat.

The size was carefully discussed. N.B.Mack. described it as like a Knot (*Calidris canutus*) but larger and longer in the neck and legs. H.R.McK. took the body size to be about that of a Greenshank (*T. nebularia*) but having a much shorter bill. It was finally decided to compare it with the Sharp-tailed Sandpiper (*C. acuminata*), this being a smaller bird than the two above, but more like a Ruff in general appearance and proportions and a bird well known to both of us.

The note of the bill as taken down on the spot was: "Compared with Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, longer and somewhat heavier but in smaller proportion to the greater size of the bird. Similar in shape and colour." Witherby gives length of bill as, Ruff 34-38, Reeve 29.5-33. That of the Sharp-tailed Sandpiper is 23-27. The bill alone is sufficient to separate it from all other waders of like size and shape.

The side and back of neck were noted as having "thin striations moving diagonally to the rear." Illustrations vary in this respect, apparently because of the different ways the head may be held. A drawing in "Emu" 63, 38 shows rather over emphasised striations moving forward. Witherby, IV, 280 shows them more or less horizontally crescentic, if such a term may be used. In any case they were definite fine markings.