

Records of Uncommon Migrant Waders near Darwin, N.T.

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INTRODUCTION

Until D. N. Crawford commenced systematic observations in 1967 (Crawford, 1972) our knowledge of the relative abundance of waders in coastal Northern Territory could only be said to be scanty, and published observations mainly of a cursory nature. Regular and abundant visitors, e.g., Grey Plover, *Pluvialis squatarola*, Black-tailed Godwit, *Limosa limosa*, Terek Sandpiper, *Xenus cinereus*, Great Knot, *Calidris tenuirostris*, Sanderling, *Calidris alba*, Curlew Sandpiper, *Calidris ferruginea*, Broad-billed Sandpiper, *Limicola falcinellus*, Pin-tailed Snipe, *Gallinago megala*, Turnstone, *Arenaria interpres*, and Oriental Pratincole, *Glareola pratincola*, were all known from less than five records (Storr 1967). Crawford's detailed notes on migrant waders remain to be published but a useful summary of results is presented (Crawford 1972) which demonstrates the relative abundance of various migrant wader species in the Darwin area. We have continued systematic observations of waders and other birds in the Leanyer Swamp, Buffalo Creek and Sanderson Sewerage Works areas near Darwin which we hope to publish when sufficient data accrues.

It might be expected that in view of its closer proximity to the holarctic region, Northern Australia could be expected to produce more records of vagrant and uncommon waders than Southern Australia but this clearly is not the case. If we ignore *Gallinago megala* which, on the basis of recent records including collected specimens, could not be described as a vagrant or particularly uncommon bird in sub-coastal Northern Territory, prior to 1967 only two records of 'rarities' had been published viz. the Caspian Plover, *Charadrius asiaticus*, (Condon 1961) and the European Curlew, *Numenius arquata*, (Deignan 1964). The lack of records of rarities prior to 1967 could probably be explained by the lack of experienced resident bird-watchers in the Northern Territory. Since then Crawford (1972, 1972a, 1972b), McKean, Bartlett and Perrins (1975), McKean, Mason and O'Connor (1975), and this paper place on record a number of observations of uncommon migrant waders and it seems obvious that a better observer coverage would result in many more such records.

SPECIES ACCOUNTS

Little Ringed Plover, *Charadrius dubius*.

On September 29, 1974, a Little Ringed Plover was seen feeding along the edge of a pond at the Sanderson Sewerage Treatment Works near Casuarina, Darwin, N.T. The bird was studied for five minutes by Gunnar Brusewitz, Stuart Keith, John Estbergs and John McKean. On being disturbed it flew off rapidly and was joined

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by another bird of the same species. This bird must also have been present at the pond but until then had not been noticed by us. McKean and Keith have had previous field experience with *C. dubius* and Keith is also familiar with *C. semipalmatus* and *C. hiaticula*.

McKean's field description reads:— "Practically full breeding plumage. Yellow legs and yellow skin of eye. Bill, all dark. Breast band and usual face markings. No white in wing. Call 'tui-twee'. 30x telescope at 10 metres."

The two Little Ringed Plovers were relocated the following day by Hilary Thompson and McKean. The birds were feeding in some dried out settling ponds at the Sanderson Sewerage Works. Also present were a number of Red-capped Dotterels, *C. alexandrinus*. The birds were very wary and a close approach was only possible by car.

Thompson's field description of one of the birds reads:— "Upper-parts brown, darker than Red-capped Dotterel. White underparts with almost complete broad black breast band. White and dark head pattern. Slightly larger than nearby Red-capped Dotterel. In flight, no wing bar, noticeable white side to tail and towering zig-zag flight. Call 'pe-yù'."

A previous sighting in Australia has been reported (Schodde, 1973). This was a single bird seen along the East Alligator River, N.T. by R. Schodde and I. J. Mason during February 1973. The migrant form *C. d. curonicus* has been recorded from Timor (McKean, Mason and O'Connor, 1975) and on one occasion on Japen Island off West Irian (Rand and Gilliard 1967). A resident form *C. d. papuanus* occurs in Papua New Guinea and West Irian. **Caspian Plover**, *Charadrius asiaticus*.

On the night of September 27, 1974, while spotlighting birds along a track near Leanyer Swamp, Hilary Thompson and John McKean found a bird standing in the middle of the road with the general appearance of an Oriental Dotterel, *C. veredus*. Field description reads:— "Mud brown upper parts and breast, belly buffy white, comparatively long yellow legs. The bird seemed to stand shorter than the Oriental Dotterel so, as it was flushed, both observers were watching for the underwing pattern which was clearly seen. The axillaries and part of the underwing were definitely white."

The following day we returned to the same spot but were unable to locate the Caspian Plover. On October 4, 1974, McKean found two Caspian Plovers among a group of 26 Oriental Dotterels in the same general area. They were identified on the basis of their general smaller size and the axillaries and part of the underwing being white when flushed. The underwing and axillaries of the Oriental Dotterels were quite dark grey brown. The previous Australian record is a bird collected at Pine Creek, N.T. (Condon, 1961).

Hudsonian Whimbrel, *Numenius phaeopus hudsonicus*.

It seems generally accepted in New Zealand that this dark rumped American race of the Whimbrel can be distinguished safely

from the white-rumped Asiatic form, *N. p. variegatus*, (Falla, Sibson and Turbott, 1966) and it is on this basis that the following records are submitted.

On September 15, 1974, John Estbergs, Brian Glover and John McKean were making a routine bird count at the Sanderson Sewerage Works. A Whimbrel was sighted at 25 metres distance standing in the middle of the roadway through some mangrove flats. McKean considered the bird looked different but could not explain why, however all observers decided to examine the rump patch on flushing the bird. All observers agreed that the rump patch was dark. McKean's field notes read:— "Seen clearly: rump, tail and back dark." It should be noted that Asiatic Whimbrels do not have pure white rumps but the background colour of the rump is whitish and the tail is varyingly marked with dark brown bars. The Hudsonian Whimbrel rump is also barred dark brown but the background colour is buff-brown. In the field the rump colour could be described as rather similar to that of the Eastern Curlew, *N. madagascariensis*.

On February 22, 1975, Hilary Thompson saw another Hudsonian Whimbrel at Lee Point. His field notes read:— "Obvious Whimbrel from size, bill length, head pattern and call but no white rump." The Hudsonian Whimbrel does not appear to have been previously noted in Australia, however, on the basis of these records one might expect it to occur occasionally along the east-coast of Australia. A recent summary of New Zealand records is to be found in the New Zealand Checklist (1970).

Spotted Greenshank, *Tringa guttifer*.

On March 9, 1974, a Greenshank with an unusual call was seen at the Sanderson Sewerage Works by Hilary Thompson and John McKean. On the basis of its call and bill shape we consider the bird to have been a Spotted Greenshank, *Tringa guttifer*. Their relevant field notes read:— "Seen clearly, distance c. 20 metres with 10 x 50 binoculars. Observed on edge of tank with low water level. Distinguished from Greenshank by smaller size and heavier bill. Call distinct, like a guttural Greenshank (J. L. McK.) or "trip" (H.A.F.T.)."

On March 30, 1974, the same observers saw what appeared to be the same bird in the company of a Greenshank, *T. nebularia*. Compared to the previous occasion the Spotted Greenshank seemed to have a few more spots on the sides of the breast. Standing alongside the Greenshank, the bird appeared much shorter and the bill nearly as long but noticeably broadened at the base. The general build of the bird would compare better with that of a Greater Knot, *Calidris tenuirostris*, than a Greenshank. The soft parts of the legs and gapes of the two birds were not very different, being of a yellow-green colour. Apparently soft part colour differences are only distinguishable in birds in nuptial plumage. The birds were eventually flushed but the Spotted Greenshank did not call.

An examination of skins of the Spotted Greenshank obtained on

loan from the British Museum (Natural History) and a comparison of these with skins of Greenshanks showed that the broadened base of the bill was perhaps the best diagnostic point for the separating of the two species in the field. Leg and gape colour would not appear to be much use for birds in eclipse. Tarsus measurements show that Spotted Greenshanks should appear to stand shorter but one Greenshank skin from Humpty Doo, N.T. showed that runt Greenshanks could occur, which might appear to be as short legged as Spotted Greenshanks.

Redshank, *Tringa totanus*.

On January 5, 1975, Hilary Thompson saw a Redshank, *T. totanus*, at Lee Point. He knows the species well from Europe and recently had further field experience of it in Timor. The bird was feeding in a pool at the edge of some rocks. His field notes read:— "A medium sized wader with upperparts browner than Greenshank. Orange-red legs. Bobbed head when alarmed. In flight showed white rump, barred tip to tail and rectangular white patches on wings at the end of the secondaries. Call, a flute-like, often repeated 'tu-tu-tu-tu'." This would appear to be the fourth Australian and Northern Territory sighting.

Long-toed Stint, *Calidris subminuta*.

On October 1, 1974, John McKean located a Long-toed Stint, *C. subminuta*, crouched under a clump of reeds, *Eleocharis* sp., on the edge of Leanyer Swamp. He was able to view the bird from c. 8 metres using 10 x 50 binoculars. His field description is as follows:— "Small wader with grey, brown-streaked pectoral gorget, chestnut crown, dark cheek patches, dark brown back, dull yellowish legs. Bill and general size as Red-necked Stint. Call, a musical 'sweep, sweep'. Flight, flushed like snipe from reed-bed, zig-zagging and towering. Wing bar not noticeable. Not a Temminck, as outer-tail feathers not conspicuously white."

The possibility that the bird seen might have been a Least Sandpiper, *Calidris minutilla*, would seem unlikely on the basis of size and call (Wallace 1974). Smith (1968) suggests that the wing stripe of the Least Sandpiper might appear to be more distinct than that of the Long-toed Stint but this is not corroborated by Wallace (*loc. cit.*). All of the small number of yellow-legged Stints collected so far in Australia have proven to be the Long-toed Stint but the possibility of the occurrence of Least Sandpiper and Temminck Stints, *C. temminckii*, should never be discounted. This appears to be the third reported occurrence of the Long-toed Stint in Northern Territory.

Ruff (Reeve), *Philomachus pugnax*.

On September 2, 1974, Hilary Thompson and John McKean saw a Reeve, *Philomachus pugnax*, at a small fresh water swamp near Holmes Jungle. Their field notes read:— "One presumed female with Wood Sandpipers. Larger than Wood Sandpiper with stockier and more hunched appearance (H.A.F.T.). Faint eye stripe and mark through lores (J. L. McK. and H.A.F.T.). Overall appear-

ance:— grey upperparts, whitish underparts, bill, heavier and thicker than that of Wood Sandpiper and appeared slightly down curved at tip. Legs appeared murky but not possible to see the leg colour clearly (H.A.F.T.). In flight showed white on side of tail (J. L. McK.).”

The bird was seen again at the same spot by John McKean on September 3, 1974, by Hilary Thompson on September 7, 1974, and by John Estbergs, John McKean and Hilary Thompson on September 14, 1974. In addition to the features recorded above, a thin white wing-bar was noted on the bird when in flight.

On November 10, 1974, a Ruff was seen at Buffalo Point by Hilary Thompson. His field notes read:— “Seen feeding on mud flat with Red-necked Stints and Tattlers. Upper parts rich golden-brown to medium brown, scaled black. Faint eye stripe giving superficially Tattler-like head pattern. Relatively heavy bill, whitish underparts, lightly streaked on breast. Legs grey-green. Tame, rising reluctantly without calling. Flew slowly showing inconspicuous thin white wing-bar and very obvious white patches on side of tail. Both in flight and at rest much heavier and stockier looking than *Tringa*.”

The Ruff (Reeve) has been recorded on a few occasions in most Australian States but these records would appear to be the first reports of the species from the Northern Territory.

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Dusky Wood-Swallows Clustering in Tasmania

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At Tinderbox, on the west side of the mouth of the Derwent River at about 2000 hours on January 11, 1975, I disturbed a number of Dusky Wood-Swallows, *Artamus cyanopterus*, from a small depression about 3m above ground level, on the south side of a gum tree. Within a few minutes they returned to the same spot, and huddled together in similar fashion to that illustrated by Edith Coleman (1948). I counted 13 birds, including some immatures. It was a heavily overcast but warm evening with a light northerly wind.

On January 13, another visit was made to the area, but none of these birds was seen between 1945 and 2130 hours. It was dull and cool without any wind.

On January 15, with similar conditions throughout the evening, I searched about 10 acres of the surrounding dry sclerophyll forest, but was again unable to find any Wood-Swallows.

Two days later I visited the site again, arriving at 1930 hours in cool cloudy conditions and found the birds hawking for insects over and about a road some 50m east of the tree where I had seen the first clustering. At about 1945 hours a light south-west drizzle commenced, and almost immediately six birds were seen to cluster on the lee side of a tree-trunk, about 4m from the ground. Two others clung to the trunk of a nearby tree, one bird above the other but not touching, and a further two clung to a piece of loose bark just under a fork on a third tree. All were on the lee sides of the trees. There was constant shuffling by clustered birds. The shower of rain ceased at 2000 hours and the birds resumed feeding but remained close to these trees. At 2045 hours all birds suddenly left the area, flying north into the forest and I was unable to locate them before I left at 2130 hours.

A week later, during a weekend field outing by members of the Bird Observers' Association of Tasmania at Waddamana in Central Tasmania, A. W. J. Fletcher sought shelter from a sudden shower of rain in a fire-blackened hollow tree, and from it disturbed about seven Dusky Wood-Swallows. When he left the tree the birds returned to it immediately.

These are the only three instances of this habit recorded in Tasmania, although a report appears in the Tasmanian Bird Report No. 2, published by the Bird Observers' Association in 1973, of about 12 birds clustered at Shag Bay on July 25, 1972. The observer in this case, Miss C. H. Mosey, has told me that these birds were not clustered in the normally accepted sense of the term but were