

The writer is familiar with the Solitary Sandpiper *T. solitaria* and both of us are familiar with the Wood Sandpiper *T. glareola* and the bird was thought to be neither of those species. In order to view the underwing and tail, the bird was flushed by Wheeler and viewed to advantage by McKean. It teetered briefly and then took flight exposing a large expanse of white rump and tail with at least two and probably three comparatively broad blackish bars across the bottom of the tail. It jerked sidewise in flight showing an underwing that seemed entirely dark (blackish). Unfortunately, it failed to call. The intervention of a group of Water Buffalo prevented us from carrying out any further observations so we jotted down some notes and sketched some of the key features. The following day we returned to Darwin where we were able to consult a number of reference books and confirm that the bird seen could only have been a Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus*.

The Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus* is a Palaearctic breeding species which winters regularly to South-east Asia (e.g. Medway & Wells, 1976), odd birds reaching as far as New Guinea (Hoogerwerf, 1964; Berggy, 1978). It is thus likely to occur on occasions in Northern Australia and in fact McKean had fleeting views of what was probably this species in December 1973, at Humpty Doo.

References

- Berggy, J., 1978. Bird observations in the Madang Province. *Papua New Guinea Bird Society Newsletter* 148: 9-20.
- Hoogerwerf, A., 1964. On birds new for New Guinea or with a larger range than previously known. *Bull. B.O.C.* 84(7): 118-124.
- Medway, Lord & D. R. Wells, 1976. *The Birds of the Malay Peninsula*. Vol. 5. Witherby: London, 448 pp.
- Prater, A. J., J. H. Marchant & J. Vuorinen, 1977. *Guide to the Identification and Ageing of Holarctic Waders*. British Trust for Ornithology: Tring, U.K. 168 pp.
- By JOHN L. MCKEAN, 31 Rosella Crescent, Wulagi, N.T. 5790.

ABW

On the Black-backed Gulls at Melville Bay, Northern Territory

On the face of the published evidence (*Australian Bird Watcher* 6: 162-164, and 238), I am less sure than van Tets (*ABW* 7: 11) that the Black-backed Gulls described and photographed by C. Boekel at Melville Bay are ascribable beyond doubt to the Scandinavian form of the Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus fuscus*. In his comment on Boekel's report to Dominican Gulls, van Tets states that the single prominent subterminal mirror evident in the photographs of the wing-tip is a diagnostic characteristic of the Scandinavian and nominate form of the Lesser Black-backed Gull.

I would contend that a single white subterminal spot on the outer primary of a Black-backed Gull is neither diagnostic of the nominate race nor the species of *Larus fuscus*. Many birds of the British population *L.f. graellsii* also show this wingtip pattern, though many also show a smaller white spot on the second outer primary. Both patterns are clearly photographed in Tinbergen, Falkus & Ennion's *Signals for Survival* (1970). In Britain, where both local birds and those of the Scandinavian breeding populations can be seen in spring, it is widely accepted that identification of the subspecies is at best valid only under perfect

viewing conditions, and at worst a pointless exercise since the populations vary and intergrade in mantle colour. In his description of the birds in the Northern Territory, Boekel stated that one bird was of a "slightly lighter shade on the dark back than the other". Yet van Tets and later the RAOU Checklist Amendment Committee (*Emu* 78: 86) boldly assign both birds to the nominate race of *fuscus*. British birds are known to have reached the Gulf of Guinea and, though less likely as far eastern vagrants, can hardly be excluded from reaching Australia on geographical grounds, especially if ship-assisted.

From my experience of British and Scandinavian Lesser Black-backed Gulls in Europe and West Africa, and one hour's notes on Kelp or Dominican Gulls *Larus dominicanus* in Hobart Harbour, I am unable to find any feature of the wing-tip pattern by which the two species may be separated in the field. At Hobart, I could not make out any clearly subterminal white spots on the second (or other inner) primaries, which by van Tets's definition, ought to have been there. The only specimen of adult *dominicanus* that I have examined is one in the W.A. Museum. It has fresh, unabraded outer primaries and clearly shows a large subterminal white spot on the outer primary, but only terminal white on the remaining primaries. The use of wingtip patterns as identification features of the large Palaearctic gulls has elsewhere been discredited (see *Brit. Birds* 64: 285-288; 65: 85-87) and individual patterns are liable to obliteration through wear of the contour feathers. I would like to suggest that observers finding black-backed gulls in northern Australia should concentrate on bill, leg and foot details rather than wingtip patterns which are easily abraded or moulted. Of 20-30 adult Kelp Gulls which I saw at Hobart in October 1976, all legs appeared from greenish-yellow through grey-green to light grey, whereas the legs and feet of adult Lesser Black-backed Gulls are usually bright-yellow, perhaps a shade more orange-yellow for some northern birds.

A strongly migrant Lesser Black-backed Gull must be a not unlikely possibility for vagrancy to the northern coastline, but on the published evidence I submit that the record of Lesser Black-backed Gulls at Melville Bay is simply not good enough to be a first for Australia. By PETER J. CURRY, 29 Canning Mills Road, Kelmscott, W.A. 6111

ABW

Black-faced Shags Breeding on Islands off Wilsons Promontory, Victoria.

In June 1963, W. R. Wheeler (1964) reported Black-faced Shags *Leucocarbo fuscescens* breeding in the Bay of Islands near Peterborough, Victoria. Apparently, this was the first recorded breeding for the species in that state, while Serventy, *et al.* (1971), in addition to this location, listed other recorded breeding stations — in Tasmania, South Australia and Western Australia.

The Black-faced Shag is distributed along the southern coast of Australia and Tasmania, its stronghold being in South Australia, particularly in Spencer Gulf. It is not uncommon in small numbers around Wilsons Promontory and R. P. Cooper (1974), in his summary stated "Mainly coastal. Present throughout the year. Nests on Flinders and King Islands." Apparently he was referring to the closest nesting locations known at the time.