

## A Hudsonian Godwit *Limosa haemastica* in South-eastern Tasmania

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### Introduction

The Hudsonian Godwit *Limosa haemastica* is vagrant to Australia, there being two prior records of its occurrence, at Kooragang Island, N.S.W., in 1982 and at Dry Creek Saltfields, S.A., in 1986 (Cox 1990, Morris 1991). It is more frequently recorded as a vagrant in New Zealand, two or three birds turning up in most years, e.g. *Notornis* 37(3 and 4), 38(4), 39(3): 'Classified Summarised Notes', being described by Falla et al. (1981) as 'a rare but possibly regular migrant'. This paper documents a third Australian sighting at Lauderdale in south-eastern Tasmania. The record has been unanimously accepted by the Royal Australasian Ornithologists Union Records Appraisal Committee, case no. 127.

### The observation

At sunset on 20 July 1991, W. and M. Wakefield briefly observed a godwit on the tidal flats at Lauderdale, noting that in flight it appeared to show the dorsal plumage pattern of a Black-tailed Godwit *Limosa limosa*. The conditions were not ideal, with the bird viewed against the setting sun and the observation could not be followed up at that point.

The following morning at 0940 h R. Patterson visited the site. The conditions were cold and blustery as strong westerly winds came across the Derwent onto the shore. There were calmer periods of sunlight from behind the observer and occasional light rain squalls, which tended to keep the birds from flight. Optical aids used were Zeiss Jenoptem 10 x 50 binoculars and a Nikon 20 x 60 spotting scope.

The bird was observed for about 40 minutes feeding with 29 Bar-tailed Godwits *Limosa lapponica* as the tide came in, about 30 m from shore. It was a little apart, feeding in slightly deeper water, often immersing its head as it probed for food. It tended to hold its tail low at an angle to the body, occasionally fanning it to expose the black upper surface, when a narrow white tip and white edges could be seen. During this period it was twice put to a short flight of several metres by the attentions of a Silver Gull *Larus novaehollandiae*. On these occasions only the plumage of the upperwings was noted.

After returning home and consulting Hayman et al. (1986), Patterson came to the conclusion that the bird was a Hudsonian Godwit *Limosa haemastica* and informed Mike Newman, who immediately visited the site and was able to confirm the identification from the diagnostic sooty-black underwings. The area was again visited that afternoon at 1330 h, when the conditions had further deteriorated. The birds were in a close roost at the edge of samphire and allowed a careful approach to within 6 m. Alan Fletcher was able to obtain some excellent photographs of the bird.

## Description

The bird is shown in Plate 48 (front cover). It was similar in size and general proportions to the Bar-tailed Godwits, but with a much darker appearance so that it tended to stand out in the flock. The bill was similarly recurved, being dark pink at the base and distally blackish. Its legs were a darker, slate grey. The head, neck and upper breast were an even grey-brown, shading to a lighter brown on the flanks. It had dark eyes with conspicuous white lower lids; dusky lores extending to produce a short eyestripe to the rear of the eyes; short, broad white supercilia mainly above the lores to the forward part of the eyes, becoming indistinct behind the eyes; and a white chin. The belly and under-tail coverts were white, with some obscure reddish marking and blotching along the flanks, and strong black barring at the lower flanks, notably at the edges of the under-tail coverts. It had a dark grey mantle, brown scapulars and wing coverts with some narrow pale fringing in the coverts, and a few scattered blackish feathers with white notches. The tertials were brown with small buff notches producing a spotted effect. The tail was black with a narrow white tip and white edges; and a relatively narrow white bar across the upper-tail coverts. In flight it had dark grey-brown upperwings with a short, weak wingbar formed by narrow white bases to the inner primaries and outer secondaries. The underwing remiges were grey with whitish bases forming a relatively inconspicuous wingbar underlying the dorsal wingbar, with sooty-black lesser and median coverts and axillaries forming a distinct black wedge. The greater secondary coverts appeared to be whitish.

## Identification

The dorsal plumage pattern in flight shown by this bird of a black tail, white rump and wingbar eliminates from contention both Bar-tailed Godwit and Marbled Godwit *L. fedoa*, limiting the possibilities to either Black-tailed or Hudsonian Godwit.

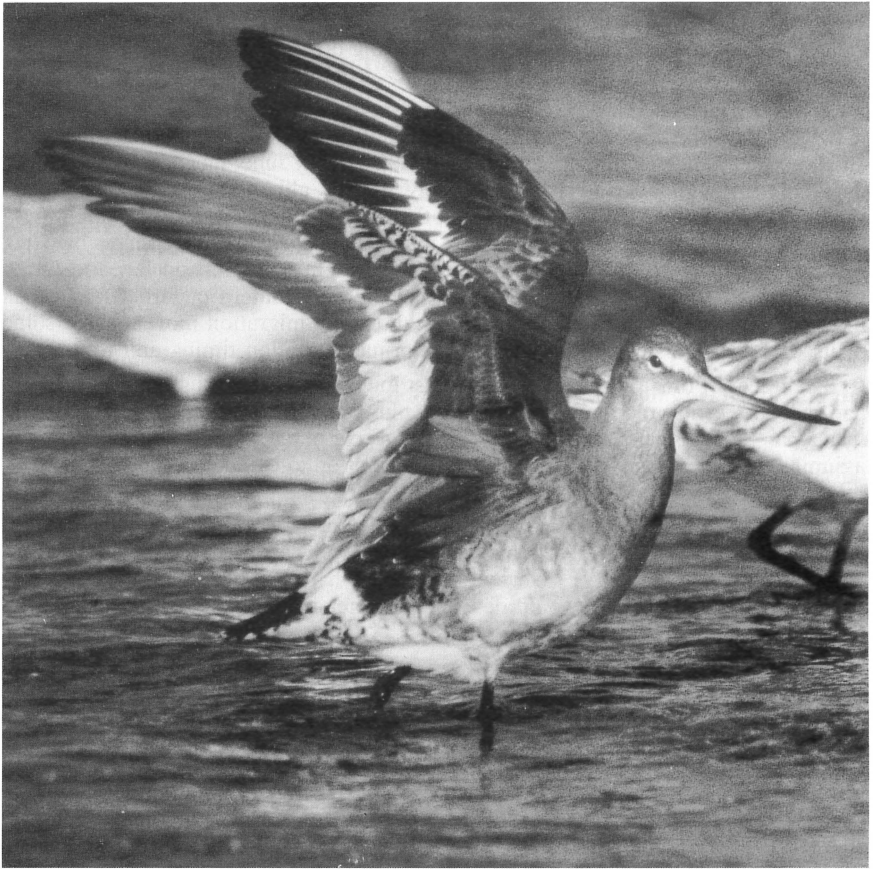
The size and more significantly the general proportions of the bird as closely similar to the Bar-tailed Godwit are consistent for Hudsonian, the Black-tailed Godwit being generally larger, slimmer and more elegant in appearance (e.g. Hayman et al. 1986), although the eastern race *L. limosa melanuroides* usually seen in Australia appears in fact to be marginally smaller. The slightly recurved bill is also consistent, that of the Black-tailed appearing essentially straight.

The principal feature usually quoted as diagnostic in separating the two is the sooty-black axillaries and wing-lining of the Hudsonian Godwit, those of the Black-tailed being white, and this alone is sufficient to confirm the identification (Plate 49). It is worth noting that the very dark appearance of the bird at rest, with an even grey-brown head and breast, together with the recurved bill were sufficient on this occasion to predicate the Hudsonian Godwit. The relative weakness of the white rump patch and wingbar were important additional indicators, against the very conspicuous white rump and the long, broad white wingbar of the Black-tailed Godwit. Indeed the initial identification of the bird as Hudsonian was based on this combination of features. The sooty underwings were the final clinching character used to confirm the bird's identity.

## Further observations

The bird remained at Lauderdale for two to three weeks until, after exceptionally high tides, it moved with the Bar-tailed Godwits to Orielton Lagoon, where the flock roosted on the causeway rocks, feeding on the Sorell flats at low tide.

By mid January the dark grey-brown marking on the breast of the Hudsonian Godwit had intensified to form a gorget, while the remains of breeding plumage (reddish



**Hudsonian Godwit, Lauderdale, Tasmania, July 1991, showing diagnostic sooty wing-lining and axillaries.**

Plate 49

Photo: Alan Fletcher

markings, black feathering, spotted tertials and most of the barring at the flanks) had moulted out.

It remained here until last seen feeding with 104 Bar-tailed Godwits on the Sorell flats on 23 March 1992, most of the birds including the Hudsonian by then in breeding plumage. The Hudsonian Godwit showed essentially reddish underparts from the breast to the vent with strong black barring along the flanks. However, the strength of the ventral colouration was reduced by the presence of whitish transverse falcate markings on the breast and belly.

Over the eight-month period that the bird was present in the area, it was seen by numerous local and visiting birders.

### **Discussion**

The Hudsonian Godwit breeds in central northern Canada and Alaska south of the Arctic Circle, choosing sites in wet sedge marshes and boggy tundra (Johnsgard

1981, Hayman et al. 1986). It is a long-distance migrant to southern South America (southern Argentina, Tierra del Fuego), travelling down the Atlantic coast of North America and crossing the west Atlantic to reach its destination.

The bird appeared to have arrived very early in the season on the wintering grounds, if in fact it had spent time at the breeding grounds during the northern summer. The adults arrive on the breeding grounds in late May or early June; incubation takes 22-25 days and the fledging period is approximately 30 days, although the young may spend the final 10 days alone (Johnsgard 1981). It therefore seems unlikely that adults would normally depart from the breeding grounds much before the end of July, unless breeding had failed, and adults are known to gather in the vicinity of Hudson Bay and James Bay before southward migration. Its presence in this southern quadrant may be an indication that it has become caught up in an earlier migration movement of some of its congeners, instead of following the normal migration timing and route.

The traces of breeding plumage in at least four feather tracts suggest that this bird had indeed recently moulted from breeding plumage and was therefore adult, rather than a non-breeding immature entering its second year of life which might have partially assumed breeding plumage, particularly as it went on to complete its moult over the following two to three months.

The paleness of the ventral colouration in breeding plumage suggests that the bird was female. Johnsgard (1981) states that females have paler, more blotchy underparts, whereas Prater et al. (1977) state that the female has white bases to feathers. The indications are that a male would develop a greater intensity of reddish underparts than were shown by this bird.

Unlike the other Hudsonian Godwits reported, this bird did not overwinter or return to the area in a following year. For example the Kooragang Island bird appeared to overwinter and was seen on numerous occasions between the first sighting on 26 December 1982 and the last on 7 April 1985 (Morris 1991). The South Australian bird was present between 20 September 1986 and 7 April 1987, and again between 20 September 1987 and 15 April 1988 (Cox 1990).

## Acknowledgement

We thank Alan Fletcher for the generous permission to use his photos of the bird.

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