

## The Story Behind the Naming of Cox's Sandpiper

by JOHN B. COX, 7 Agnes Court, Salisbury East, S.A. 5109

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### Introduction

Cox's Sandpiper *Calidris paramelanotos* differs from most birds because it was not discovered. Instead, after two specimens were collected in South Australia, some Australian ornithologists gradually became aware that the birds they had been identifying as Dunlins *C. alpina* were not Dunlins at all, but something different. This article tells of that recognition and the formal naming of the species by Parker (1982). It also seeks to clarify the consequent controversy discussed by Smith (1984a), Cox (1987) and Morimoto (1987, 1988) that has become an embarrassment to Australian ornithology.

### The Undunlins

Before arriving in Australia in 1968 I had seen most European shorebirds, including many thousands of Dunlins, plus a fair number of intercontinental vagrants, and was quite happy with my ability to identify most shorebirds in the field. I subsequently read about Australian records of Dunlin in the local literature.

Before 1968 there were only a few unconfirmed reports of Dunlins in Australia (Hindwood 1944, Wheeler 1957), but Sympson's (1968) report of a Dunlin was the start of a spate of published records (Thomas 1969; Smith 1969, 1970). These records seemed positive because the authors unequivocally used the name 'Dunlin' in the titles of their articles; indeed Smith (1969) wrote 'I was now convinced that this bird was a Dunlin' and his description of it matches Dunlin rather than Cox's Sandpiper (see Cox 1987). However, Sympson's (1968) description of a Dunlin and some of Smith's (1969) other sightings did not seem entirely true of Dunlins. Nevertheless, van Tets and Smith (in Slater 1970) accepted their sightings by stating there were records from 'Melbourne, Victoria'.

Dunlin reports continued (Lendon 1971; Fien 1972; Smith 1972a, 1972b). Smith's (1972b) composite description of three birds seemed strange if they were Dunlins, but he gave no indication of any uncertainty about his identification.

Because so many Dunlins were being seen in Australia, I felt it would be only a matter of time before I saw one. Instead, by 1973 I had seen only what I took to be a couple of odd-looking Curlew Sandpipers *C. ferruginea* that, strangely, had dark central rump feathers and upper tail coverts. I discovered from H.J. Eckert that he also had seen an odd-looking *Calidris*, and we believed these birds were the same as some Dunlins described in the literature. We recognised the need to collect a specimen to establish their identity.

Dunlins continued to be reported (Wheeler 1975). Also, Condon (1975), a taxonomist notorious for his conservative attitude towards sight records, had accepted some of the Dunlin records. Thus many observers believed the species was a proven visitor to Australia. Consequently some known sightings were not properly described or even recorded at all.

I was with R. Johnstone and R. Noske, two interstate visitors, when I next found a strange *Calidris* in South Australia on 16 February 1975. I first saw the bird flying

and believed it to be a Pectoral Sandpiper *C. melanotos*, but after it landed my companions were convinced it was a Dunlin. It took much argument to persuade them otherwise and that the bird should be collected. Assistance was sought from H.J. Eckert, who lived nearby, and the specimen was collected. Although we immediately realized it was not a Dunlin, we could not identify it.

Some days later I took the specimen to the South Australian Museum, where it was registered (B28843). The Curator of Birds, S.A. Parker, and I thought it to be similar to a Pectoral Sandpiper but believed its differences from that species suggested it to be a hybrid between Curlew Sandpiper and Pectoral Sandpiper or possibly an undescribed species. We also compared it with published descriptions of Dunlins in Australia and realized that some were compatible with the specimen. Consequently I described it in an article entitled 'The Pectoral Sandpiper: an unusual specimen' (Cox 1976). In the same part of the journal in which it was published was a report of two Dunlins (McKean 1976).

On 5 March 1977 I found and collected another unusual *Calidris*. At the South Australian Museum (where it was registered B30775, and eventually became the type of *paramelanotos*) Parker and I found it to be similar to the first specimen. We were still unsure whether they were hybrids or an undescribed species, and were especially anxious to discover if the unique specimen of Cooper's Sandpiper *C. cooperi* (Baird 1858) was the same kind of bird. Cooper's Sandpiper was collected on 24 May 1833 on Long Island, New York, U.S.A., and we believed, from Sharpe's (1896) brief description, that it had some features in common with the South Australian specimens. Subsequently Parker sent the specimens to the British Museum (Natural History), the American Museum of Natural History and the National Museum of Natural History — Smithsonian Institution for comment and comparison with their specimens. Of particular interest were the replies he received from R.L. Zusi, Curator, National Museum of Natural History (holder of the Cooper's Sandpiper specimen). In a reply dated 31 August 1977 he said 'After a quick comparison I conclude that they are not *cooperi*.' In a more detailed letter of 24 March 1978 he opined that 'the 2 Australian birds are the same "thing," and they are not members of any known species (including "Tringa cooperi"). They are either hybrids or a new species'.

I believed the birds could be hybrids and thought more evidence was needed to discount that theory before a new species should be named. With this point particularly in mind, Parker continued his investigations and again sent the specimens to the British Museum (Natural History) in 1979.

Occasional reports of Dunlin were still cropping up (Lindsey & Lindsey 1978) although by 1980, judging from the paucity of further reports, many observers realized that most past Dunlin sightings were erroneous. However, the news was filtering through only slowly because some people still did not discount the Dunlin records. Pizzey (1980) unfortunately included them in his *Field Guide to the Birds of Australia*. It was only later that Smith (1981) and Sympson (1985) retracted their records. Roberts (1983) reviewed the remainder and described a Dunlin he saw in northern Queensland in 1983. He thought all other records of Dunlin were unacceptable, although he noted that the bird seen by Lindsey & Lindsey (1978) in the same area as his bird was the 'most plausible' of them.

### The naming

On 4 March 1979 C. Corben and other observers saw a strange *Calidris* at Werribee Sewage Farm, Victoria. In May 1979 he stayed with me in South Australia for about a week. During that time we discussed his sighting and the identity of the South

Australian specimens. On 17 February 1981 Corben saw another *Calidris* at Werribee and identified it as the same as the two specimens. He was later informed, however, that other Victorian bird-watchers considered it to be a Dunlin (Corben, pers. comm. 9 March 1988). On 1 March 1981 this bird or a similar individual was again seen at Werribee (Smith 1984b).

On 16 March 1981 F.T.H. Smith wrote to Parker stating [*sic.*] 'For many years now, on my own and in company with other observers, a small wader has been turning up to which we cannot put a name . . . We have had two in the Melbourne area recently (one first detected by Chris. Corben). I have with tongue-very much-in-cheek given it the sunday name of *Calidris perplexus*. The bird collected in South Australia, I believe now in the State Museum there, and described in literature by John Cox (a strange Pectoral Sandpiper) may well be one of these birds'. Smith's letter referred to it as 'the mystery wader', and did not mention his previous identifications of it as Dunlin (Smith 1969, 1970, 1972a, 1972b) or that it was Corben who first pointed out it was the same as the specimens. Parker replied on 19 March 1981 with information about the specimens and the question 'Incidentally, do you think that any of the Australian Dunlin reports would be based on this odd bird?' On 24 March 1981 Smith replied 'In fact my own records of alpina, of which I have several, I realize now are largely of *perplexa*. I now retract all my personal Australian (Victorian) records of alpina . . . Although I think I have a couple, or more, of genuine dunlins among them it is better to erase the lot', and 'Also I will place a retraction with "The Australian Bird Watcher" . . .'

Parker replied to Smith on 6 April 1981 stating 'I look forward to your article on *Calidris perplexa* [referring to Smith's (1981) retraction of his Dunlin records, and **not** to his later (1982) article]. I am seriously considering describing this as a new species, using one of our two skins as the type. Your name would be an excellent one to adopt, and for the English name, what about False Dunlin? . . . Should I decide to take the matter further, I should certainly ask you and John Cox whether you would like to join me in authorship'. On 10 April Smith replied 'I would be pleased to cooperate with you and John Cox in producing a paper on this bird', and 'I won't be writing a paper on *C. perplexa* at present. I will leave that to you, John Cox & myself for later on. What I intend to do is write a *few lines* in "The Australian Bird Watcher" suggesting that my Dunlin articles shouldn't be taken too seriously . . .'

In another letter to Parker, of 17 April 1981, Smith said 'I have had a quick look at most of my "Dunlin" records for Victoria (since 1955) and find that they refer to *C. perplexa*. I will be going through my records closely over the next few weeks extracting the essence of them. The information will be available to you later on if you wish to have it. If an article is written by you, John Cox and myself eventually on the False Dunlin at least I will have the nucleus of my part of it close to hand.'

Parker and Smith then began a collaboration: Parker investigating the identity of the museum specimens and Smith working from his field observations. The final outcome was conditional upon evidence that Smith's sightings, which he had mainly described as Dunlins, were indeed referable to the bird represented by the two specimens.

On 21 April 1981 Parker wrote to Smith and requested copies of 'slides' of the birds he had seen. Smith replied on 29 April and enclosed some photographs which 'are not all that good' of a bird seen on 28 March 1971. He had previously identified it as a Dunlin (Smith 1972b), but his letter mentioned a feature which is not found in Dunlins or in his published description: 'Note in one picture a small light stripe on the crown splitting away from the pale superciliary stripe'. Parker replied (letter

undated) 'The pale stripe splitting off from the eyebrow is not evident in our two skins, but could of course be a variable character' [Parker did not then know that the character is found in some Cox's Sandpipers (Cox 1987)]. He also informed Smith '. . . that someone recently caught, photographed and released a *ferruginea* x [Sharp-tailed Sandpiper *C. acuminata* hybrid at Newcastle! [New South Wales] Sounds as though it could have been another *perplexa*'.

In May 1981 Parker took a specimen to a wader symposium in Sydney to show to Smith (who in fact did not attend) and the bird banders who caught the Newcastle bird on 21 March 1981 (Lane et al. 1981). On returning to Adelaide he wrote to Smith 'I was hoping to see you at the wader symposium in Sydney last Saturday, thinking it was an event you wouldn't miss . . . Anyway, I took one of our *perplexa* along and said a few words about the problem, including the fact that you and I were working on the problem.'

On 3 December 1981, P.J. Curry, then Editor of *The Stilt*, wrote to Smith 'at the RAOU wader symposium in May, Shane Parker talked about the "when is a Dunlin not a Dunlin" business and exhibited the S.A. skin of the "aberrant Pectoral Sandpiper" of John Cox.' He noted Smith's (1981) retraction of his Dunlin records and asked 'I wondered if there was any chance that you could write anything about your lengthy period of encounters with the "Undunlins"?' Also '. . . send it to me by the New Year, which is the revised deadline for material'. Smith complied with the first request, for, in a letter to J.K. Ling of 12 August 1982, Curry stated, 'I sent the edited manuscripts off to Melbourne in early April'.

Unaware of that transaction, Parker telephoned Smith on 21 April 1982 to say that a specimen was being sent to the Victorian Museum for him to examine. During their conversation, Smith told Parker he had submitted his notes for publication. The following day Parker wrote to Curry and said 'I have just learnt from Fred Smith that a brief note will be appearing soon in *The Stilt* on our new wader. Fred and I planned . . . to describe this in a joint paper', and 'We are now ready to put pen to paper . . . we are concerned that someone might now beat us to the draw. We should be grateful, therefore, if you could add to Fred's note that he and I have a paper in preparation describing it as new.' Curry had just left for three weeks of field work. A week or so later Parker telephoned the Assistant Editor of *The Stilt* and was told that Smith's article was a detailed description to which the Editor had added a scientific name, and that it was in press. They agreed that the name '*perplexa*' should be deleted from Curry's addition to the article.

On 13 May 1982 Smith wrote to Parker stating 'Since you 'phoned me on April 21st to let me know that you were forwarding a wader specimen for me to look at I have been waiting most anxiously', and 'The specimen has not arrived . . .' He also wrote 'I have received many enquiries since placing my Dunlin retraction note in the Australian Bird Watcher so I have written another short note for the A.B.W. explaining (briefly) my reasons.' Parker replied on 20 May 1982 'Realizing after your phone call that we had precious little time to salvage the project . . . I sent the skins to the artist.'

The collaboration had dissolved. Smith had written two articles for publication and Parker rapidly wrote another in which he named the 'new' wader Cox's Sandpiper *Calidris paramelanotos* Parker, 1982. I had no knowledge of these names before they were published.

The name '*perplexa*' was deleted from Curry's titling to Smith's (1982) article, and from the first line of the third paragraph. Unfortunately, a third mention of the name in the fourth line of the third paragraph was not deleted from all copies of *The Stilt* and, for the reasons stated by Ingram (1989), '*perplexa*' became a *nomen nudum*.

Smith's (1982) paper was published shortly before Parker's (1982). On 27 October 1983 Parker wrote to Smith about his article (Smith 1982) which '... unfortunately I did not learn of until it was in press, or see until it was in print', and pointed out that there was a discrepancy between Smith's description of the birds and the two specimens.

### Coxgate

'Coxgate' was coined by Nancy Clayton in reference to the initial misidentification of a Cox's Sandpiper in Massachusetts, U.S.A., in September 1987 (Arvidson 1987). Morimoto (1987) linked the term to 'an intriguing story about the discovery and naming of this species'.

The main points of that 'intriguing story' are some later statements by Smith (1984a) and Morimoto (1987). I recognise that David Morimoto wrote his article in good faith, but believe it unfortunate that his information was based only on limited documentation sent to him by Smith. Morimoto (1988) has since acknowledged the misleading nature of his 1987 paper and has commendably rectified some errors. I offer no comment on these corrections or other superfluous issues that mask the main story, but other allegations (a) still require rebuttals (b) to deter their otherwise likely quotation in future literature.

1. (a) Smith (1984a) said he 'was never completely happy' with his Dunlin identifications.
  - (b) His own writings (Smith 1969, 1970, 1972a, 1972b), as cited in 'The Undunlins' above, testify that he was sure of his identifications of Dunlins. He accepted his sightings as valid records of Dunlins in Australia (in Slater 1970).
2. (a) Smith (1984a) said it was 'late 1971' and Morimoto (1987) said it was 'by 1972' that Smith realised something was wrong with his identifications of Dunlins.
  - (b) Smith (1972a) listed four of his Dunlin sightings and said 'I will write up the last three records more fully in the near future'. This he did in a composite description in an article entitled 'The Dunlin near Melbourne, 1970/71' (Smith 1972b). Furthermore, Wheeler (1975) listed a Dunlin seen on 1 December 1974, of which Smith was an observer. Smith (1984b) listed it as a record of the 'new sandpiper'. Also Pizzey (1980) included Smith's Dunlin records by stating there were published sight records of Dunlin from 'w. shores Port Phillip Bay, Vic. . . . several birds . . . possibly of the large race *sakhalina*' [the race Smith (1970) suggested occurred in Australia], and acknowledged 'Fred Smith' as one of the persons who provided him 'with personal observations . . . or read and commented upon all or part of the text' of his book. Even more significantly, Smith's letters to Parker (as quoted in 'The naming' above) indicate that it was early 1981 when he came to accept his records of Dunlins were erroneous. His letter of 24 March 1981 said '... I think I have a couple, or more, of genuine dunlins among them . . .', he referred them to '*perplexa*' in his letter of 17 April 1981, and eventually listed all of his Dunlin sightings as 'Victorian records of a sandpiper new to science' (Smith 1984b).
3. (a) Morimoto (1987) said 'John Cox . . . corresponded with Smith for several months [i.e. between 1972 and 1975], during which time he learned of these dunlin-style birds.'
  - (b) I learnt of Australian records of Dunlins from the literature (e.g. Sympton 1968; Thomas 1969; Smith 1969; Slater 1970) published before I wrote to Smith, and I did not learn of Smith's 'dunlin-style' birds until at least 1982. I cannot find pre-1981 documentation of the term 'dunlin-style' birds.

4. (a) Morimoto (1987) said 'Smith commenced a correspondence with Shane Parker, . . . pointing out the similarities between his dunlin-style birds and Cox's specimens, and suggesting the possibility of a stereotyped hybrid or even a new species'. He and Smith (1984a) implied that Smith's ideas were original. Smith said 'Mr Parker replied immediately to my letter expressing interest in my suggestions . . .'
- (b) When Smith first wrote to Parker about 'the mystery wader' on 16 March 1981, he made only suggestions that Parker and I (and others) had thought of many years before (see 'The Undunlins' above) and which we were pursuing. Parker's reply of 19 March 1981 showed no interest in Smith's suggestions, beyond the passage ' . . . now that I have your statement that your own birds are all, as you say, stereotyped'. More to the point, *Parker asked Smith* about the Dunlin reports.
5. (a) Smith (1984a) and Morimoto (1987) said that Smith and Parker collaborated in studying these birds for about 15 months. Smith then wrote, after ' . . . cooperation in this matter I was surprised to read an article . . . "A new Sandpiper of the genus *Calidris*" by S.A. Parker', and 'no reference was made in the article to our joint studies'. Morimoto said 'and no mention was made of Smith's major contributions even in the many acknowledgements. This perplexed Smith, and since then he has struggled for "due recognition in the discovery of this species"'
- (b) Smith (1984a) and Morimoto (1987) wrote chronologies of the events which led to the naming of Cox's Sandpiper; but neither mentioned that Smith had summarised his field observations for publication and Curry had added the name '*perplexa*' to the piece (Smith 1982), and on learning that the paper was in press Parker (1982) therefore wrote another paper in which he named the bird. Parker described only the two specimens and made no reference to the joint study because he had not read Smith's description of '*perplexa*', and it had not been established that all of the birds Smith had seen were of the same identity as the specimens. Also, Smith had made no contribution towards the collection or study of the specimens.

## The results

Smith (1984b) listed 21 sightings of his 'Observations of the new sandpiper in Victoria 1955-1982'. Of these, he had previously described two as Pectoral Sandpipers (Smith 1968) and eight had been published as Dunlins (Smith 1969, 1970, 1972a, 1972b; Wheeler 1975). I questioned some of these records (Cox 1987) because at least one of the original descriptions matches Dunlin rather than Cox's Sandpiper and the identity of others cannot be accurately determined from their published descriptions. However, I stated 'It is also highly probable that some of Smith's earlier sightings . . . are referable to *paramelanotos*, although it is unlikely that all can now be authenticated'. They cannot be authenticated because field descriptions are the basis of ornithological sight records and they are not changeable many years later. Morimoto (1987) said 'Smith has reliable witnesses to support his sightings'. Even so, witnesses cannot alter what has already been written about the birds. It is sad that, to date, I cannot find a single published description of a Cox's Sandpiper from Victoria that shows it was undoubtedly that bird. Accepting that the one photographed on 28 March 1971 can have its identity verified, the only other well-founded record is a bird seen in March 1986 that was also photographed (Grant 1987). I recognised (Cox 1987) 'that there is a steadily accumulating number' of sightings which might be verified in the future.

In my opinion, the controversy over the naming of this bird, as discussed by Morimoto (1987, 1988), has played a major role in preventing the publication of more detailed information. Another reason I questioned some earlier records (Cox 1987) was my concern that Dunlin characteristics were creeping into the descriptions of Cox's Sandpiper in the popular literature (e.g. 'shorter legs', Simpson & Day 1984). I therefore described the birds in detail.

### Current investigations

I took no part in the naming of these birds because it is possible they are hybrids. Grant (1987) recognised that possibility, but argued 'The increasing number of sight records in Australia goes against the hybrid view'. Kasprzyk et al. (1988) made a similar statement when describing the Cox's Sandpiper which occurred in Massachusetts, U.S.A., on 15-21 September 1987. Vickery et al. (1988) listed six of its plumage characters which they '... offer as new evidence that Cox's Sandpiper is not a Pectoral and Curlew hybrid, and is probably a species'.

Against those arguments is the fact that most Australian sightings are undescribed and it is not known if the birds had hybrid characteristics. Also, I consider the plumage characters of the Massachusetts bird, listed by Vickery et al. (1988), to be intermediate features which could suggest it was a hybrid. The reasons for this contrary view are in a paper (Cox 1989) which discusses Cooper's and Cox's Sandpipers.

In February 1988 S.A. Parker kindly showed me 15 colour slides of the Cooper's Sandpiper specimen which were sent to him by R.L. Zusi of the National Museum of Natural History. After studying them, I concluded that both forms (Cooper's and Cox's) are similar birds. Differences between them are probably of a seasonal nature or are an indication that each is a different kind of hybrid. This view was expressed on 15 February 1988 in a letter to Parker, in which I said 'it is beyond the bounds of credibility that two so similar birds represent different species'. The possibility that they are hybrids is still being investigated, but whatever the outcome, I believe there are only two options to consider before their correct identity is established:

1. Cooper's Sandpiper *Calidris cooperi* (Baird, 1858) and Cox's Sandpiper *Calidris paramelanotos* Parker, 1982, are one species. Therefore the earlier name proposed by Baird should be used for this species.
2. Cooper's and Cox's Sandpipers are hybrids. Therefore both scientific names are invalid.

### Acknowledgements

An earlier draft of this article was sent to all persons involved in the dialogue. Their views were sought to induce an understanding of the various arguments so that the dispute can come to an end. I gratefully acknowledge the responses I have received from the people concerned.

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I received unpublished documents from many sources. Copies of these papers have been lodged in the RAOU Archives, La Trobe Library, Melbourne.

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