

## SHORT NOTE

### First and second sightings of a little stint (*Calidris minuta*) in New Zealand

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On 30 November 1992, CH observed an unusual stint amongst the annual influx of red-necked stints (*Calidris ruficollis*) at Lake Ellesmere. He tentatively identified the bird as a little stint (*C. minuta*), but viewing conditions were poor and no notes were taken.

In the course of a visit to Lake Ellesmere on 18 February 1993, SP and KH were searching through a flock of 61 red-necked stints in eclipse plumage when their attention was drawn to a stint with brightly coloured plumage, which stood out amongst the rest of the birds. Being familiar with the pre-nuptial reddish plumage of red-necked stints that is assumed late in the season, they agreed that the plumage of the new bird was distinctly orange-rufous rather than reddish. The bird stayed at the lake, moving around as water levels changed, until it was last seen on 25 April 1993. Although the bird was quite tame and could be approached to within about 15 m, attempts to photograph the bird during this period were unsuccessful. Five Ornithological Society of New Zealand (OSNZ) members submitted reports to the OSNZ Rare Birds Committee.

During a visit to Lake Ellesmere on 4 January 1995, SP and KH were accompanying a visitor from Israel, who observed an unusual-looking stint amongst the red-necked stints. Confident as our

Israeli visitor apparently was that the dark-legged small calidrid was not a little stint (he was familiar with the species), we considered other possibilities, namely western sandpiper (*C. mauri*), Baird's sandpiper (*C. bairdii*), semi-palmated sandpiper (*C. pusilla*), and red-necked stint. A process of elimination, again, led to the conclusion that the bird was a little stint. Many other observations throughout the summer, during which the bird assumed breeding plumage (Table 1), confirmed the conclusion.

By 28 February 1995, the area of colour in the centre of the crown had shortened and the split supercilium was fainter; the breast markings had spread across the breast and appeared more extensive. The orange wash on the breast had faded. On 22 March 1995, the bird was developing breeding plumage. The right side of the mantle had a clear straw-coloured stripe and the dark brown and rufous extended down the scapulars and out to the tail; the chin and throat were now white. When last seen on 12 April 1995, the bird was accompanied, as usual, by red-necked stints which were by now in breeding plumage. The mantle 'V' of the little stint showed up clearly and the orange-rufous colouring had brightened, and could easily be distinguished from the redder red-necked stints.

CH was successful in taking photographs of this bird, which were submitted to the OSNZ Rare Birds Committee. Both the 1992/93 and the 1995 sightings were accepted by the Rare Birds Committee (UBR93/23; Medway 2000).

**Table 1** Plumages of birds identified as little stints (*Calidris minuta*) and of red-necked stints (*C. ruficollis*) observed at Lake Ellesmere during the austral summers of 1992/93 and 1994/95.

Little stint		Red-necked stint
1992/93	1995	
Slightly smaller and slimmer than red-necked stint	Slightly smaller and slimmer than red-necked stint	
Forehead - base near bill whitish, dark above	Same	Similar
Crown - early season - pale orange-rufous, streaked chocolate brown. Centre of crown dark to back of head, colour merging into rest of crown giving the crown a narrow appearance when viewed from front.	Chestnut-orange, speckled black.	Faint chestnut brown; a less distinct dark line along the ridge. Back of neck grey-brown.
Mantle - orange-rufous streaked chocolate-brown with a pale straw-coloured 'V' and another discontinuous line almost parallel but less distinct on upper scapulars.	Early season similar. Later in the season, dark chestnut-orange, speckled with black and edged with a strong yellow 'V'.	Slight buff. Faint whitish mantle 'V'. Small, regular black mottling giving a striped look; no orange.
Early season - upper and lower scapulars - dark brown centres fringed with orange-rufous and straw.	Early season - upper scapulars - dark brown with indistinct grey edges. Lower scapulars - dark brown centres with russet and buff edges. In breeding plumage, only a single line of feathers with chestnut.	Along upper scapulars, feathers greyish brown with a broad greyish white edge.
Projecting primaries - long, with brown to black tips. Appeared slightly longer-winged than red-necked.	Similar.	Similar colour, but medium length.
Eyestripe - not strongly defined, but straw-coloured with a narrow crown stripe giving the appearance of a split supercilium, which became fainter through the season.	Early in the summer no apparent split supercilium, but similar to 1992/93 bird later in the season.	No lateral crown stripe.
Ear coverts - dark brown with a small distinctly darker patch in centre.	Similar.	No auricular spot.
Chin, throat and centre of breast white; at each side of breast a pale rufous overlaid with mid brown streaking. Later the breast band closed, similar to a pectoral sandpiper ( <i>C. melanotos</i> ).	Pale cream chin and throat, later becoming white; breast with dark brown streaking ending in an almost pectoral band.	No white throat; breast mid grey as for upperparts.
Belly and flanks white.	Similar.	Not as white.
Bill - black, straight although from some aspects appeared very slightly decurved; longer and finer than that of red-necked stint.	Similar.	Shorter and slightly thickened tip.
Legs - very dark grey to black; slightly longer than those of red-necked stint.	Similar.	Similar colour; legs appeared slightly shorter than those of little stint.

## DISCUSSION

Much has been written about the identification of small stints (for example, Grant 1986). Our attention was drawn to the little stints in the first instance as a result of their substantially different colour compared to the accompanying red-necked stints. This also made recognising the bird, once a flock of stints had been located, very easy on subsequent visits to the lake.

Red-necked stints in New Zealand during the austral summer are normally uniformly grey and white before assuming breeding plumage. Various references (e.g., Hayman et al. 1986; Chandler 1989; Paulsen 1993) suggest that non-breeding red-necked stints and little stints have very similar plumages. This is not our experience from observing little stints at Lake Ellesmere. Photographs of red-necked stints taken in New Zealand (Pringle 1987) show the pale plumage well. Paulsen (1993: p. 258) showed a bright and a pale juvenile red-necked stint, the latter approaching in appearance birds normally seen in New Zealand. Both these birds were photographed in Japan during September.

Furthermore, when red-necked stints in New Zealand moult into breeding plumage, they start by developing a warm pinkish plumage around the sides of the neck, eventually gaining some reddish or rufous on the upperparts (Pringle 1987: p. 356). Only rarely are brightly-coloured birds, as frequently depicted, seen in New Zealand. Grant (1986) refers to a problem little stint as being "rather too orange-toned (not the 'brick-red' of classic red-necked)", with which we concur. We are, however, unable to explain why the differences particularly between the breeding plumages of New Zealand red-necked stints and little stints have not been well documented, and have not discovered any description of racial variation in red-necked stints that may account for this observation.

Lake Ellesmere is the most important wintering ground in New Zealand for red-necked stints

(Sagar *et al.* 1999). It accommodates up to 200 birds annually, thus making it a logical place for a vagrant little stint to be found. These and other waders are normally found on extensive salt marsh and mudflats, dominated by *Mimulus repens*, which are covered and uncovered as water levels and wind direction vary. The little stint is abundant in the West and Central Palaearctic, wintering mainly in Africa (Cramp & Simmons 1983). Small numbers regularly visit Australia (Higgins & Davies 1996), among other countries. Both breeding and non-breeding ranges overlap with those of red-necked stints (Cramp & Simmons 1983).

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