

SHORT NOTE

First record of a stilt sandpiper (*Micropalama himantopus*) in New Zealand

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On 9 Sep 1998, I visited Yarrs Bay, Lake Ellesmere, to see if any additional migratory waders had arrived. The weather was fine and sunny, with a southeast breeze. I counted 7 bar-tailed godwits (*Limosa lapponica*) and 9 curlew sandpipers (*Calidris*

ferruginea) feeding/resting/roosting on the salt flats. I thought there was another curlew sandpiper near the first ones, but this bird had yellow legs. I moved closer, and noticed that it had very long legs, comparable in length to those of a pied stilt (*Himantopus leucocephalus*). In body size, the bird was comparable to the curlew sandpipers nearby, but it appeared larger because of its long yellow legs. Its

Received 1 December 2004; accepted 31 March 2006

bill was long (c. 1.5× head length) and straight, but it drooped at the tip.

The colour of the mantle, tertials, and wing coverts was very similar to that of a curlew sandpiper in winter plumage, but it had brown bars beneath the tail. The bird was feeding, moving into the south-easterly breeze, and the sun was behind it, so I moved to get a better front view: it had a pale supercilium and a dark eye stripe, the lores were dark, and solidly marked from the base of the bill to the eye. The crown was dark brown, and the rest of the head, hind neck, and the sides of neck were grey. The breast was off-white, streaked with grey, and the belly was off white ("dirty white"); the sides were barred. The mantle and wing coverts were grey, and the tertials were brown, with what seemed to be rufous buff edges with a white fringe.

The bird was approachable, because I was riding a 4-wheel-drive motorcycle. The curlew sandpipers flew away when I approached too closely, but the new bird merely walked away. When alert it stood up, and its neck was longer than that of a curlew sandpiper. I took several photographs in case the bird flew away. I had never seen the species before and, from the long, yellow legs, thought that it might have been a lesser yellowlegs (*Tringa flavipes*).

Later, I consulted 3 shorebird identification guides (Chandler 1989; Hayman et al. 1989; Paulson 1993) to try to identify the bird. The bill of the lesser yellowlegs was too fine and up-turned to match that of the Ellesmere bird, but a photograph of a stilt sandpiper (*Micropalama himantopus*) in Chandler (1989) showed it to be very similar. It was not identical, because the photograph showed a stilt sandpiper in winter plumage, and the bird I saw was moulting and still showing some breeding plumage, with dark brown barring on the sides and beneath the tail. The plumage pattern and moult showed that it was not a juvenile.

I alerted other local observers: Steve Wratten saw the bird the same evening: N. Bither; Tony Crocker; Don Hadden; Kathleen Harrison; and Sheila Petch saw the bird the next evening. From their observations, they agreed with the identification. Ms Bitter commented that the bird fed like a dowitcher (*Limnodromus* spp.) i.e. its bill probing was sewing machine-like. Other features noted by these observers included that in flight the legs extended beyond the tail more than in curlew sandpipers, and the rump patch was not as white as that of a curlew sandpiper.

The adult stilt sandpiper in (northern hemisphere) summer plumage is similar to the grey-tailed tattler (*Tringa brevipes*) and wandering tattler (*T. incana*), being medium-sized and grey

above in all plumages, with barred underparts; all have medium-length straight bills (Paulson 1986). However, whereas tattlers also have yellow legs, they are short, not long and stilt-like, and tattlers lack a white rump. In non-breeding plumage, it can be confused easily with the curlew sandpiper, especially when feeding in deeper water.

The flight pattern may suggest either lesser yellowlegs or Wilson's phalarope (*Phalaropus tricolor*), but the yellowlegs is obviously larger, and the phalarope's toes do not project as far beyond the tip of the tail. In flight, it shows a white patch on the lower rump and upper tail, as in curlew sandpiper, but almost no wing bar. Its pale greenish toes and part of the legs projecting beyond the tail clearly separate it from the curlew sandpiper (Hayman et al. 1986).

Its habit of feeding by constant probing, usually in water, is distinctive. Of the medium-sized sandpipers, only dowitchers feed similarly, but stilt sandpipers are long-legged and short-billed in comparison. Lesser yellowlegs are about the same size and proportions, but feed differently: they move rapidly through the water, picking prey from on or below the surface (Paulson 1993).

The stilt sandpiper breeds in North America. Its normal migration autumn route is south across the plains of central North America to its main non-breeding area in central South America. A few stilt sandpipers move down the Pacific coast. It is a rare passage migrant in Japan, and has been recorded in Taiwan. It has been recorded 4 times in Australia (3 sightings confirmed), all of which were of single birds (Higgins & Davies 1996).

This bird may have reached New Zealand by being attached to flocks of curlew sandpipers, which are regular visitors to Lake Ellesmere.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank all members of the OSNZ who checked this sighting, and Paul Sagar for helping to draft this report.

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Keywords stilt sandpiper; *Macropalama himantopus*; Lake Ellesmere; New Zealand; first record