

*Flight pattern:* Squarish white area on rump and upper tail not extending up the back between the wings. Wings uniformly dark with no wing bar, feet projecting beyond tail. Flight buoyant and rapid, usually above, or at the front of, the wader flock of about 150 birds.

*Behaviour:* A very active bird feeding almost continuously, even among the roosting Godwit and Knot, but occasionally resting on its belly on the sand. Used quick purposeful strides and rapid head movements to take food from the surface, more often to the side than to its front, and twice seen to take insects in the air. Also seen to wade in the shallow water and on several occasions to swim but not seen to 'spin' for food. Several roosting Godwits were seen to react antagonistically to close approaches by the feeding bird.

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#### WILSON'S PHALAROPES AT LAKE ELLESMERE

On 19 November 1983, Jason Hopkinson, Geoffrey Woodley and PMS were counting waders at the southern end of Kaitorete Spit, Lake Ellesmere, when we observed an unfamiliar wader. The bird was feeding actively in water up to its belly and was associated with Curlew Sandpipers (*Calidris ferruginea*). Our initial impression was of a very pale, active, medium-sized bird with a needle-fine bill. Both the feeding action and pale features of the bird were reminiscent of the Marsh Sandpipers (*Tringa stagnatilis*) we had seen at Lake Ellesmere in 1981. However, we eliminated this species when the bird eventually walked out of the water and we saw its relatively short-legged appearance. From observations to within 50 m for 40 min, using a 20-45X telescope, we identified the bird as a Wilson's Phalarope (*Phalaropus tricolor*).

*Size and appearance:* Slightly larger, more slender and elongate than a Curlew Sandpiper. Throughout the observation period the bird maintained a horizontal posture.

*Plumage:* White forehead, chin and lores. White supercilium, and dark grey line from behind eyes to nape. Grey crown, nape and neck, becoming light brown-grey on the back, upperwings and tail. Wing coverts finely edged with white; in the folded wing, the outer primary looked dark grey-black. The underparts, including undertail coverts, were white, except for a grey wash on the sides. It was noted that the white feathers of the flanks and sides extended over the leading edge of the folded wing. When the bird stretched its wings the underwing 'armpit' looked very pale but the other feathers were grey. In flight, a small, square, white rump was obvious, and the uppertail was grey. No wing bar was observed.

*Bare parts:* Bill black, needle-like and straight. The legs were oval in cross-section and yellow-brown, and the feet looked dark green, with yellow margins to the toes.

Subsequently, the Wilson's Phalarope remained at Lake Ellesmere until at least 25 April 1984, providing an attraction to many OSNZ members. During this period, observations indicated that more than one phalarope was present. This was eventually confirmed on 22 December 1983, when KH and Peter Wilson saw two feeding together at a ponded area near the lake edge. At this time one bird was feeding along the pond edge, while the other fed by spinning around in deeper water, in typical phalarope fashion. No plumage differences between the birds were evident, but the legs of one were noted as yellow-green and of the other as smoky grey. Subsequently two birds were seen together on 24 December 1983 (George Glover), 2 January 1984 (Frank Hollay and Wilf Mawson), and 8 & 28 January 1984 (George Glover). On 2 January both birds were feeding while spinning around on the surface of a pond. These are the second and third records of this species in New Zealand, the first being reported from the Manawatu Estuary in September 1983 (Moore & Moore, this issue).

Wilson's Phalaropes breed in the temperate zone of the North American interior and winter in South America from Peru and Bolivia to Chile and Argentina (Cramp & Simmons 1983, *The birds of the Western Palearctic*). They are rare vagrants to Australasia, there being only three records from Australia (Pizzey 1980, *A field guide to the birds of Australia*), in addition to those from New Zealand.

The extended stay of at least one phalarope at Lake Ellesmere allowed plumage changes to be noted. When one bird was seen on 19 February 1984, it was still in winter plumage with worn flight feathers and wing coverts, but the dark line behind the eyes seemed more distinctive. By 3 March a slight chestnut was on the flanks and the black line behind the eyes extended down the sides of the neck. When next seen, on 15 April, the bird was in full breeding plumage and identifiable as a female.

The feeding habits of the phalaropes were distinctive, the birds adopting a horizontal posture while snapping insects or spinning around on a pond and pecking insects from the water. When wading, the phalarope would snap insects flying over the water or peck rapidly at the water surface. While feeding along the shore the bird walked slowly, rapidly snapping flying insects.

Phalaropes are rare wanderers to New Zealand but now all three species have been recorded from Lake Ellesmere — a Grey Phalarope (*P. fulicarius*) was collected in 1925, and a Red-necked Phalarope (*P. lobatus*) was recorded in 1929 (Falla, Sibson, Turbott 1979, *The new guide to the birds of New Zealand*).

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