

OBSERVATION OF A LONG-BILLED CURLEW
IN MASSACHUSETTS

by Blair Nikula, Chatham, and Henning Stabins, Harwich

Shortly after arriving on the north island of Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge, Chatham, late in the afternoon of June 6, 1984, the writers flushed from the marsh a shorebird that, because of its large size and completely brown dorsal coloration, immediately attracted attention. The bird flew south, directly away from us, then wheeled and alighted on a dry mudflat about a hundred yards distant. As it landed, with wings momentarily raised, we were able to see that it had reddish-buff wing linings and buffy underparts. Most obvious at this point were a prodigious, decurved bill and the bird's large size relative to some nearby Brant (Branta bernicla) and Herring Gulls (Larus argentatus). Observation through a 20X telescope revealed that the crown was unstriped, eliminating any doubt that the bird was, as initially suspected, a Long-billed Curlew (Numenius americanus).

The bird remained on the flat for thirty minutes or so, during which time Massachusetts Audubon Society biologists, Denver Holt and Bob Humphrey, arrived. After several more minutes of observation, we began to move south to obtain a different angle and improved lighting but, in the process, flushed several night-herons, apparently alarming the curlew and causing it to flush also. The curlew flew west to the edge of the marsh, turned north for roughly four hundred yards, then flew south, and eventually landed a short distance south from where it took off. During this flight we were able to see again the coloration of the wing linings and dorsal surface. After the bird landed, we left the island, not wishing to disturb the curlew any further.

The curlew remained on Monomoy through midmorning on June 10 and was seen by an estimated seventy-five people during its stay. At about 9:00 A.M. in the morning of June 10, shortly after spotting the curlew among a distant group of plovers and gulls, the writers and two other observers watched it take off alone and fly off high to the southwest until completely out of sight. The bird was not reported from the area again.

The general impression given by the curlew was that of a very large, pale brown shorebird, which, when seen on the ground near several Herring Gulls, stood three or four inches taller than the gulls. The overall dorsal coloration was a mottled brown, resulting from the coverts and tertials being buff-brown with blackish centers and white spots along the fringes. The secondaries and inner primaries were uniform buffy-brown. The outermost four or five primaries were uniform dark brown and appeared quite worn. The underparts, from the breast to the undertail coverts were a warm, pale buff, with fine dark spotting or streaking on the sides of the upper breast. The

neck, throat, and face were light brown contrasting with a darker brown crown, which was finely streaked with black but lacked any semblance of a median stripe. A pale white line ran back from the base of the bill, over the eye, ending just behind the eye. The wing linings were cinnamon-buff, and the rump and tail were pale buff-brown with fine blackish streaking that was heaviest towards the ends of the rectrices.

The bill was extraordinarily long, approximately equal in length to the body of the bird, and was relatively straight over the basal half but prominently decurved through the distal half. The bill was mostly blackish except for the basal third or so of the lower mandible, which was distinctly pinkish. The legs were pale flesh-gray.

On June 8, Blair Nikula heard the bird call three or four times as it flew past at fairly close range. The call was two-syllabled, consisting of a short first note followed by a slurred, ascending whistle: "cur-leeeee." The bird was generally very wary, as is typical of this genus, and rarely allowed observers to approach closer than about seventy-five yards.

In identifying a Long-billed Curlew in this area, four other species of large shorebirds need to be considered. The most common species in the northeast, the Whimbrel (Numenius phaeopus), is smaller, less buffy, has brownish wing linings, a smaller, more uniformly decurved bill, and a bold pattern of dark brown and white stripes on the crown. The closest species in size and structure is the Eurasian Curlew (Numenius arquata), a very rare vagrant to North America (two or three records) that has been recorded on Monomoy once¹ (September 9 to October 12, 1976). It differs from N. americanus by its duller brown (less buffy) coloration overall, more heavily streaked underparts, whitish wing linings, and a prominent white "v" pattern up the rump and lower back. A very remote possibility in this area, the Far Eastern Curlew (Numenius madagascariensis), is also similar in size and structure but is less buffy, more heavily streaked underneath, and has whitish wing linings barred with brown. The fourth species, the Marbled Godwit (Limosa fedoa), is a bit smaller, brighter buff in coloration overall, has barring on the underparts, and a recurved bill.

Blodget (List of the Birds of Massachusetts, 3rd edition, Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife, 1983) cites four previous Massachusetts records for Long-billed Curlew: one shot in Essex County in 1905 (fide Griscom and Snyder); one shot in Marshfield on August 10, 1909 (fide Griscom and Snyder); one collected in Chatham on June 15, 1938 (Bishop and Griscom); and a sight record from Monomoy on

¹Ed. note: In the interval since this paper was submitted to BOEM, another Eurasian Curlew appeared on Monomoy and remained from September 16 to October 1, 1984.

May 31, 1979 (Nisbet). The sighting detailed herein thus constitutes the fifth record for the state. Complete details of this record, accompanied by two recognizable photographs, have been submitted to the Massachusetts Records Committee for review and are on file at Massachusetts Audubon Society.

BLAIR NIKULA is an old hand at reporting rare birds. Among a number of articles that he has contributed to this magazine are several model field reports - on Swainson's Warbler, BOEM 10(4):219, on Little Stint, BOEM 8(5):187, and on Common Gull, BOEM 12(1):18. The fact that he has been on the scene of so many unusual sightings attests to his birding acuity and the long hours he spends in the field. Since 1982, he has served as the editor of the spring migration for the northeastern maritime region for American Birds. Blair is a lifelong resident of Cape Cod whose chief interest is shorebirds. He is president of the Cape Cod Bird Club and is currently co-operating with other members of the club to produce a bird-finding guide to Cape Cod. He has served as a tour leader on birding trips to Trinidad and Arizona and on pelagic trips off the Massachusetts coast, has birded in Churchill, and has studied shorebirds in Guyana and Surinam. He works as office manager and technician at a weather and wind instrument company on the cape.

HENNING STABINS is a senior at Harwich High School and has been birding for about two and a half years. He is considered by some to be the top seventeen-year-old birder on Cape Cod.

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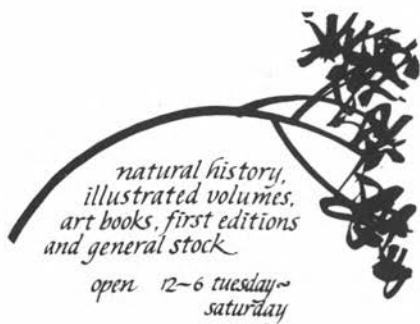
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