ESKIMO CURLEW: ON THE ROAD TO RECOVERY AT LAST, PERHAPS

by Andrew H. Williams

In January 1988, I opened the new issue of *Endangered Species Technical Bulletin* and found a photograph of an Eskimo Curlew, *Numenius borealis* (Anon. 1987). It was a 1962 photograph, which I had seen before, but the information in the accompanying article was electrifying news. In late May, "Canadian Wildlife Service biologists found a pair in the Canadian Arctic. Preliminary reports indicated that a nest may have been located." This article mentions reports of observations in April in Nebraska and in April and May in Texas, all in 1987. In summary, we have several observations, including a possible nesting pair, all in the appropriate places at the right times of year, all in one year and reported in a document published by the Department of Interior in Washington. This adds up to the most exciting news I have heard in a long, long time! The same article concludes with the following paragraph:

> In response to the increased number of observations of Eskimo Curlews, a group of shorebird specialists from the United States and Canada at the recent American Ornithologists' Union meeting in San Francisco met to discuss ideas for recovering the species from the brink of extinction. Among the ideas mentioned were increasing public awareness that the species is not extinct; characterizing migration, winter, and nesting habitat; and protecting and managing known migration stopover areas.

Among the group of shorebird specialists was Massachusetts' own Kathleen S. Anderson, Director Emeritus of Manomet Bird Observatory.

Since reading this information I have heard reports of three fall observations in 1987: one in Maine and two separate occasions and observers on Monomoy. That is three reports in one fall, at appropriate places and times.

Part of my excitement is that even government agencies seem to be coming around to the belief that the Eskimo Curlew still exists. People who hold power of budgets for bird conservation seem hardest to convince, perhaps because there are innumerable ways to spend limited money to help other species in need. For example, in February I received a letter from an ornithologist at the National Museum of Natural Sciences of Canada who dismisses all observations of Eskimo Curlew since 1944 as "unconfirmed," despite photographs and even a specimen shot in 1963 in Barbados (Bond 1965). With respect to highly endangered species, bureaucratic ornithologists often seem unwilling to accept reports of observations, almost as if they prefer that the bird remain "extinct." (For an interesting discussion of this subject, see Harwood 1986.) So, if our

Department of Interior and some subset of the Canadian Wildlife Service are referring to Eskimo Curlews in the present tense, I think there is cause for special excitement.

Of course, some of these observations may be instances of mistaken identity. Perhaps several of them are. What of the others? Even the Department of Interior thinks the birds are alive and well and living somewhere. Our hopes for this species are better founded than they once were.

Before the Eskimo Curlew was extirpated, it was a frequent visitor to the coasts of New England and New York. Its appearance hereabouts was irregular, but its numbers on occasion were spectacular. In some years, few were seen here. In other years, heavy east winds blew the migrating birds onto our shores in astounding numbers. Forbush (1912) has written of the Eskimo Curlew that it was "formerly so abundant on the New England coast that its flocks resembled those of the Passenger Pigeon; now believed to be extinct." Elsewhere he wrote (1925), "The Eskimo Curlew formerly was one of the extremely abundant birds of America." Usually it was seen in August or September, closely associated with the coastline and especially with outlying islands and capes. When in Massachusetts, it often associated with the Lesser Golden Plover *(Pluvialis dominica)* and was most often found in open and short-grass habitats -- heaths and pastures -- where it ate mostly crickets and grasshoppers. It also associated with its larger congener, the Whimbrel *(Numenius phaeopus)*.

Much has been written about humanity's sordid role in the Eskimo Curlew's disastrous decline (Bent 1929, Forbush 1912, Forbush 1925, Johnsgard 1980, Mathiessen, Clem, and Palmer 1967). As the Passenger Pigeon diminished, hunters' guns were increasingly turned upon shorebirds and the decline of plovers and curlews began in the last part of the 1800s. Chroniclers of this era nearly always refer to the Eskimo Curlew's unsuspicious nature. The curlew would circle back over the hunters, calling out to the fallen birds (a habit shared with Dunlins, dowitchers, and many other shorebirds). Since about 1900, very few *Numenius borealis* have been seen, and some people have thought the species extinct. An excellent book devoted to this bird and the result of exhaustive research by its authors is *Eskimo Curlew: A Vanishing Species?* by J. B. Gollop, T. W. Barry, and E. H. Iversen, 1986, Special Publication No. 17 of the Saskatchewan Natural History Society, Box 1121, Regina, SASK S4P 3B4, available at $9.00.

More observations of the Eskimo Curlew will probably be reported. If you keep this species in mind next August and September while you are shorebirding, you may see one or more of these very rare birds, winging along our New England coast -- perhaps on the road to recovery at last.

Andrew Williams *Photo by* Daily Hampshire Gazette

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ANDREW H. WILLIAMS is a Massachusetts naturalist who now lives in Haydenville and regularly writes for this publication. In an article in the February 18, 1988, *Daily Hampshire Gazette* ("Eskimo Curlew lives!") describing his enthusiasm for the Eskimo Curlew and his conservation advocacy, Andrew described himself as a "Route 128-fast-track-corporate-computer dropout" -- a step taken to devote himself to his major interests, birds and books. He currently works at Smith College in the science library.