

FIELD NOTES

Finding a Eurasian Kestrel on Lieutenant's Island, South Wellfleet, MA

Leslie Bostrom

Sunday, April 14, 2002. My partner, Pat Maier, and I had an argument about what route we should take back to the house. She wanted to take the road because it was shorter, and I wanted to walk around the island on the beach, hoping I might see some late winter ducks. Pat persuaded me we really did not have much time, and we started back along the sand road that winds along the edge of the salt marsh.

Lieutenant Island is a large, irregularly shaped mound of sand in the middle of an expanse of salt marsh and tidal flats. Pointing roughly westward into Wellfleet Harbor, on the bay side of Cape Cod, it is just north of Mass Audubon's Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary, which owns part of the island. The island is studded with summer cottages but also has an amazing number of mini-habitats: pine woods, a small deciduous swamp, fields with thickets where Prairie Warblers nest, both mudflats and sand tidal flats, and beach, salt marsh, and eel grass environments. I've spotted a number of interesting birds on or around the island, most recently an American Avocet (August 1, 2002).

It was around 3 o'clock on a windless, sunny afternoon; the harbor water was barely wrinkled; the island was empty and silent. The marsh grass was brown, with whorled cowlicks from the winter tides, and the locust and oak trees were still bare. We approached a place where a narrow arm of the marsh cuts across the road, dividing the island into what the residents call the "first" and "second" islands.

Looking north up the marsh, I saw a hawk-like shape in the top branches of a locust tree about fifty yards away. I trained my binoculars on it. The bird was facing me. Although it had a superficial resemblance to an American Kestrel, it was much too big, bigger than a crow. It was being halfheartedly buzzed by a couple of agitated goldfinches. Its breast feathers were a light rust, and it had brilliant yellow feet, a blue-capped head, and a long gray tail with a black band toward the end. As it turned its head back and forth, preening, I saw one thin, black moustache line on each cheek.

I said to Pat, "This is so weird! It sort of looks like a kestrel, but it's too big, and the face is wrong – all kinds of things are wrong – the breast, the tail..." I'm fairly familiar with the falcons and other raptors I'm likely to see on the Cape. I've seen numerous American Kestrels, the occasional Merlin blown in by a storm, never a Peregrine, although I've seen them in other places. In addition, I've seen Red Tails, Bald Eagles (always immature), Sharp-shinned Hawks, Cooper's Hawks, Northern Harriers, and Broad-winged Hawks. Because this bird did not resemble any immature or atypical plumages I could think of, I suspected I had some sort of vagrant.

Along the other side of the marsh is a woods area of pitch pines. Leaving Pat on the road, I walked as quietly as possible through these woods until I was directly across the marsh from the bird, perhaps twenty yards away. At this point I got a really good, long look. It was definitely some kind of falcon, with pointed wings folded behind its back, separate from the tail. I noted the long, gray tail with a wide black band. It had a reddish back, blue head, and yellow around the eye and at the top of the curved beak. I saw the delicate, dark moustache line. The bird's fluffy, buff-colored leg feathers covered the legs almost to its feet. I stepped to get closer, and then it flew, showing the tail with the black band and two-toned wings: deep rusty red up to the wrist and then black to the tips. It gave a couple of strong flaps and glided north to a pine tree.

I rejoined Pat, we ran home (less than five minutes), and I looked the bird up in the National Geographic field guide, third edition. There it was, right next to the American Kestrel, and there seemed to be no mistake about the identification, since it (luckily) looked pretty much exactly like the painting in the book. It was a male Eurasian Kestrel. If the resemblance had been less exact, I would have doubted my identification because the book said these birds have been seen rarely on the East Coast, and only in the fall. So I ran out the door again, thinking I might get another look. As I arrived at the marsh, the bird flew, and I got another brief but clear look at the red and black wings, gray and black tail, and its easy, athletic flying style.

I returned to the house and called the Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary to report the bird. I had last seen it heading south, and I really hoped they might pick it up. Because I had no picture or other confirmation, I figured no one would believe me, and indeed, no one did. I was not really worried, however. The Cape has more birders per square mile than any other place I can think of, and someone else was going to notice this bird! Bob Clem spotted the bird on Wednesday morning, April 17, in Chatham, over fifteen miles south of Lieutenant Island, and the rest is history. 🦅



EURASIAN KESTREL BY JIM BAIRD

Eskimo Curlew Sighting on Martha's Vineyard

John Nelson

On Tuesday August 27, 2002, at 3:16 p.m., I was driving North on the Cape Poge road with my son Andrew for an afternoon of field ornithology and bonito fishing. I had pulled off the single lane road to let a southbound vehicle exit the narrow road when I looked west over the Shear Pen Marsh. I saw a curlew flying toward the road from the marsh at an altitude of approximately 50 feet. The bird was approximately 100 yards away from me when I first sighted it. The bird flew in typical curlew fashion with a strong and graceful flight pattern.

At first, I was quite sure it was a Whimbrel. Because it was flying out of the west and from the direction of the sun, my ability to observe coloration and size was not ideal. As the bird got closer and then passed directly over my vehicle at about fifty feet, I was struck by the size and coloration of this bird. It was much smaller than a Whimbrel, between half to two-thirds the typical size. Its overall plumage was a warm brown, not the typical gray coloration of a Whimbrel. The most striking characteristic of this bird was the rich cinnamon color of its wing linings as it passed directly overhead. My son Andrew, who is an avid ornithologist and naturalist, was sitting in the passenger seat next to me. He moved his head outside of the window to observe the bird as it passed directly overhead. He also was struck by the size and plumage of this bird. He looked at me and said, "Dad do you think it could be?" We have observed a great many Whimbrels in the past and were both struck by the fact that this bird was no Whimbrel.

The bird moved to our right and looked as if it was trying to pick out a spot in the beach grass and *Hudsonia* area of the dunes to land. At that moment another vehicle was moving south on the Cape Poge road at a rather fast speed and spooked the bird, which flew across the road in a westerly direction out over the Shear Pen Marsh. The bird did a survey of the eastern part of the marsh and then changed its course to head out to a thin barrier beach that separates the southwest portion of the Shear Pen Marsh from Cape Poge Bay. It circled the barrier beach twice, and then came in for a landing. The wind conditions at the time were NNE at 10-20 mph. The bird approached the beach from the southwest and landed into the wind. It alighted in the high area of that barrier beach amid the beach grass.

I looked at my son and said, "I've got to get close to that bird," and drove my Trooper as close to the marsh as I could and organized my stalk. I wanted to approach this bird with the sun in my back so that I would have the best opportunity to observe its coloration, size, and all other field characteristics in the best possible light conditions. To do this, I would have to cross approximately 250 yards of open salt marsh, while first using a low wooded island to obstruct my view from the resting curlew. The sky conditions were excellent, a perfectly clear day with temperatures in the high 60s. I waded across the outflowing tide of a tidal stream about three feet deep and pulled myself up on the *Spartina patens* marsh to begin my hike across the high

marsh. I moved as close to the northern part of this marsh as I could while moving in almost a due west direction. I crossed approximately 200 yards of open *Spartina patens* marsh. I had to wade across two rather treacherous low spots in the marsh to complete my course to my planned optimum location to begin my observation. One of the low spots was particularly treacherous, since it was a saltmarsh panne composed of black ooze covered by about three feet of water. I got across it, though. I had a bird to observe. I continued my westerly route across the marsh to place me about 75 yards up light of where I had seen the bird land. My heart was pounding with excitement.

I began to move down the barrier beach in the direction of the spot where I knew the bird had landed. I moved in a stalking method taught to me by my superior at Mass Audubon's Wellfleet Bay Sanctuary, the late Wallace Bailey. I was employed by Wallace at Wellfleet Bay as a field naturalist and the Monomoy Island National Wildlife Refuge ornithology tour leader during the mid-1970s. Wallace taught me his method of approaching shore birds by walking five steps and then stopping for a minute or two before moving another five steps ahead. I have used this method successfully countless times in the past, and this method once again proved successful on this approach. I had moved approximately forty yards down the beach when I observed some movement in the beach grass approximately forty yards ahead of me. I immediately froze. The curlew had seen me and moved slightly, which gave its position away to me. I moved slowly to a prone position and began crawling on my abdomen to approach the bird. Between myself and the bird was a small rise in the barrier beach covered with beach grass about three feet in height. I immediately placed that small mound between myself and the curlew to obstruct the bird's view of me as I approached it while crawling on my stomach. I slowly crawled to the small rise and carefully moved my head slightly to my right, keeping my body behind that small hill and out of view from the curlew. The curlew was standing approximately thirty feet away preening its feathers and I raised my binoculars. My first observations were validated at this time. This was not a Whimbrel.

This curlew was slightly less than two-thirds the size of a Whimbrel. Its overall plumage was a warm brown, not the gray plumage tone of a Whimbrel. It had a short, decurved bill that was much thinner and one-third shorter than that of a Whimbrel. The base of the lower mandible was a pink flesh tone where it met the feathers of the lower head. It had a slight eye streak but lacked the profound dorsal crown striping of the Whimbrel. Its legs were a creamy olive color not the blue-gray of the Whimbrel.

As I observed the bird, I was struck by its tame demeanor. It seemed to be observing me as much as I was observing it. It was silent as I observed it. During this time my son Andrew approached me from behind, and he also crawled on his abdomen to a position along side of me. He was thrilled to make the same field observations as I had made. The curlew preened its wing feathers with its bill. On two occasions it stretched its wings over its head, exposing the warm cinnamon-colored wing linings. Also at this time the coloration of the undersides of the wing primary feathers was clear for observation. The primaries were a solid chocolate brown, not the variegated lined primaries of the Whimbrel.

After we had been observing the curlew at this position for approximately fifteen minutes, it began to move down the foreshore to a large mat of eelgrass that had washed ashore as a result of the frequent and unusual east and northeast winds of this August 2002 season. The curlew walked in a deliberate and slow manner. When it reached the eelgrass mat, it dipped its bill into the vegetation three times and started to slowly walk away from us. As it proceeded down the beach, we were both struck with the small size of this bird. It continued down the beach in its deliberate way, occasionally turning its head to observe us as we followed it. As we continued to follow, it became more concerned about our presence and seemed ready to fly. It did eventually flush and once again exposed the cinnamon wing linings and the solid chocolate primary feathers. It flew low down the shoreline and curved to the left, landing on a stretch of shoreline with a group of Greater Yellowlegs and a few Black-bellied Plovers. This made for an excellent size comparison. The curlew was slightly bigger and more robust than the Black-bellied Plovers and about the same body length as the Greater Yellowlegs.

The curlew remained stationary with the flock of other birds and did not interact with them. The Greater Yellowlegs spotted us and gave the alarm to the other resting shorebirds as they flew off with their clear three-note whistle *kew, kew, kew*. The plovers took off with the yellowlegs, but the curlew did not take flight. It waited perhaps fifteen seconds after the other birds flushed to take off. As it took to the air, it flew by us at a distance of about forty feet and produced a melodic twittering call somewhat reminiscent of a Golden-Plover. I had never heard this call before. It was not the distinct seven-note whistle of the Whimbrel, or the musical whistle of an Upland Sandpiper. As it flew by, I once again had a clear view of its cinnamon wing linings, solid chocolate primaries, and its short decurved bill. It flew west for about 100 yards over Cape Poge Bay and then turned due east toward the Shear Pen section of the Cape Poge road. As it approached the dune line past the road, it had gained an altitude of about 200 feet. It then circled back over the shore of Cape Poge Bay and headed due south at a rapid speed in the direction of the Dike Bridge and was lost from sight.

My son and I looked at each other, and I said to Andrew, "Did we really see what we saw?" He replied, "Dad, I am so glad we saw the Eskimo Curlew together. I will never forget today as long as I live." Nor will I.

When I reached my home in West Tisbury, I began a series of hurried phone calls to inform others of our sighting. My first call was to local birding expert Vern Laux, author of the Bird News in the *Vineyard Gazette*. Vern was not home, but had left a number where he could be reached on Prince Edward Island. I called him there and spoke to him at great length about my curlew observation, which he included in his column the following Friday. I called Dr. Robert Cook in Eastham, head wildlife biologist at the National Park Service North Atlantic Research Lab in Truro. Bob was intrigued by my observations and encouraged me to speak to Wayne Petersen at Mass Audubon's office in Lincoln. When I tried to call Wayne, I got a message stating he

would be out of his office for an extended period. I also called other local birders, but any efforts to rediscover the curlew were unsuccessful.

Over a period of the next few days, my phone rang at a rather frequent rate. It became quite apparent that among the birding community news travels fast. 🐦

A Note on the Report of Eskimo Curlew

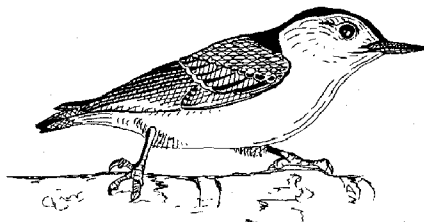
Marjorie Rines

The Eskimo Curlew, once abundant in North America, is now considered by most ornithologists to be extinct. In its day, the fall migration of this species took a direct shot from the Canadian Maritimes to South America, starting in late August and ending around the end of September. A combination of strong easterly winds and rain, however, would occasionally displace these oceanic flights toward shore, periodically grounding them in large numbers at favored localities such as Nantucket.

Since 1918 the only well-described observation of an Eskimo Curlew in Massachusetts was that of two individuals reported August 6-7, 1972, at Chilmark, Martha's Vineyard. Several additional unconfirmed sight records from other locations are similarly lacking in specimen or photographic evidence, but keep a faint hope alive that perhaps there is a small breeding population surviving somewhere in the vast, unpopulated areas of the Northwest Territories.

On September 5, 2002, two observers watched a small curlew on Martha's Vineyard for over fifteen minutes from as close as 30 feet. Their conclusion that this was an Eskimo Curlew was supported by a detailed report (see the preceding article), and the report was submitted to the Massachusetts Avian Records Committee (MARC). It was not accepted, not surprising given its tenuous status. The significance of an accepted record for Eskimo Curlew would not be local or even North American, but global in its impact. Given this, no record without photographs, specimen, or perhaps a large group of expert observers is ever likely to be accepted for this species.

"Presumed extinct," however pessimistic, still leaves a window of hope that someday a specimen or photograph will appear. It is therefore important to include any report of a well-documented sighting of this species in the ornithological literature. The preceding report includes that documentation, but also tells the story of the joy of discovery and sharing of that discovery. 🐦



WHITE-BREADED NUTHATCH BY WILLIAM E. DAVIS, JR.