Three New Species for Massachusetts from Plum Island in 2001-2002

Richard S. Heil

In the northeast corner of the Commonwealth, in Essex County, lies a barrier beach and great salt marsh complex that includes the well-known Plum Island, most of which is incorporated within the Parker River National Wildlife Refuge near Newburyport, arguably the single best birding location in Massachusetts. The refuge comprises a six-and-a-half-mile-long sandy beach with a backbone of tall dunes interspersed with dense thickets of coastal scrub and patches of maritime forest, behind which lie thousands of acres of salt marsh and tidal estuaries. There are numerous salt pans, several grassy uplands, and three large man-made fresh impoundments created in the late 1940s for the purpose of encouraging the breeding of American Black Ducks (*Anas rubripes*).

Certainly the single most popular birding location in the state year-round, the refuge is an important migratory site for waterfowl, shorebirds, and passerines both in spring and fall. Given the proper weather conditions (usually inclement), tremendous fallouts of shorebirds and passerines, including flycatchers, swallows, thrushes, warblers, and sparrows often ensue. In recognition of this fact, the area was one of the first sites nominated for the Massachusetts Important Bird Area Program, just underway. The island, connected to the mainland by a short causeway and bridge across the marsh, has also hosted a long and impressive list of first state records over the years, including Little Egret, White-faced Ibis, Garganey, Spotted Redshank, Terek Sandpiper, Vermilion Flycatcher, and Sage Thrasher. This article documents the discovery of three species new to the Massachusetts list, all from Plum Island during a 12-month period: Pacific Golden-Plover (*Pluvialis fulva*), Broad-billed Sandpiper (*Limicola falcinellus*), and Couch's Kingbird (*Tyrannus couchii*).

Couch's Kingbird (*Tyrannus couchii*): September 7, 2001

Adrenalin still flowing from having observed a Northern Wheatear (*Oenanthe oenanthe*) elsewhere on the refuge earlier in the morning on September 7, 2001, I energetically headed out to Hellcat intending to survey shorebirds at the Bill Forward Pool. While traversing the dike toward the Hellcat tower and the pool, I turned, and using my binoculars (B&L Elite 10 x 42), noticed a roughly robin-sized, yellowish bird perched in one among a group of dead trees, just in from the proximate east edge of the pool, about 500 feet distant. Fumbling to set my scope up quickly and get it on the bird, my initial presumption was that it was a *Myiarchus* flycatcher. Having taken only a brief side profile of the bird with my binoculars, I had observed a yellow belly and very warm brown, almost rufous-appearing, tail. As soon as I had a view in the scope, however, I knew that this was no *Myiarchus*, but rather was clearly a yellow-bellied *Tyrannus* kingbird. But which? The kingbird sallied out on frequent aerial forays after flying ants, which were abundant, but nearly always returned to the same

group of dead trees. In fact, the bird remained in plain sight, nearly continuously, for at least six and a half hours!


TROPICAL KINGBIRD BY DENNY ABBOTT

Once I had sufficient views of the bird, I gradually noted the salient features, including the large bill, medium gray head and nape, dusky mask, greenish back, brown slightly notched tail, and bright yellow underparts extending to the upper chest. Only then did I reasonably convince myself that this was not just a very worn Western Kingbird (*T. verticalis*), obviously the most expected yellow-bellied kingbird in New England, but was rather either a Tropical Kingbird (*T. melancholicus)* or a Couch's Kingbird (*T. couchii*), both extreme rarities. Although there are subtle plumage and structural differences in this species pair, which can aid in identification, there is also much overlap, and neither is considered safely separable from the other, except by voice. The bird was thus far silent.

After viewing the bird from this location for nearly an hour, I decided it was time for a closer view. From the Hellcat parking lot I crept through the vegetation to a clearing adjacent to the clump of trees where the bird was perching and flycatching. Here I enjoyed very excellent backlit views through the scope of the still silent kingbird, at perhaps less than 200 feet, and easily noted the rather worn condition of all the flight feathers, indicating that the bird was an adult. After about 20 minutes here I returned to my original position on the Hellcat dike and continued viewing the bird through the scope for another half-hour. At this point I left the refuge to make a few phone calls. When I returned, the kingbird was still in position. Shortly thereafter, a number of other birders began to assemble and study the still silent bird, including Doug Chickering and Lois Cooper.

The defining moment occurred sometime after 3:00 p.m., when a Peregrine Falcon arrived on the scene, streaking in from the north and flushing all the shorebirds at the adjacent pool. Immediately upon the Peregrine's arrival the kingbird began calling from its perch, uttering several sharp, brief, spaced *kip* calls, diagnostic of Couch's Kingbird, four or five in all, clearly and unambiguously heard by all present. Later, a dozen or more additional birders arrived, including Denny Abbott who was able to obtain some useful video footage. The bird continued to flycatch in plain view from the same group of trees until at least 6:45 p.m., when I departed. Unfortunately, it never vocalized again during the course of the afternoon. The kingbird apparently departed thereafter, since it could not be found the next day.

DESCRIPTION

Head and Neck: Crown and nape gray; lores darker, dusky gray to blackish; auriculars dusky gray forming a subtle mask, appearing bold at certain angles and lighting, but nearly nonexistent at others; chin and throat much paler grayish-white,

contrasting with the gray head and yellow underparts; structurally bigger- (heavier-) headed than Western Kingbird, with thicker neck.

Bill: Large, heavy, thick-based, black, with a very slight curve to culmen, and a small but noticeable hook at the extreme tip; the bill was considerably longer and heavier than any Western Kingbird's, but was judged shorter and stouter than the bill of most Tropical Kingbirds. By comparison, from recollection and from a review of photographs of each, this bird's bill appeared slightly shorter, but in particular, considerably heavier (broader- and thicker-based) than the Hingham, Massachusetts, Tropical Kingbird of November 2000, the first state record for that species.

Underparts: Bright, deep yellow, extending from, and including, undertail coverts up to upper breast/ lower throat, rising just above bend of folded wing; yellow on upper breast/ lower throat subtly suffusing with obscure pale gray below the brighter white of chin and throat proper. At certain angles this imparted an obscure, pale greenish-yellow chest band, particularly on the sides of the upper chest, where it formed an extension of the greenish back.

Back: Rather bright green-olive, showing a fairly sharp contrast with gray nape.

Wings: Primaries, secondaries, tertials, and coverts were brownish, worn and somewhat ratty-looking (but this was only noticeable at close range), yet all still showing somewhat narrow, diffuse, paler grayish-white fringes, broadest on the wing coverts. The primary tips were not seen well enough to discern or comment upon any possible notching or comparative primary morphology.

Tail: Long in appearance with a noticeable, but rather shallow notch, worn and ragged-looking; rather uniformly brown in color, although at times appearing quite rufous, and completely lacking the bold white outer webs of the outermost (r6) rectrix that is characteristic of Western Kingbird. At close range all of the tail feathers actually possessed narrow, diffuse, paler tips and edges, which were nevertheless frayed.

Vocalizations: Four or five sharp, brief, spaced, *kip* or *pik* call notes given from a perch in an alarm response to a passing Peregrine. The kingbird was watched while giving these calls, and the observation included seeing the bill opening and closing during the vocalizations. These calls were clearly and unambiguously heard by each of the half-dozen or so observers present at the time, including local birders Doug Chickering and Lois Cooper. These single note *kip* calls are absolutely diagnostic for Couch's Kingbird and are quite distinct from the rolling, metallic, twittering call characteristic of Tropical Kingbird. Single-note calls such as these are apparently unknown for Tropical Kingbird.

Summary: Several structural and plumage features of this obvious Tropical/Couch's Kingbird suggested Couch's Kingbird (*Tyrannus couchii)* from the get-go, including, a brighter green back, brighter yellow underparts, a slighter tail notch, and especially the bill shape, being thicker-based, heavier, and stouter than most Tropicals. This suspicion was confirmed when diagnostic calls were eventually heard after watching the bird for some three hours.

Prior records of Couch's in the Northeast: None previously for New England. There is one plausible record for Nova Scotia, at Cape Sable Island, October 16, 1997, which apparently was reasonably described, and the calls were said to match Couch's. The record was written up in *Birder's Journal* (9: 196-199), although I have not read it. Extralimital records of Couch's in the east include Florida (four+), Arkansas (one), Louisiana (three), and Alabama (one). In addition, Northeastern records of indeterminate Tropical/Couch's come from Nova Scotia (different from the above-mentioned) and one also from Maine. The Plum Island Couch's was accepted as the first state record (#01-10) by the Massachusetts Avian Records Committee, reported in the Sixth Annual Report (April 2002).

Pacific Golden-Plover (*Pluvialis fulva*): April 21 to May 5, 2002

Early on the morning of April 21, 2002, the author (along with Jan Smith) discovered a golden-plover in transitional plumage in salt marsh adjacent to several salt pans on the west side of the Parker River National Wildlife Refuge main road, approximately 1.9 miles south of the entrance on Plum Island, Newbury, Essex County, Massachusetts. Almost immediately upon viewing the bird, I believed it to be a Pacific Golden-Plover (*Pluvialis fulva*) nearly in alternate plumage. Over the next four hours we observed the bird roosting, preening, and occasionally walking around adjacent to several small pans about 150 meters from the road. During the course of the next two weeks, the plover remained remarkably faithful to this site, and it was subsequently viewed by perhaps several hundred additional birders. In addition, numerous digital images of the plover were obtained by Tom Carrolan, Phil Brown, Steve Mirick, and others.

DESCRIPTION

Since the plover was present for 15 days, and for the most part dependably so at the described site, I was able to observe it in detail on numerous occasions and for extensive periods. The numerous photographs taken clearly document the bird's identity better than any written description. Nevertheless, the following description is a compendium of the features observed over the course of its stay.

General: The bird was clearly a *Pluvialis* golden-plover in transitional plumage, but nearly in alternate plumage. By the end of its stay the plover had molted essentially into alternate plumage. The immediate impression was of a long-billed, long-legged golden-plover with very bright golden upperparts and an extensive black belly, these being separated by a white stripe ringing the bird from the supercilium, down the neck, breast, and flanks to under the tail.

PACIFIC GOLDEN-PLOVER BY STEVE MIRICK

Upperparts: Crown, rear of nape, mantle, back, and scapulars brightly

patterned black and gold, finely marked on the crown and nape, but very coarsely marked on the mantle and scapulars, with comparatively large golden spotting on the feathers in these areas, along with some smaller white spotting. The overall resultant appearance was of very bright golden, intricately patterned upperparts.

Underparts: Black face, throat, breast, and belly, extending to the crissum, where it ended with some black mottling and intrusions of white. When the plover was first discovered, the dark area on the face was not yet truly black but was more of a lightly mottled, dusky grayish-black, but this area became essentially black during its stay. There was a white stripe running from the supercilium down the sides of the neck and breast, along the flanks, and wrapping around under the tail to join the other side. This white stripe was somewhat broader at the upper breast, although this varied with the bird's posture. Along the flanks and on the sides of the lower breast, somewhat dense gold and black barring intruded into the white areas there.

Head and face pattern: The immediate forehead above the bill was rather extensively white, such that the white supercilium wrapped across to the other side. A tiny section of the chin just below the bill was also white, and in fact there appeared to be a narrow ring of white feathering completely encircling the base of the bill, such that the black of the face did not quite touch the bill, or did so only very narrowly near the gape. The white supercilium was narrowest anterior to the eye and flared out evenly to become broadest at the extreme rear. Posterior to the black auriculars, the white stripe became broader still as it dipped down along the neck to the upper breast.

Primaries and tertials, and their relationship to each other and the tail: The plover possessed a comparatively short primary projection beyond the tip of the longest tertial. On those occasions (several times) when the slightly paler primary edges could be discerned, it appeared that only two primaries extended beyond the tip of the longest tertial, although it is quite possible that it may have been three. The tip of the folded primaries extended only a comparatively short distance beyond the tip of the tail, and at times even appeared to be nearly equal in length. Similarly, the long tertials fell only slightly short of the tip of the tail and at times appeared to nearly reach them. The long, blackish tertials were very coarsely marked with fringing, large and broad, straw-yellow triangles. On windy days these wispy feathers were often seen raised, blowing in the gusts.

Underwings: On at least five occasions I had opportunities, with others, to observe all or part of the underwings, either when the plover was raising its wings preening or when it took flight. The underwings were generally gray, but not uniformly so. Approximately the distal fourth of the underside of all the flight feathers were darker than the rest of the underwing, while nearer the base of the primaries appeared the palest gray. The rest of the underwing, including the underwing-coverts and axillaries, appeared a medium gray. The underside of the distal portion of the outermost primary showed a very high contrast between the dark gray or even blackish feather, and a long, bright white shaft streak (see Plate 37 in *Tundra Plovers* by Byrkjedal and Thompson 1998).

Bill: The blackish bill was very long, and slender, broader nearer the base, and apparently evenly tapered. By both observations in the field, and especially by measurements of various photos, the bill, if reversed, would extend well beyond the rear of the eye.

Legs: The legs appeared grayish, or even a dull blue-gray, and were very long, and delicate looking, at times appearing almost "stilt-like." Several of the photos by Steve Mirick illustrate both the very long tarsus and tibia (as well as the long bill) of this plover.

Vocalizations: The plover was mostly silent, but brief flight calls were heard on two occasions, once by the author, though not well. As best I can describe, the plover called several times as it took flight, issuing a clearly two-syllabled *chu-eee*, somewhat recalling a Semipalmated Plover, and different from the familiar calls of the American Golden-Plover.

DISCUSSION

Immediately upon scrutinizing this bird on April 21, I believed that it was a Pacific Golden-Plover and posted it as such to the Massbird listserve. Having observed many Eurasian Golden-Plovers (*P. apricaria*) in Europe and perhaps thousands of *fulva* (although never in alternate plumage) on trips to Asia and Australia, I was familiar with the structure and tertial/primary/tail relationships of each. However, given that the date was precisely when numbers of *apricaria* often appear in Newfoundland, and also given the subtleties of golden-plover identification, I initially embraced a somewhat conservative approach to the bird's identification. However, repeated observations only served to strengthen and confirm my initial identification of the plover as *fulva*.

Structurally, the very long "knitting-needle" legs appeared much too long for any Eurasian Golden-Plover, and probably for most American Golden-Plovers (*Pluvialis dominica*). They imparted a particularly delicate look to the plover when it walked about foraging (of the three, male *fulva* has the longest average tarsus, 43.9 mm, while female *apricaria* has the shortest at 39.3 mm; measurements from *Tundra Plovers*, 1998). Similarly, the very long bill also strongly indicated *fulva* (male *fulva* also has the longest average bill length, 23.1 mm, and *apricaria* has the shortest, 21.5 mm for both sexes).

The very bright upperparts, with large golden spots, were much too bright for *dominica*, and too coarsely patterned for *apricaria*, which shows smaller spots on the upperparts and has more finely notched tertials. The extent of black on the underparts on this bird, extending to the crissum, in conjunction with the comparatively narrow, lateral, white stripe running along the flanks and wrapping around under the tail, also is classic *fulva*. Most *apricaria* show less extensive black on the underparts, usually not reaching the crissum, while *dominica* shows much more black, such that the white running down the neck ends in an expanded blob on the sides of the breast, but does not extend along the flanks in alternate males. The Plum Island plover did not show this expanded area of white on the sides of the breast to the extent typical of

dominica. The white area along the flanks was intruded with dense gold and blackish barring, which is typical of *fulva* and not present to this extent in *apricaria*. Finally, the generally gray underwing noted on numerous occasions clearly excluded Eurasian Golden-Plover as a contender.

The relationship of the primaries, tertials, and tip of the tail, in the folded wing, was distinctively characteristic of *fulva*. The comparatively short primary projection on the Plum Island bird, showing only two visible primaries extending beyond the longest tertial eliminated both *apricaria* (shows 4 primaries), and *dominica* (4-5). It is quite possible that the bird actually had three primaries extending beyond, since in *fulva* P9 and P10 are often very close together, and this distinction may have been missed in the field. Furthermore, the long tertials on the plover fell only a little short of the tip of the tail, very different from either *apricaria* or *dominica*, in which the shorter tertials in these species fall far short of the tail (see Fig. 4.2 in Byrkjedal and Thompson for an illustration depicting all of these relationships).

MOLT TIMING

The Plum Island golden-plover was nearly in alternate plumage by the time of its arrival on April 21, which in and of itself made the bird stand out and demand a "closer look." All previous American Golden-Plovers that I have personally seen in Massachusetts in March or April (perhaps 5-10) have been in full basic plumage. Observers in Texas and Kansas, where large flocks of American Golden-Plovers are seen in spring migration, independently reported to me that *all* birds seen there in mid-April are in full basic plumage. Even migrant *dominica* in May seen locally in New England are often still in transitional plumage. In fact, it is interesting to note that the timing of the prealternate molt among the three species of golden-plovers does indeed differ considerably. The American Golden-Plover begins this molt on average up to a month later than the other two species (initiating migration north in the spring while still in basic plumage), whereas Pacifics and Europeans begin their prealternate molt earlier, on the wintering grounds. Therefore, any golden-plover in North America in or near alternate ("breeding") plumage during April is unlikely to be *dominica*.

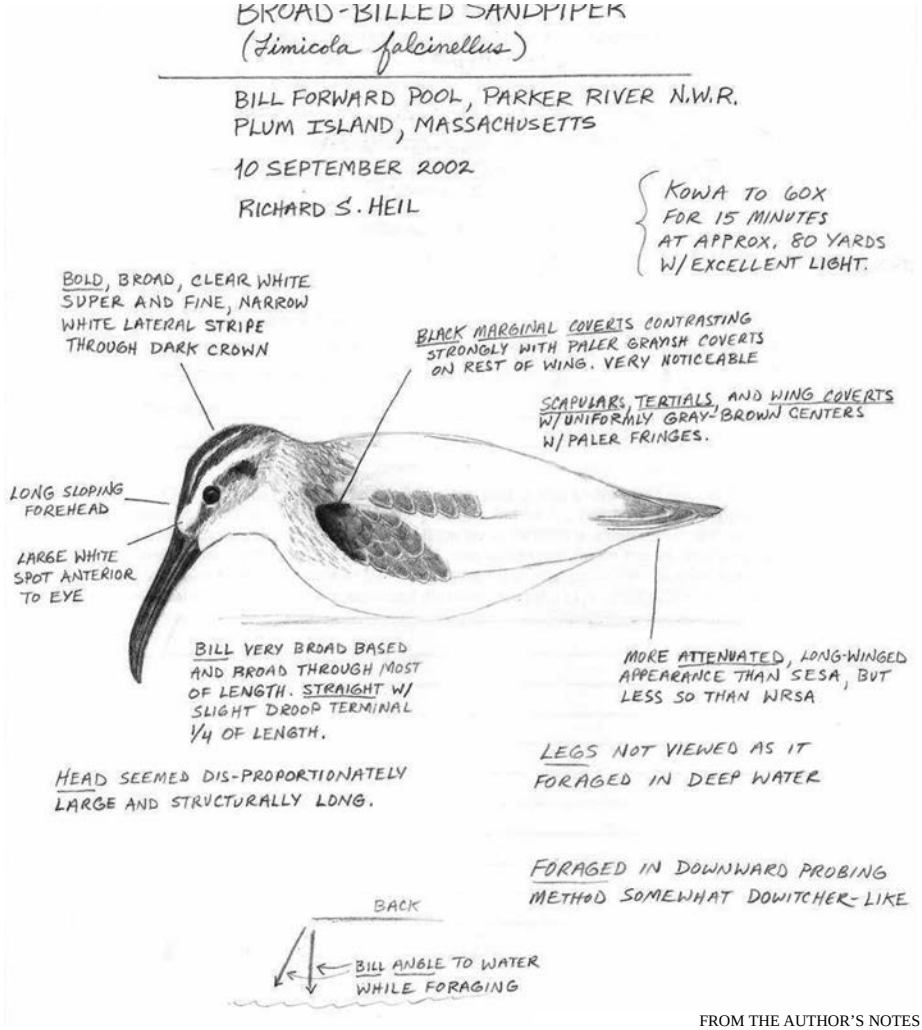
SUMMARY

In sum, there was absolutely nothing about this well-documented bird that was atypical of an alternate plumaged male Pacific Golden-Plover, despite repeated careful scrutiny for anomalies. The record (#02-10) was accepted by the Massachusetts Avian Records Committee and reported in their Seventh Annual Report (this issue).

There were no prior accepted records for Massachusetts, only one previous record for New England, and none for the Canadian Maritimes. Prior documented records of *fulva* in the East include an adult in prebasic molt just this past September in New Jersey, accepted by the New Jersey Records Committee, March 23, 2002, and an adult female shot at Scarborough, Maine September 11, 1911.

Broad-billed Sandpiper (*Limicola falcinellus*): September 10, 2002

All summer 2002, almost every weekday afternoon when there was a late day high tide, I had been doing a survey of the salt pans, the Bill Forward Pool, and Stage Island Pool, three prime areas on the Parker River National Wildlife Refuge on Plum Island, Massachusetts, for staging shorebirds. On the afternoon of September 10, 2002, while counting shorebirds during high tide at the Bill Forward Pool, I was, to say the least, shocked to set my gaze upon a bird showing all the characters of a Broad-billed Sandpiper, a species found only once previously in the "lower forty-eight." In short order I had sufficient views through my Kowa TSN-824 scope with a 20-60x zoom, noting the distinguishing characteristics, and I immediately recognized the species. I became progressively more confident over the course of the next fifteen minutes, with even closer views, that I was indeed looking at a Broad-billed Sandpiper.



FROM THE AUTHOR'S NOTES

The bird, probably a worn juvenile, was feeding in shallow water just behind the close island flat that cormorants, gulls, and shorebirds often roost on. The sandpiper was loosely associated with several each of juvenile Semipalmated and adult White-rumped sandpipers, and one or two juvenile Short-billed Dowitchers. Several Dunlins were in the vicinity, although not in the same field of view, as the others often were. Looking around, there were no other birders anywhere in view; in fact there were no other visitors at all to the area for the next 45 minutes. After just a few minutes, I walked down the dike (into the closed area) to obtain a closer view and was able to approach the sandpiper to a distance of about 80 yards. At this distance I had a relatively close study of the bird through my scope at 60X for approximately 15 minutes. I was looking east at the bird, and the sun was behind me. Although it had been a very warm, somewhat humid day, by 4:30 p.m. it had become one of those clear late afternoons when optimal light results in crisp images.

I was close enough to the sandpiper that I was not just observing "gross" structural and plumage features, or just relying on the bird's "jizz," however distinctive, but was rather able to actually examine and study specific feather details. Observations abruptly ended when a juvenile Peregrine, the nemesis of all shorebird watchers (and shorebirds!), dashed through and put up all the birds. Most departed the area and did not return over the course of the next two hours. I had not relocated the bird by 6:30 p.m., by which time the tide had started to drop, and most all of the shorebirds had vacated the impoundment for distant salt flats.

DESCRIPTION

Size and shape: Direct side-by-side comparisons were made with both Semipalmated and White-rumped sandpipers. The Broad-billed appeared slightly larger-bodied, but noticeably more attenuated (longer-winged) than the surrounding juvenile SESA. Compared with WRSA, it was slightly smaller and less attenuated, therefore roughly intermediate in size and length between these two species, but perhaps closer to WRSA. The sandpiper was considerably smaller-bodied than several nearby Dunlins, although I had no side-by-side comparison with them.

Bill: Unique and distinctive; long, thick (especially at the base), and mostly straight, with a slight, downward droop at the very tip. At various angles from different, mostly side profiles, the bill appeared very thick at the base and remained comparatively (to other *Calidridrines*) thick for most of its length, finally tapering near the tip. I never obtained a good study of the bill entirely straight on, but a couple of quick glances as the bird rotated its position while foraging imparted a considerably broad appearance, as did several partial front angle views. This all blackish bill was long, much longer than adjacent WRSA, appearing longer than even the most extreme Western Sandpiper, and clearly longer than the bird's head length. It was notable for being nearly straight for at least 3/4 of the length, after which there was a slight downward droop, unlike the more uniformly tapered and drooped bill of a long-billed Western Sandpiper. The overall impression was that this was a considerable and unique "heavy" structure relative to the sandpiper's size that, combined with foraging behavior, imparted a distinctive appearance to the bird. (This may sound odd since I am discussing a *Calidrid*-like sandpiper, but the general "look"

of the face, combining a heavy-based bill structure and white super/dusky eye stripe, was reminiscent to me of Antarctic Prion.)

Head: Structurally a bit heavy-appearing, with a long, sloping forehead. The sandpiper possessed a very distinctive head pattern. Most obvious was a bold, broad, clean white supercilium, especially expanded to form a large white supraloral spot anterior to the eye, but remaining broad well to the rear of the head. The supercilium was apparently "split," because above it there was a second, very fine, white stripe that ran parallel and above the main supercilium, through the otherwise dark brownish crown (the crown was notably darker brown than the crowns of the surrounding SESA and WRSA). With effort, this pattern was noted on both sides of the head. I could not discern where this apparent split occurred, but it was certainly somewhere anterior to the eye. The other possibility was that it was not actually "split" but rather that the upper supercilium didn't quite meet the main one and was separated by a bit of dark feathering (as illustrated in the sketch of the sandpiper). There was a dusky eye stripe, including the lores, though not so dark as the crown. There was a contrastingly darker, expanded patch or postocular spot at the rear of the eye stripe. The rest of the face was generally quite pale with just some light streaking over the ear coverts to form a vague dusky patch. The chin, throat, and lower face were apparently unmarked white. On this generally pale-faced appearance, the dark eye appeared disproportionately large. The dusky lores, eye stripe, and big "bug eye" only served to increase the long, thick-billed appearance of the sandpiper. The sides of the neck and nape were much paler than the crown, with dull but fairly dense streaks over a very slight buff tone.

Underparts: White; sides of breast had some soft, fairly dense, grayish-brown streaks over a slight warm buffy tone. I could not determine how far these streaks extended across the breast, although they clearly diminished farther out toward the center. No marks were noticed on the flanks which appeared unmarked white.

Upperparts and closed wing: Mantle, scapulars, coverts, and tertials possessed no strong patterns (with one exception described below), having uniformly grayish-brown centers and narrow grayish-white fringes. These edges were not strongly contrasting and so created only a slightly scaly appearance to the upperparts. The edges and perhaps the bases to some of the mantle feathers and scapulars showed a very slight hint of rufous, and there was only a suggestion of any white "lines" on the back. The one exception to these rather uniformly patterned upperparts was that the carpal area and marginal coverts at the bend of the closed wing were blackish, and they strongly contrasted with the paler gray coverts on the rest of the wing. This darker patch was very noticeable and stood in stark contrast to the uniformly colored wings of the adjacent juvenile SESA. The tertials were rather long and appeared to fall only a little distance short of the end of the primaries, although I can't say how many primaries extended beyond them. I did not determine the relationship of the tertials/primaries to the end of the tail.

Legs: Not seen. The sandpiper was foraging in water nearly to its belly during the entire observation, as were all the other surrounding shorebirds.

Calls: None heard.

Foraging behavior/posture: While feeding, the bird generally held its bill nearly straight downward, nearly at a right angle to its back, thus often in the water. It probed in a straight up-and-down (vertical) motion, similar to a Stilt Sandpiper or a dowitcher (though not as rapid as the latter). Several times the Broad-billed paused and briefly assumed an apparently alert posture and held its bill in a more upright position.

Flight: The flocks flushed rapidly upon the arrival of the Peregrine, and I was unable to pick out and follow the Broad-billed as the flock quickly and erratically departed the impoundment.

DISCUSSION

Broad-billed Sandpiper is a globally uncommon species and in most areas, even within its range, is considered a somewhat scarce migrant. It is common at some passage and winter sites, however. Six thousand have been observed at one site in Australia, and 1000-1500 regularly occur at each of a few sites from the Arabian Peninsula to Southeast Asia. It is also a very distinctive species. The combination of a unique bill, and a distinctive snipe-like head pattern (minus the median crown stripe), leaves little with which to confuse it. The contrasting dark (blackish) marginal coverts (as on a Sanderling) were also very obvious during the observation. This is a key plumage feature, and one which I did not immediately recall as characteristic of Broad-billed Sandpiper, but it was clearly noted during the observation.

I had prior experience with Broad-billed Sandpiper from Australia, where I gained familiarity with the species from repeated observations of several individuals daily for a week along the Cairns waterfront during November 1995. While it is unfortunate that this record was not photographed, or subsequently seen by other capable observers, I never had any doubts as to this bird's identity. This record (#02-30) was accepted by the Massachusetts Avian Records Committee and reported in their Seventh Annual Report (this issue).

It is interesting and perhaps relevant to note that during August 2002 there was an influx of Broad-billed Sandpipers in Europe (*Birding World* 15 [8]) west of their normal migration route. Two juveniles together in England were termed "unprecedented," while others were in France (1), the Netherlands (8), and Austria (8), the latter two counts about double the normal totals there. A *peak* of *sixty* in Hungary was called "exceptional" and was about six times the usual highs there (Steve Gantlett, pers. comm.). Clearly something was going on with Broad-billed Sandpiper in Europe this summer, and this is the most proximal area for the source of a vagrant in the northeastern U.S. In addition, there are five records of Broad-billed Sandpiper from Iceland. However, since most North American records come from the outer Aleutian Islands of Alaska (four records, 8+ individuals), and given that the prevailing winds are from the west, an Asian origin involving the subspecies *sibirica* should not by any means be ruled out, particularly for a fall vagrant. The only photographically documented record outside of Alaska is of a bird at the Jamaica Bay

N.W.R. on Long Island, New York, in late August 1998 (*Field Notes* 52: 513-516). There is however, a very convincing sight record of a Broad-billed Sandpiper from Hartlen Point, Nova Scotia, on September 9, 1990 (McLaren and Maybank), that was fully described in detail in an article by the observers in *American Birds* (46: 48-50).

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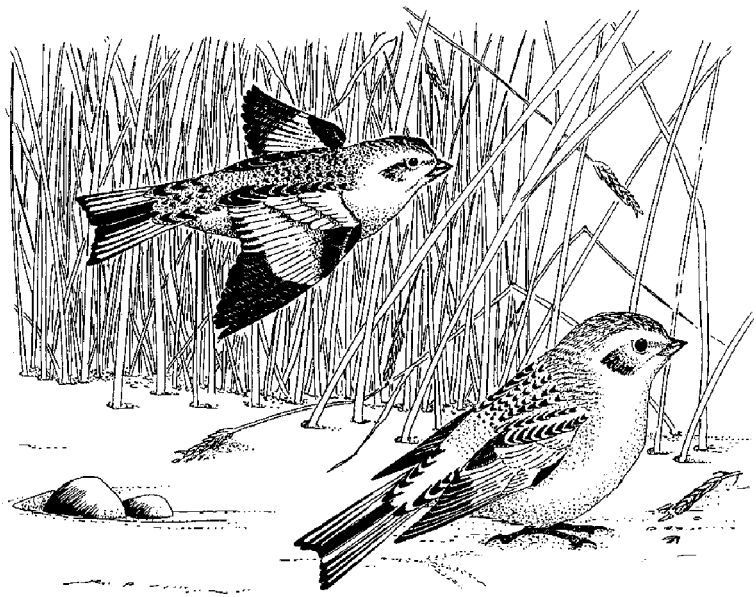

SNOW BUNTINGS BY GEORGE C. WEST