

# First record of the Bristle-thighed Curlew *Numenius tahitiensis* in Easter Island, Chile

Yerko A. Vilina, Antonio Larrea & Jorge E. Gibbons

Vilina, Y.A., Larrea, A., & Gibbons, J. E. 1992. First record of the Bristle-thighed Curlew *Numenius tahitiensis* in Easter Island, Chile. *Wader Study Group Bull.* 66: 43–44.

Vilina, Y. A., Larrea, A. & Gibbons, J. E., *Unidad de Biología de la Reproducción, Departamento de Biología Celular y Genética, Universidad de Chile, Casilla 70061–7, Santiago, Chile.*

## INTRODUCTION

The Bristle-thighed Curlew *Numenius tahitiensis* nests in the western tundra of Alaska. Southwards migration to Polynesian islands, in the South Pacific, starts from late August and return migration takes place in May. The Bristle-thighed Curlew has been found in Polynesia, and its distribution area extends between Caroline Island, in the south, to Fiji in the west, and Pitcairn and Ducie Islands in the Tuamotu

isolated of the Pacific Ocean. It is located 4,130 km to the west of Chilean continental coast, and 2,315 km from Ducie Island, the nearest island to the west. Easter Island is a volcanic island, with an area of 105 km<sup>2</sup>. It is approximately 24 km long and 12 km wide (Figure 1). The island is mainly surrounded by warm water, with a subtropical climate (24°C during summer and 20°C during winter). Its flora and fauna have been subject to detailed survey (Castilla 1987). Seven landbird species have been recorded; six introduced by man,

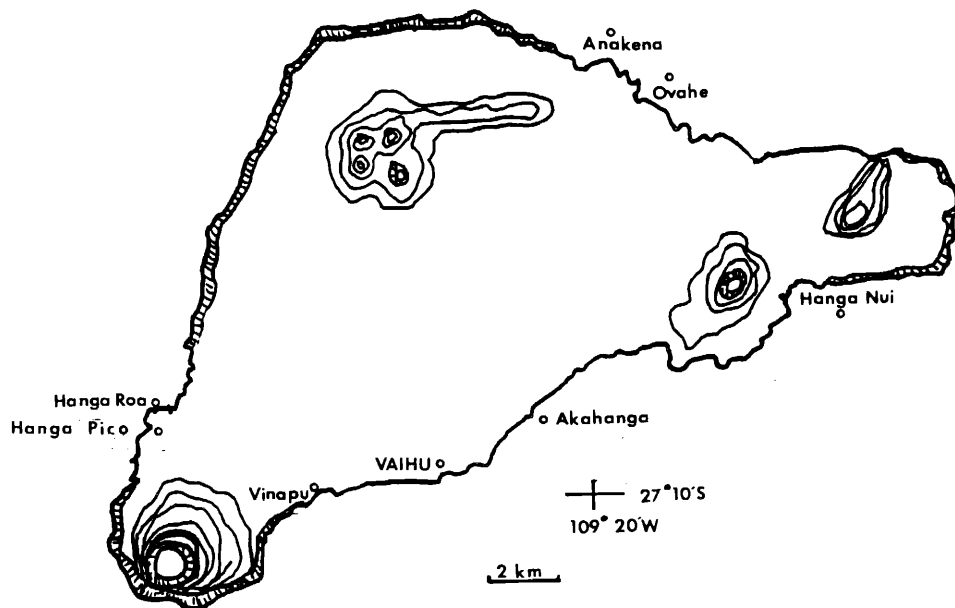


Figure 1. Location of Easter Island.

Archipelago to the east. Furthermore, this species uses the islands of Hawaii and Marquesa on passage (Hayman *et al.* 1986). It has never been recorded in the oceanic islands of Chile, such as Easter Island or Rapa Nui (27°09'S, 09°26'W).

Easter Island is the westernmost island of Chile, and the most

and one occasionally observed. Fourteen seabird species have been recorded, five nesting on the rocky cliffs and on the rookery of "Motus". However, no shorebird species has been recorded in the island (Schlatter 1987).

The island has 64 gastropod species in the rocky intertidal. Other species such as Polychaetae, Siphunculidae, barna-



cles, crabs, starfish, as well as invertebrates of the same families and genera of the other Pacific tropical and subtropical islands can be found here (Osorio & Cantuarias 1989). The marine algal flora include species which have a wide geographic distribution among other west Pacific islands (Santelices & Abbot 1988).

### METHODS

The island was visited on two occasions: between 16–23 September 1991 and between 20 April–21 May 1992. Observations were made with 8x30 and 10x50 binoculars. In addition, photographs were taken.

### RESULTS

A lonely curlew was detected during both visits to the island, and it was always seen alone in the rocky intertidal. During the first period, the curlew was seen in the northern region of Hanga Roa, and during the second period in the region of Vaihu (Figure 1). The main features of the bird taken from photographs and sightings, determined that it was a middle-size curlew, with brown or chestnut colored feathers and a supercilial line. These features resemble a Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus*. However, the upper tail, rump and underparts had cinnamon tinges, resembling the Bristle-thighed Curlew (Hayman *et al.* 1986).

Therefore, the curlew seen on Easter Island may be a Whimbrel – the only curlew of South America's Pacific Ocean continental coast, or a Bristle-thighed Curlew whose winter grounds are located in Polynesia. However, taking into account the size and plumage, and that the time and habitat of the observations were similar to that of normal wintering Bristle-thighed Curlews (see Hayman *et al.* 1986), we concluded that the bird was *Numenius tahitiensis*. This is the southernmost and a unique record for the species in Chile.

### DISCUSSION

Never before have members of the Scolopacidae or Charadriidae families been recorded in the oceanic islands of the area between Easter Island and the continental coast of Chile (Schlatter 1987). Therefore, it is highly improbable that the described Bristle-thighed Curlew had, by any chance, arrived from Alaska using an easterly route. It seems most probable that the bird(s) came from the islands of Tuamotu Archipelago, or directly from the north. The richness and diversity that characterize the intertidal, including the flora and fauna available there, may allow the birds to survive successfully and regularly return to the island.

Further studies to determine the population size and seasonal presence, and searches for this species on Sala y Gomez Island (26°27'S, 105°28'W), the nearest land to the east of Easter Island, are required.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are indebted to Claudio Christino, Manuel Gedda and Carmen Espozo for field support, and the crew of Chilean Army ship "Aguiles". This survey was partially financed by the Departamento Técnico de Investigación de la Universidad de Chile and supported by Manomet Bird's Exchange of the Manomet Bird Observatory.

### REFERENCES

- Castilla, J. C. (Ed.) 1987. *Islas Oceánicas Chilenas: Conocimiento y Necesidades de Investigaciones*. Ed. Univ. Católica de Chile. Santiago, Chile.
- Hayman, P., Marchant, J. & Prater, T. 1986. *Shorebirds: an identification guide*. Houghton Mifflin Co. Boston. U.S.A.
- Osorio, C. & Cantuarias, V. 1989. Vertical distribution of mollusks on the rocky intertidal of Easter Island. *Pac. Sci.* 43: 302–315.
- Santelices, B. & Abbot, A. 1988. Geographic and marine isolation. An assessment of the marine algae of Easter Island. *Pac. Sci.* 41: 1–20.
- Schlatter, R. P. 1987. Conocimiento y situación de la ornitofauna de las islas oceánicas chilenas. In: *Islas Oceánicas Chilenas: Conocimiento y Necesidades de Investigaciones*. (J. C. Castilla Ed.) Ed. Universidad Católica de Chile, Santiago, Chile. pp: 271–285.

