

19th century portrait of a hunter with a Slender-billed Curlew *Numenius tenuirostris*

NICOLA BACCETTI

INFS, via Ca' Fornacetta 9, I-40064 Ozzano Emilia BO, Italy, e-mail: infszumi@iperbole.bologna.it

Purely by chance, while glancing through a catalogue of 19th century Neapolitan paintings (Greco *et al.* 1993), my attention was drawn to an odd-looking hunter holding a domestic duck as if it were a trophy. Possibly he had shot one of his own decoys or a neighbour's duck by accident. To this day, such events are not uncommon among Italian shooters. However, I was more surprised to see that he also held a Slender-billed Curlew in the other hand. Despite being a secondary element of the painting, which was aimed mainly at a faithful rendering of the face and traditional clothing of the man, the bird is well reproduced and quite recognisable for what it is. I am not aware of any other depiction in historical art of this once common shorebird.

As the title of the painting is *Islander with wildfowl* and in view of the subject of other works by the same artist, there can be little doubt that the birds depicted were shot on an island, probably Ischia or Procida. This is really an irrelevant detail, as both are very close to Naples and known as key stopover sites during spring migration. The painting, by Luigi Rocco (1806–c. 1870), is an oil-on-canvas measuring 132×105 cm and belonging to the Taxes Office of Naples. It was painted during 1830–1850, well before *Numenius tenuirostris* was recorded as showing any sign of decline (Moltoni 1943, Stresemann & Grote 1943) and earlier than most skins in Italian museums were collected (Baccetti 1995). This record would be at least the sixth Slender-billed Curlew for the province of Naples and the second for a small Mediterranean island lacking any suitable habitat for waders. The other relates to a bird that was shot in November 1947 on the island of Ustica, near Sicily. Other reports from larger and more suitable islands are for Greece (Kos and Corfu), Tunisia, the Balearics, Canaries, Azores and even the Seychelles (Gretton 1991). Stopping-over on small islands suggests that Slender-billed Curlews performed long sea crossings on a broad front. Thus exhausted birds might land on virtually any island irrespective of whether it provided opportunities for feeding.

Baccetti, N. 1995. Revisione delle catture italiane di una specie giunta all'orlo dell'estinzione: *Numenius tenuirostris* (Aves, Scolopacidae). *Ricerche Biologia Selvaggina* 94: 1–18.

Greco, F.C., M. Picone Petrusa & I. Valente. 1993. *La pittura napoletana dell'Ottocento*. Pironti, Naples.

Gretton, A. 1991. The ecology and conservation of the Slender-billed Curlew (*Numenius tenuirostris*). *ICBP Monograph no. 6*.

Moltoni, E. 1943. Frequenza del Chiurlottello (*Numenius tenuirostris* Vieill.) in Italia. *Riv. Ital. Ornit.* 13: 100.

Stresemann, E. & H. Grote. 1943. 1st *Numenius tenuirostris* in Aussterben begriffen? *Orn. Monatsber.* 51: 122–127.



Figure 1. *Islander with wildfowl* by the Neapolitan painter Luigi Rocco.



Figure 2. Detail showing the corpse of the Slender-billed Curlew.

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Line art: Curlews (p.11), Dunlins (p. 13), Lapwings (p. 15), Avocets (p. 16) by Gerrit Krottje, Dunlin (p. 63) by M.N. Dementiev (WSGB collection). Common Sandpiper (p. 36) by P.F. Meakin, Ringed Plover (p. 59) by K. Wright, Ruff (p. 78) and Little Stint (p. 87) by

R. Denison, taken from Harrison, J.A. *et al.* 1997. *The atlas of southern African birds*, vol. 1: Non-passerines. BirdLife South Africa, Johannesburg. Reproduced by permission of the Avian Demography Unit, University of Cape Town.

