

Sight Record of Eskimo Curlew (*Numenius borealis*) on West Coast of James Bay, Canada.

by Joseph A. Hagar and
Kathleen S. Anderson

On August 15, 1976, at North Point, Ontario, we had a brief but reasonably convincing glimpse of two Eskimo Curlews. The circumstances of our observation were as follows.

During the past two seasons North Point, on the west coast of James Bay, 17 miles northeast of Moosonee, has been the site of large-scale shorebird banding and color-marking by the Canadian Wildlife Service. We had been visitors at the C.W.S. base camp for the week preceding, and had spent part of the cool sunny afternoon of the 15th on the foreshore sandflats watching preparations for a cannon-net shot if the tide moved a sufficient number of birds in front of the nets. By mid-afternoon, as the lower flats were covered, the usual tens of thousands of small and medium-sized shorebirds were trading restlessly up and down the tideline, but an hour later it became evident that the flood would fail to reach the netting ground, and soon after four o'clock we started

back to camp. Our path, lying at first along the back side of a low sand ridge, then turned to the west across half a mile of level salt meadow. We had been seeing Whimbrels by ones and twos during the afternoon, and now put up several more as we went out on the marsh. Circling around behind us, they were scarcely gone from sight when suddenly, directly in front of us, no more than 40 yards away and perhaps 15 feet above the meadow, we saw two smaller curlews with short, *slender* bills, flying very fast from left to right — i.e., south to north. We had our glasses on them at once, and watched them out of sight. A quarter-mile beyond us they dipped down for a moment as if to alight and then picked up again without losing a wingbeat.

Once they were gone, a very short exchange was enough to show that our impressions were either identical or complementary. We had both noted small size, nearer that of Black-bellied Plover than of Whimbrel. Each of us



Marshes west of James Bay, typical of area where curlew was seen. Photos by J. A. Hagar.

retained a vivid mental image of the short fine bills, only slightly downcurved. One of us (Hagar) was particularly struck by the rapid direct flight with quick deep wingbeats — a flight more like that of plover than of the Whimbrels we had been seeing all afternoon. The other (Anderson), using 8-power glasses, had caught a suggestion of buffy or warm brownish color on rump or back as the birds went away. Neither of us saw color or markings of any sort, above or below, when they were in front of us. These various impressions were written down immediately on our return to camp and before we looked at any field manuals, and were later copied into the camp journal.

An appraisal of this observation must begin with the fact that it is only a sight record, brief, unsupported by any tangible evidence, and actually of no great significance except as it sustains the hope that Eskimo Curlews still live. However, several additional circumstances bear on its credibility. To begin with, place and season are consistent with what is known of former range and migrations. Second, neither of us had mentioned or even considered the possibility of seeing Eskimo Curlew — we were in no way pre-conditioned — and the appearance of the two birds in front of us was a complete surprise. Third, one of us (Hagar) had seen an Eskimo Curlew on the ground at Gal-

veston Island, Texas, in 1962, but not in flight; he has been familiar with Whimbrels at many places and seasons over a span of 60 years, including two summers on the nesting grounds at Churchill, Manitoba, and feels qualified to say that the flight-style of these two small curlews was subtly but recognizably different from that of any Whimbrel he ever saw. This again is consistent with the testimony of the older ornithologists who wrote from experience with Eskimo Curlew in the days of their abundance. And lastly, we believe that the weak point of our observation, that we failed to see much color, is explained by the light conditions: when the birds were in front of us, the afternoon light was behind them, throwing their necks, heads and bills into sharp silhouette and their underwing patterns into shadow, but when they had gone well beyond us, Anderson caught the suggestion of buffiness.

In sum, the foregoing considerations are the basis for our initial statement that the observation was "reasonably convincing."

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are extremely grateful to the Canadian Wildlife Service, and in particular to Dr. R. I. G. Morrison, for the facilities provided us at their James Bay camps during the period of our visit.



Aerial view, showing sluggish streams flowing into James Bay from muskeg forest.