

# A probable sighting of 23 Eskimo Curlews in Texas

*An unusual number of birds at a site  
seldom visited by ornithologists*

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**T**WENTY-THREE SHOREBIRDS believed to be Eskimo Curlews (*Numenius borealis*) were sighted at about 5:00 P.M. CDT on May 7, 1981, on Atkinson Island in Galveston Bay, Chambers County, Texas (29°39' N, 94°58' W).

While boating about 100 meters off the east shore of Atkinson Island during a survey of rookery islands in Galveston Bay, we stopped to observe a concentration of mixed shorebirds feeding in a large area of mud flat and marsh in the island's interior. A small flock of shorebirds was standing on a grassy spit that separated the bay from the interior marsh. We moved to within 50 meters of the birds and observed them with 10 × 50 and 7 × 50 binoculars for 15 to 30 seconds before they flushed.

Our initial reaction was that the birds were too small and short-billed to be Long-billed Curlews (*N. americanus*) and that they must be Whimbrels (*N. phaeopus*). We then checked for the distinctive Whimbrel head pattern, but the only pattern visible was a faint light stripe above the eye. The slightly decurved bills did not appear any longer than those of the Long-billed Dowitchers (*Limnodromus scolopaceus*) that were feeding on nearby mud flats. We estimated that the bills were about 1.5 to 1.75 times as long as the head. The birds appeared slightly larger than the nearby dowitchers.

When the birds flushed, they circled back over the bay, passing overhead and to the side once at a distance of less than 50 meters and again at 60 to 80 meters. Both passes provided an excellent view of the color of the belly and underwing.

The flock circled over the marsh and then split into two groups with six to eight birds heading west toward Morgan's Point and the remainder circling and then landing far out in the marsh where they were no longer visible. The birds were silent in the air and flew in an unorganized but fairly tight flock until just before dividing, when the flock formed a line.

In the air, the birds showed little contrast between upper and lower surfaces and no distinctive body pattern. The effect was of an almost uniformly brown to buff-colored bird. We were in definite agreement that the wing linings were uniform cinnamon-buff in color, with no discernible pattern or contrast. Peterson (1980) shows the undersides of the flight feathers of the Eskimo Curlew to be darker than the lining, but we were unable to see this distinction in the field. A flock of Black-bellied Plovers (*Pluvialis squatarola*) flying near the curlews offered an opportunity for size comparison. Although the distance that separated the two flocks precluded simultaneous viewing, our impression was that the birds were very similar in size. Another comparative impression which came to mind was that the birds resembled diminutive Marbled Godwits (*Limosa fedoa*) with much shorter, decurved bills.

We also considered the possibility that the light from the lowering sun combined with a haze effect was red enough to obscure the head pattern and make the underparts and wing linings appear buff and cinnamon-buff. This seemed unlikely as the sun was not really very low at 5:00

P.M. CDT on May 7. Conditions were somewhat hazy, but several flocks of Black-bellied Plovers were seen passing overhead during this same time period and no alteration of color due to light quality was noted.

The sighting was carefully discussed with constant reference to field guides (Peterson 1963, Robbins *et al.* 1966) and we concluded that the birds could only have been Whimbrels or Eskimo Curlews. Bill length can be deceiving, but the lack of head striping and the presence of cinnamon wing linings would seem to eliminate the Whimbrel. We feel it is probable that the 23 birds observed were Eskimo Curlews.

From 1945 to 1968, there have been ten reported sightings of Eskimo Curlews on the Texas coast (Table 1). Seven of these ten observations were made on Galveston Island, about 30 miles from the location of our sighting on Atkinson Island. In past years, Eskimo Curlews have been seen between March 22 and April 29. The late spring record for Eskimo Curlews in Texas is May 4 when three individuals were collected at Fort Stockton in 1860 (Oberholser 1974). Our sighting on May 7, 1981, would be a late record, but not so late as to be implausible. The number of individuals we observed was far in excess of numbers reported since 1945. Although our observations are inconsistent with recent records, they are in agreement with the flocking behavior of Eskimo Curlews Bent (1929) summarized reports of flocks ranging from a few individuals to 200 or 300 birds.

**Table 1. Eskimo Curlew sightings in Texas, 1945 to 1968.**

Date	Number of Birds	Location <sup>a</sup>
Apr 29, 1945	2	Galveston Island
Apr 27-29, 1950	1	Aransas N.W.R.
Mar 22, Apr. 18 & 26, 1956	1	Galveston Island
Mar 22-Apr. 26, 1959	1	Galveston Island
Apr 3-6, 1960	1	Galveston Island
Mar 31-Apr. 3, 1961	1	Galveston Island
Mar 24-Apr. 15, 1962	2 <sup>b</sup>	Galveston Island
Apr 11-12, 1963	1	Rockport
Mar 29, 1964	2	Galveston Island
Apr 30, 1968	1	Rockport

<sup>a</sup>Data from Emanuel (1962), Oberholser (1974), Iversen (1976), and Aldrich (1978).

<sup>b</sup>Verified by photographs (D. L. Bleitz).

The ornithology department at Texas A & M University, the Houston Audubon Society, and several individual birders in the Houston-Galveston area were notified of the sighting, but unfortunately our observation was not confirmed by other birders. Atkinson Island is made of dredged soil from the adjacent Houston Ship Channel and is rarely visited by professional or amateur ornithologists. A boat is needed for access to Atkinson Island. The late date of our observation and the logistic difficulties associated with access to the area precluded confirmation of our sighting.

Both authors are experienced ornithologists and both are especially active in the area of endangered species and waterbird research. The senior author has

been bird-watching on the Texas coast since childhood. He is a research biologist and a member of the Whooping Crane (*Grus americana*) recovery team. The co-author has been engaged in waterbird research in Texas since 1968, and is a member of the Brown Pelican (*Pelecanus occidentalis*) recovery team. Both authors are thoroughly familiar with the Whimbrel, the bird most likely to be confused with the Eskimo Curlew.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## REQUESTS FOR ASSISTANCE

THE EIGHTH ANNUAL spring close-up study (interception line) along the lower Rio Grande between Brownsville and Mission, Texas, will be held on Saturday, March 30, 1985. Anyone wishing to participate in this all-day count should contact Mrs. Gladys Donohue, P.O. Drawer 400, Penitas, TX 78576 as early as possible. Phone 512-581-6545.

THIS IS THE LAST year of the Ontar-

io Breeding Bird Atlas, and we would like to invite birders to help us collect data. Although assistance would be appreciated anywhere in the province, we are in particular need of volunteers interested in working in remote areas of northern Ontario. Experience with northern species and wilderness survival skills are essential, and canoeing experience would be useful in most remaining blocks.

Some northern areas are accessible via road and canoe, while others can only be reached by plane. Free and reduced rate

flights are available to atlas volunteers, and financial assistance with travel and living expenses may be available.

June and July are the key months for northern atlas work. Northern volunteers should plan on devoting at least one week to road-accessible blocks and ten days for fly-in blocks.

For more information, please contact Mike Cadman, FON Conservation Centre, 355 Lesmill Road, Don Mills, Ontario, Canada, M3B 2W8; telephone 416-449-2554.