

## A little-known species reaches North America



Aged as a juvenile, this Little Curlew spent almost a month in the Santa Maria Valley. Note the distribution of pink on the lower mandible.  
Photo: September 18, 1984/Alan S. Hopkins

Paul Lehman and Jon L. Dunn

**T**HE SANTA MARIA VALLEY in northern Santa Barbara County, California, is well-known for the large numbers and varieties of shorebirds found there. Since regular censusing began in 1978, the lush pastureland, settling ponds, and Santa Maria River mouth have produced numerous rarities, including several records each of Sharptailed Sandpiper (*Calidris acuminata*), and Ruff (*Philomachus pugnax*), as well as small numbers of Semipalmated Sandpipers (*C. pusilla*), each fall. A flock of "Pacific" Lesser Golden-Plovers (*Pluvialis dominica fulva*), regularly winters in the valley, and moderate numbers of such uncommon west coast species as "American" Lesser Golden-Plover (*P. d. domi-*

*nica*), Solitary Sandpiper (*Tringa solitaria*), Baird's Sandpiper (*C. bairdii*), and Pectoral Sandpiper (*C. melanotos*), are annually seen in fall.

On September 16, 1984, Louis Bevier and Kelly Steele found a juvenile Curlew Sandpiper (*C. ferruginea*), in a partially flooded pasture, several miles west of the city of Santa Maria. Having been notified of this sighting, several other birders, including Lehman, Brad Schram, and Tom Wurster, arrived at the site within two hours but could not relocate the bird that day. (It was subsequently seen at a nearby settling pond over the following several days.) The group of birders then split up to search for the Curlew Sandpiper at other localities in the valley. Lehman,

who remained at the original site, heard a somewhat plover-like "too-whit" call and briefly noted a shorebird of medium size with unmarked, brownish upperparts fly by to his side and disappear into the pasture. Given the overall size of the bird, the call, and the brief views of the upperparts, he assumed it was a Lesser Golden-Plover, but was bothered that the bird was not golden enough above and that its silhouette showed too much body forward of the wings.

<sup>1</sup>Due to this species' close taxonomic relationship with the Eskimo Curlew (*Numenius borealis*), the authors herein use the name Little Curlew in preference to Little Whimbrel, the name commonly used in Europe and Australia.

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***At home on the tundra steppes of eastern  
Siberia, the Little Curlew (*Numenius minutus*)<sup>1</sup>  
has been recorded in southern California***

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The distinctive shape of the Little Curlew is readily apparent — slim body, long neck, small head and short, slightly decurved bill. Photo: September 18, 1984/Alan S. Hopkins

Shortly thereafter the bird appeared in the flooded pasture close to Lehman, who was stunned to be looking at a bird that at first appeared to be an Upland Sandpiper (*Bartramia longicauda*), owing to its overall size and color, slim build, relatively long neck, small head, and slim, rather short bill. However, it was almost immediately apparent that the bird was a small curlew, as it showed distinctive blackish-brown head striping and a noticeable droop to the bill.

Lehman was unaware of the field characters used to differentiate the two species, but he believed the bird was either an Eskimo Curlew (*Numenius borealis*), or Little Curlew (*N. minutus*). However, as the bird raised its wings he then noted that it had sandy wing linings with fine dark barring. He knew that the Eskimo Curlew shows rich cinnamon-buff underwing linings, and so believed the bird was a Little Curlew.

The bird was seen briefly by Wurster before it flew well to the south. With the assistance of the other observers it was relocated in extensive pastureland approximately 1.5 miles away, where it remained until dusk. Excellent views were obtained here as the bird fed in close proximity to numbers of Lesser Golden-Plovers, Long-billed Curlews (*N. americanus*), Whimbrels (*N. phaeopus*), and Greater Yellowlegs (*T. melanoleuca*). The bird's body size was close to that of the nearby golden-plovers, although slightly slimmer, and its longer legs made it stand a little taller. It stood almost as tall as the Greater Yellowlegs but with a slimmer body. It was much small-

er than nearby Whimbrels and was absolutely dwarfed by Long-billed Curlews.

That evening the literature was consulted, and all field marks used to differentiate Eskimo and Little curlews pointed toward the bird being a Little Curlew. The news was quickly spread.

**A** MAZINGLY, THE BIRD remained for almost a month, being last seen with certainty October 14. During this period, it was viewed by hundreds of observers and extensively photographed (Figures 1-5), thanks to the kindness and patience of Gene and Glenna Mahoney, the farmers who owned the property the bird frequented. Not only did they welcome the hundreds of birders who visited, but even moved their cows from the Little Curlew's favored pasture for several days so that observers could more easily enter the property. The bird's preferred habitat was in and around pools of standing irrigation water in the pastures, although drier pasture was also utilized. It primarily visited pastureland an additional 0.25 miles farther south from the last site of observation September 16, and was only rarely noted at the two localities at which it was seen on that first day.

The Little Curlew did not directly associate with any particular species, although it was usually close to Black-bellied Plovers (*P. squatarola*), Long-billed Curlews, Greater Yellowlegs, European Starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*), or Red-winged Blackbirds (*Agelaius phoeniceus*). When flushed, it often flew off alone. It was not especially wary; but it usually took flight when the other shore-

birds flushed nearby. Some observers were able to get within 20-25 feet of the lone, feeding bird by sitting quietly and waiting for it to approach them. The curlew could not always be found, and on several days it was not seen at all.

The following description of the Santa Maria, California, Little Curlew, a juvenile, is based primarily on the field notes of the authors, with some supplemental material gleaned from the notes of Guy McCaskie and Joseph Morlan. Additional detail was obtained from the examination of photos taken by Alan Hopkins and Arnold Small.

**SIZE** — The overall body size was close to a *fulva* Lesser Golden-Plover, but the legs were longer. It stood almost as tall as nearby Greater Yellowlegs but was slimmer bodied. The bird was much smaller than a Whimbrel and was literally dwarfed by a Long-billed Curlew. All species were present for size comparison on a number of occasions.

**HEAD PATTERN** — The crown was a dark blackish-brown with a very thin, but conspicuous, pale median crown stripe. To the sides of the crown were very broad, lateral blackish-brown crown stripes that connected around the rear portion of the crown. Behind this, in the occiput area, a pale circular spot was completely surrounded by a ring of dark brown. A broad, pale buff supercilium extended forward to the base of the bill and appeared to connect very narrowly across the forehead. Below this was a dark stripe that went from behind the eye, extending forward under the eye and stopping just short of the base of the bill. The anterior portion of the lores were a very pale and unmarked buff color. The eye itself was dark and appeared moderately large in the rather small head. The area just below and behind the eye was pale with a very conspicuous white eye ring, especially behind the eye. The remainder of the face was a pale buff, essentially unmarked, except for a narrow, dark brown slash line in the lower rear of the auriculars, just below the rear portion of the dark eye line.

**UPPERPARTS** — There was a thin and diffuse dark stripe down the rear of the neck. The entire upperparts (mantle, scapulars, tertials, and wing coverts) appeared a dark brown, but there were numerous markings of light buff along the edges of these feathers. Upon close inspection of the tertials and the greater and median wing coverts, these pale edge



markings appeared as serrations or little triangles that penetrated into the dark-based centers. The rump and uppertail coverts were barred with dark brown on a light buff ground color. The upperside of the tail was barred just like the uppertail coverts; but, there was a darker sub-terminal band which set off a broader, pale buff terminal band. The barring in these areas was rather fine. The primaries were blackish with a narrow pale whitish edge extending around the tip of each visible primary. There was noticeable primary tip extension past the longest tertial. The long tail extended just barely past the longest point of extension of the primaries.

**UNDERPARTS** — The overall ground color of the underparts was a dirty white, with a very slight grayish tinge. The chin was whitish and unmarked. Much of the underparts was finely marked with darker brown. The front portion of the neck was very finely streaked with vertical brown lines. On the sides of the breast the brown streaks were crossed at right angles by thin dark brown horizontal bars that penetrated a short distance out towards the upper belly. The vertical neck streaks stopped fairly abruptly on the lower neck in an almost straight line, although there was a bit of a bulge to the line, in the center of the upper portion of the belly. For most of the belly, down through the undertail coverts, there were no markings, except for some horizontal dark brown bars on the sides of the vent. The ground color of the flanks was a richer buff color than the remainder of the underparts. This was particularly evident when comparing it to the unmarked, pale belly.

**SOFT PARTS** — The fine bill appeared quite short for a curlew, and was also rather straight, although there was still an obvious droop near the tip. The bill was bicolored. The upper mandible and the terminal one-third of the lower mandible were blackish. The remaining basal two-thirds of the lower mandible was a sharply contrasting fleshy pink color. The legs were bluish-gray, and at very close range (about 20 feet and looking through a 22x Bushnell Spacemaster II telescope), Dunn and Carol Goodell noted circular dark indentations on the front of the legs that formed a pattern of rings. Goodell noted that these rings connected in the same manner around the back side of the legs. Otherwise the legs appeared smooth with no other markings.



*A somewhat atypical hunched position clearly shows the plumage detail of the Little Curlew. Note the facial pattern and overall coloration. Photo: October 6, 1984/Arnold Small*

**IN FLIGHT WITH WINGS SPREAD** —

In looking at the spread wings from above, the primaries and the primary coverts contrasted a darker blackish-brown to most of the rest of the paler brown wing, although the secondaries and particularly the smaller leading rows of lesser wing coverts (including the marginal coverts) also contrasted darker. The greater wing coverts and the secondaries were tipped with pale, whitish-buff which formed two ill-defined horizontal bars on the wing. Especially conspicuous was the pure white primary shaft on the outermost primary. In flight, viewed from below, the wing linings were extremely pale grayish-brown, being just a bit darker than the ground color of the underparts. Additionally, there was distinct dark blackish-brown horizontal barring on the wing linings and the axillaries. In flight the bird appeared very long-winged and long-tailed.

**CALL** — The bird was silent most of the time but on several occasions observers heard it give a one — or possibly two — syllabled "tuet." The note was quite soft and difficult to hear. Additionally, Lehman believed he heard the bird, when flushed, give a quick two or three note call that was flatter, softer, and less shrill than the typical Whimbrel call.

**D**IFFERENCES BETWEEN the Little Curlew and Eskimo Curlew are given by Farrand (1977) and Moon (1983). These include:

- 1) While both species have fine dark barring on the underwing coverts and axillaries, the Little Curlew lacks the rich



*Although it did not directly associate with any other species, the Little Curlew could be found near Black-bellied Plovers, Greater Yellowlegs and European Starlings. Note the off-white underparts with fine dark streaking to the neck and the fine dark horizontal bars on the sides. Photo: October 6, 1984/Arnold Small*





The spread upperwing shows the contrasting blackish-brown primaries and primary coverts and a distinctive pure white shaft on the outermost primary. Photo: September 18, 1984/Alan S. Hopkins

cinnamon-buff base color of the Eskimo and, instead, is a much paler buff or sandy color.

2) The Eskimo Curlew is more boldly and coarsely marked below, with heavier streaking on the face and neck and dark chevrons on the breast and flanks; the Little Curlew is more finely marked, with chevrons being few in number and confined to the flanks.

3) The Little Curlew lacks the warm buffy or rusty tones to the underparts shown in the Eskimo Curlew.

4) The Little Curlew has more distinctive crown stipes.

5) The Little Curlew has a more extensive pale pinkish area to the base of the lower mandible, reaching to or beyond the middle of the bill, while in the Eskimo Curlew, this pink color occupies less than one-half of the lower mandible.

6) In the hand, or at exceedingly close range, the rear surface of the tarsus in the Little Curlew is covered by transverse scutes like those seen on the front of the tarsus of both species, while in the Eskimo Curlew the rear surface is covered with small, round scales.

The Santa Maria individual matched all of the above criteria for identifying the Little Curlew. The aging of the bird as a juvenile was based on the overall freshness of the plumage, the presence of fine whitish edges to the coverts, distinct whitish edges to the tips of the primaries, and the patterning of the tertials, as described in Prater *et al.* (1977).

**T**HE LITTLE CURLEW is a rare, although not endangered, species which breeds only in eastern Siberia. Within this relatively small range, nesting colonies are scattered, separated by hundreds of kilometers, and sporadic in nature (Labutin *et al.*, 1982). These colonies, which contain from three to thirty pairs, are found in open grassland on dry, well-drained slopes, in glades of sparse woodland of larch (*Larix* sp.) and dwarf birch (*Betula nana*). Their habitat is largely dependent on fire and subsequent recolonizing vegetation, a secondary successional phase which has relict features. The appropriate tundra steppe habitat has dwindled since the Pleistocene epoch owing to the spread of the predominant larch woodlands (Labutin *et al.*, 1982). The secondary, fire-affected landscapes which Little Curlews currently utilize have somewhat replaced the vanished steppes. During the nesting season, Little Curlews eat a variety of insects and berries collected from the surface. Labutin *et al.* (1982) state that the species arrives on the breeding grounds in late May, and that post-breeding flocks begin to form in the second one-half of July. Records well south of the breeding grounds include a flock of 100 birds north of Yakutsk, Siberia, July 21-22, 1926, several flocks near Lake Baikal beginning in mid-August, two flocks in northwest Manchuria on August 23, 1956, in Mongolia in late August and early September, and in Hong Kong in October (Labutin *et al.*, *op. cit.*).

The species winters only in the Southern Hemisphere, primarily in northern Australia, and also in eastern Indonesia from the Moluccas eastward to New Guinea. Individuals wintering in Australia typically arrive in September or October and remain until March, April, or May. In Australia, Little Curlews frequent open areas of short grass, including airfields and playing fields, margins of drying swamps, tidal mudflats, crops, and commercial saltfields (Pizzey 1980). The species has wandered to Tasmania, New Zealand, the Celebes, Borneo, and the Philippines (Farrand 1977; Moon 1983). Vagrant records come from Kazakhstan (September 9, 1928), the Seychelle Islands (October 14, 1972 — April 1973), Norway (an adult on July 14, 1969), and Mid Glamorgan, England (an adult August 30 — September 6, 1982) (Labutin *et al.*, *op. cit.*; Moon, *op. cit.*). The California sighting establishes the first record for North America and the New World.

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