

# Some new records and observations of birds in the Virgin Islands

*Fred W. Sladen*

THE LIST OF FIRST RECORDS FOR THE United States Virgin Islands continues to grow as more experienced birders spend more time in the field and document their findings. With the exception of Beatty (1930, 1936, 1938a, 1938b, 1941, 1943, 1944) and Seaman (Virgin Island Wildlife Biologist for 22 years) on St. Croix, and Nichols (1943) on St. Thomas and St. John, the study and documentation of birds of the Virgin Islands in the past has been sporadic, the results of short and infrequent trips to the islands, e.g., Danforth (1930, 1935), Leck (1971, 1975), Mirecki (1977), Newton and Newton (1859), Robertson (1962) and Wetmore (1927, 1937).

More recently, a publication by Philibosian and Yntema (1977) included the status of all species up to 1977. Since then, there has been intensive field work on birds in these islands by several individuals, especially Norton (1979, 1981a), and coverage of most sightings has been included in Norton's seasonal reports to *American Birds* (1981b, 1982, 1983, 1984). The most up-to-date publication covering the status of birds in the Virgin Islands is Raffaele's guide (1983).

Observations presented below are the partial results of surveys of the birds of St. Croix which I have conducted since 1981 and which include over 2500 hours in the field. Included are record sightings and comments on several species, the status of which is significantly different from that indicated by the previously published records. Some information is not being presented for the first time, having been reported in *American Birds* by Robert Norton, the West Indies Region Regional Editor; however, I hope to show a pattern of increased species occurrence that has resulted from more



*Purple Gallinule (Porphyryla martinica). Photo/Arthur Morris, VIREO (m17/8/015).*

numerous and frequent field observations.

The area of St. Croix is about 220 square kilometers and includes more extensive wetlands and agricultural land than any of the other Virgin Islands. The availability of this more extensive habitat may help explain why some of the species reported here, such as Baird's (*Calidris bairdii*) and Buff-breasted (*Tryngites subruficollis*) sandpipers and Wilson's Phalarope (*Phalaropus tricolor*), have not yet been sighted in the other Virgin Islands.

Unless otherwise stated, all observations were made on St. Croix. Taxonomy follows the 6th edition of the A. O. U. Check-list (A. O. U. 1983).

## Species accounts

### Ring-necked Duck (*Aythya collaris*)

On January 2, 1982, I observed a male in company with three female Lesser Scaup (*Aythya affinis*) at Southgate Pond. Earl Roebuck, a long-time birder and naturalist on St. Croix, joined me in studying this first *A. collaris* to be recorded on St. Croix. Since then, this species has been seen on St. Croix every winter.

### Purple Gallinule (*Porphyryla martinica*)

Prior to 1981, the only evidence of



Dunlin (*Calidris alpina*). Photo/Robert Villani, *VIREO* (v0513/005).



Buff-breasted Sandpiper (*Tryngites subruficollis*). Photo/J. P. Myers, *VIREO* (m0111/043).

this species in the Virgin Islands was from bones found on St. Croix (Wetmore 1937). On November 24, 1981, Norton carefully studied a juvenile on St. Thomas (Norton 1982). On January 29, 1984, I observed an adult at Cassava Garden. I was able to watch this bird through a 40X telescope for 15 minutes while it preened. The pale blue frontal shield and bright yellow legs made identification certain. These two sightings are the only ones recorded for the Virgin Islands. Raffaele (1983) lists this species as a rare permanent resident over most of Puerto Rico's coast and as absent in the Virgin Islands.

#### Piping Plover (*Charadrius melodus*)

On September 16, 1982, I observed a single Piping Plover in company with two Semipalmated Plovers (*Charadrius semipalmatus*) on the beach at Cassava Garden. This represents the first record for the United States Virgin Islands. This species is a rare winter visitor to Puerto Rico and there is only one previous record from the British Virgin Islands (La Bastille and Richards 1973). Two subsequent sightings occurred in August and October 1983, suggesting a rare but possibly regular visitor that may have been overlooked in the past.

#### Long-billed Curlew (*Numenius americanus*)

During heavy rain on September 20, 1981, I was watching what appeared to be five Whimbrels (*Numenius phaeopus*) wading in rain pools near a beach on the south shore. I am familiar with the Whimbrels that sometimes spend the entire year here, but noted with interest that one bird was acting aggressively toward the others. The longer bill was not as apparent at first as was the color difference. While the Whimbrels were gray-brown, this bird was buff-brown and had no head stripes. On closer inspection, I could see that its bill was about 25 percent longer than that of the others. When I maneuvered to study the bird more closely, it flew, giving me a glimpse of the cinnamon wing lining.

This appearance of a Long-billed Curlew is perhaps the first recorded in this century in the West Indies (Bond 1980) and is the first recorded for the Virgin Islands.

#### Baird's Sandpiper (*Calidris bairdii*)

The first Baird's Sandpiper I saw on St. Croix was on April 8, 1982, at the industrialized Krause Lagoon, and is the first one recorded for the Virgin Islands. There is only one previous record in the Antilles, that on Barbados (Bond 1980). Raffaele (1983) does not mention this species. I have seen individual Baird's Sandpipers on seven more occasions, the last one on October 16, 1984. This suggests a rare visitor, but much more regular a visitor than the paucity of sightings indicates.

#### Dunlin (*Calidris alpina*)

On June 17, 1982, I observed two Dunlins in company with Red Knots (*Calidris canutus*) and Short-billed Dowitchers (*Limnodromus griseus*) at the industrialized Krause Lagoon. This sighting is the first for St. Croix. These birds were in winter plumage, and feeding in shallow water. I observed a single Dunlin on August 20, 1982 and two on October 10, 1984, all in winter plumage. The Dunlin has been seen only four other times in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands (Raffaele 1983).

**Buff-breasted Sandpiper (*Tryngites subruficollis*)**

On September 28, 1982, I observed an adult feeding among Lesser Golden Plovers (*Pluvialis dominica*) in a sheep pasture north of Frederiksted. It remained through October 5, on which date John Yntema, a naturalist for 15 years on St. Croix, joined me in studying it through a 20× scope. This was the first recorded sighting of this species in the Virgin Islands. On September 18, 1984, I saw an individual in juvenal plumage feeding in grass in company with Lesser Golden Plovers and Upland Sandpipers (*Bartramia longicauda*). Earl Roebuck, a long-time birder and naturalist on St. Croix, joined me on September 29 in studying this individual. Bond (1980) lists this as a rare transient in the West Indies and it is not mentioned by Raffaele (1983).

**Long-billed Dowitcher (*Limnodromus scolopaceus*)**

While some dowitchers are present in the Virgin Islands year around, there has not been much effort to discriminate this species from *griseus* (Raffaele 1983). Such effort will probably show *scolopaceus* to be a regular if rare visitor, particularly during fall migration. I observed four at Altona Lagoon on July 25, 1982, providing the first record in the Virgin Islands. Another twelve individuals were observed between August 1982 and October 1984. All of these birds were identified by their call



Long-billed Dowitcher (*Limnodromus scolopaceus*). Photo/Allan Cruickshank, VIREO (c02/6/091).



Common Black-headed Gull (*Larus ridibundus*). Photo/Geoff LeBaron, VIREO (105/10/055).

when they were flushed, as this is perhaps the only sure way to separate these two species in the field.

**Wilson's Phalarope (*Phalaropus tricolor*)**

At a freshwater pond at Estate Shoys on October 10, 1981, I watched a Wilson's Phalarope swimming and feeding in company with Lesser Yellowlegs (*Tringa flavipes*) and Stilt Sandpipers (*Calidris himantopus*). I was joined by three other island naturalists nine days later when we visited the same freshwater pond and studied a Wilson's Phalarope (probably the same individual). This is the first record of this spe-

cies in the Virgin Islands. Raffaele (1983) lists it as accidental in Puerto Rico, known from three records. Single Wilson's Phalaropes have been seen on six occasions, the last on August 29, 1984. On all these occasions, the phalarope was seen in company with dozens to hundreds of yellowlegs and Stilt Sandpipers, making it difficult for an observer to notice the phalarope's presence. Perhaps this species is more common than previous records indicate.

**Common Black-headed Gull (*Larus ridibundus*)**

On October 27, 1981, at Westend Saltpond, I saw a gull in flight which appeared much lighter in color than Laughing Gulls (*Larus atricilla*) which are so common here in the breeding season. This bird proved to be a *ridibundus* in first-winter plumage. This is the first sighting of this species in St. Croix (Raffaele 1983). It is considered rare in Puerto Rico (1983). Norton (1983) reported seeing another Common Black-headed Gull in company with a Ring-billed Gull (*Larus delawarensis*) on St. Croix on November 29, 1982. On November 27, 1985, Earl Roebuck, Bertel Bruun and I carefully studied an individual in winter plumage at industrialized Krause Lagoon.

**Ring-billed Gull (*Larus delawarensis*)**

Earl Roebuck and I studied an individual *delawarensis* in first-winter

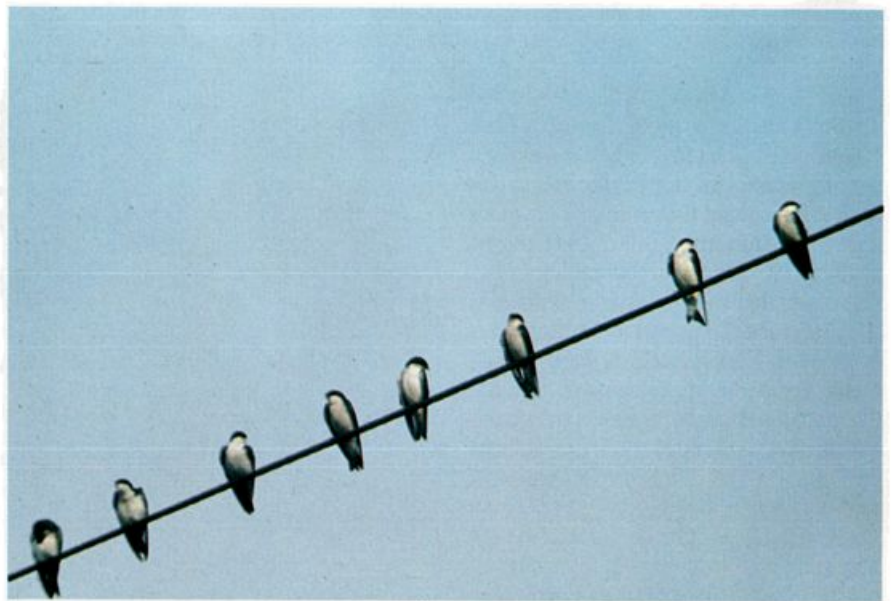
plumage for about ten minutes on December 5, 1981, at industrialized Krause Lagoon. This is the first record of this species on St. Croix. Ring-billed Gulls have been seen regularly in Puerto Rico and there are two records from St. Thomas and one from St. John (Raffaele 1983). I have seen single Ring-billed Gulls in first-winter plumage on fourteen different occasions since the first sighting. Scott McFee, a visiting amateur nature photographer, and I observed an adult in winter plumage at Great Pond on February 3, 1985.

#### Arctic Tern (*Sterna paradisaea*)

On July 20, 1982, at Westend Saltpond, I carefully studied an adult in breeding plumage, resting among Least (*Sterna antillarum*) and Royal terns (*S. maxima*) on rocks 20 meters from shore. This may be the first sighting of the Arctic Tern in the Antilles east of Cuba and the second for the West Indies (Bond 1980). I had an excellent view of an adult in breeding plumage at Buck Island, St. Croix on September 30, 1984. This species is not mentioned by Raffaele (1983) and is considered to be truly vagrant in the West Indies (Bond 1980). I believe, however, because of their pelagic nature in these latitudes and the many thousands of look-alike Roseate (*S. dougallii*) and Common terns (*S. hirundo*) that breed here and pass through during migration, the Arctic Tern may be regularly overlooked.



Ring-billed Gull (*Larus delawarensis*). Photo/Crawford H. Greenewalt, VIREO (g02/26/570).



Tree Swallow (*Tachycineta bicolor*). Photo/Robert S. Ridgely, VIREO (r10/2/041).

#### Chimney Swift (*Chaetura pelagica*)

I have seen only ten swifts on St. Croix in four years, so when I saw one on May 20, 1983, I spent about 15 minutes studying it. It proved to be a Chimney Swift, flying in an area along a beach which borders fields and pastures north of Frederiksted. This is the first record of this species in the Antilles east of Hispaniola (Bond 1980). Norton (1984) sighted three Chimney Swifts on St. John on November 7, 1983. I carefully studied three Chimney Swifts on November 9, 1985. They were flying and feeding among a flock of about two hundred swallows at Sandy Point National Wildlife Refuge.

#### Tree Swallow (*Tachycineta bicolor*)

Raffaele (1983) and Bond (1980) indicate that this swallow is unrecorded east of Puerto Rico. I have seen it on four occasions, all in the area of pastures north of Frederiksted. The first of these on May 24, 1982 provides a record for the Virgin Islands. Two Tree Swallows were also reported by Norton (1983) on St. John on December 18, 1982.

#### Northern Rough-winged Swallow (*Stelgidopteryx ruficollis*)

Many thousands of swallows pass through these islands during migration in fall and spring, mostly Barn Swallows (*Hirundo rustica*). Prior to 1977 Bank (*Riparia riparia*), Cave (*Hirundo fulva*) and Cliff (*H. pyrrhonota*) swallows had each been recorded in the Virgin Islands less than 15 times (Philibosian and Yntema 1977). In the past four years, I have counted 117 Bank, 80 Cliff and 12 Cave Swallows, indicating that many of these have probably been overlooked in the past. On December 17, 1982, I observed a Northern Rough-winged Swallow for about 15 minutes, the first to be recorded on St. Croix. I saw another in a large, mixed flock of swallows near the south shore on October 23, 1984. A single individual was carefully studied by Norton (1981b) on St. John on December 24, 1980, for the first record for the Virgin Islands and perhaps the first east of Cuba.

Gray-cheeked Thrush (*Catharus minimus*)

This species is listed by Bond (1980) as a rare transient in the West Indies and by Raffaele (1983) as a vagrant, having been seen only three times in Puerto Rico. I and three others observed one at the Buccaneer Golf Course on October 19, 1981, providing the first record for the Virgin Islands. This individual lacked the eye-ring of the Swainson's Thrush (*C. ustulatus*) and was too boldly spotted on the breast to be a Veery (*C. fuscescens*). The upperparts were gray-brown and the eye-ring, usually indistinct in this species, was not discernible.

Red-eyed Vireo (*Vireo olivaceus*)

On October 15, 1983, I studied closely for over two minutes a vireo with no whisker marks. All other characteristics of this, the first Red-eyed Vireo seen in the Virgin Islands, were so similar to those of the resident Black-whiskered Vireo (*V. altiloquus*) that the two species could be, and probably are often, readily confused. Unless the two species are seen together for comparison, and often even then, they are almost impossible to tell apart owing to age and regional variations in plumage, except by the presence or absence of the whisker or malar stripe. Even this feature must be observed closely and carefully, as some individual Black-whiskered Vireos, when in molt, have only a faint trace of a whisker stripe (*pers. obs.*). I observed another Red-eyed Vireo, this one on St. John, on October 6, 1984, a record for that island. There are only five records from Puerto Rico (Raffaele 1983).

Magnolia Warbler (*Dendroica magnolia*)

This species is a rare and irregular winter visitor to Puerto Rico, St. Thomas and St. John (Raffaele 1983). Though it has been unrecorded from St. Croix, its tendency to remain high in the trees when feeding and its (sometimes) similarity in immature plumage to the immature of the common and regular Prairie Warbler (*D. discolor*) could explain why it might have been overlooked. On March 15, 1984, I observed an immature on the south slopes

of Blue Mountain, finally recording the first presence of this species on St. Croix.

Discussion

The last published list of birds on St. Croix (Philibosian and Yntema 1977) shows 155 species, including those considered extinct or extirpated. The present count is now 198, an addition of 43 species, of which I have contributed 34 in the last four years. The correlation between increased field time and increased sight records is fairly self-evident. It is hoped that these sightings will provide supporting information to other observers in the West Indies and possibly fill in gaps in population trends or movement patterns studied elsewhere. I also hope to encourage others to devote more time in the field and dispell the notion that there is nothing more to see or contribute.

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— PO Box 4106,  
Christiansted, St. Croix,  
USVI 00822