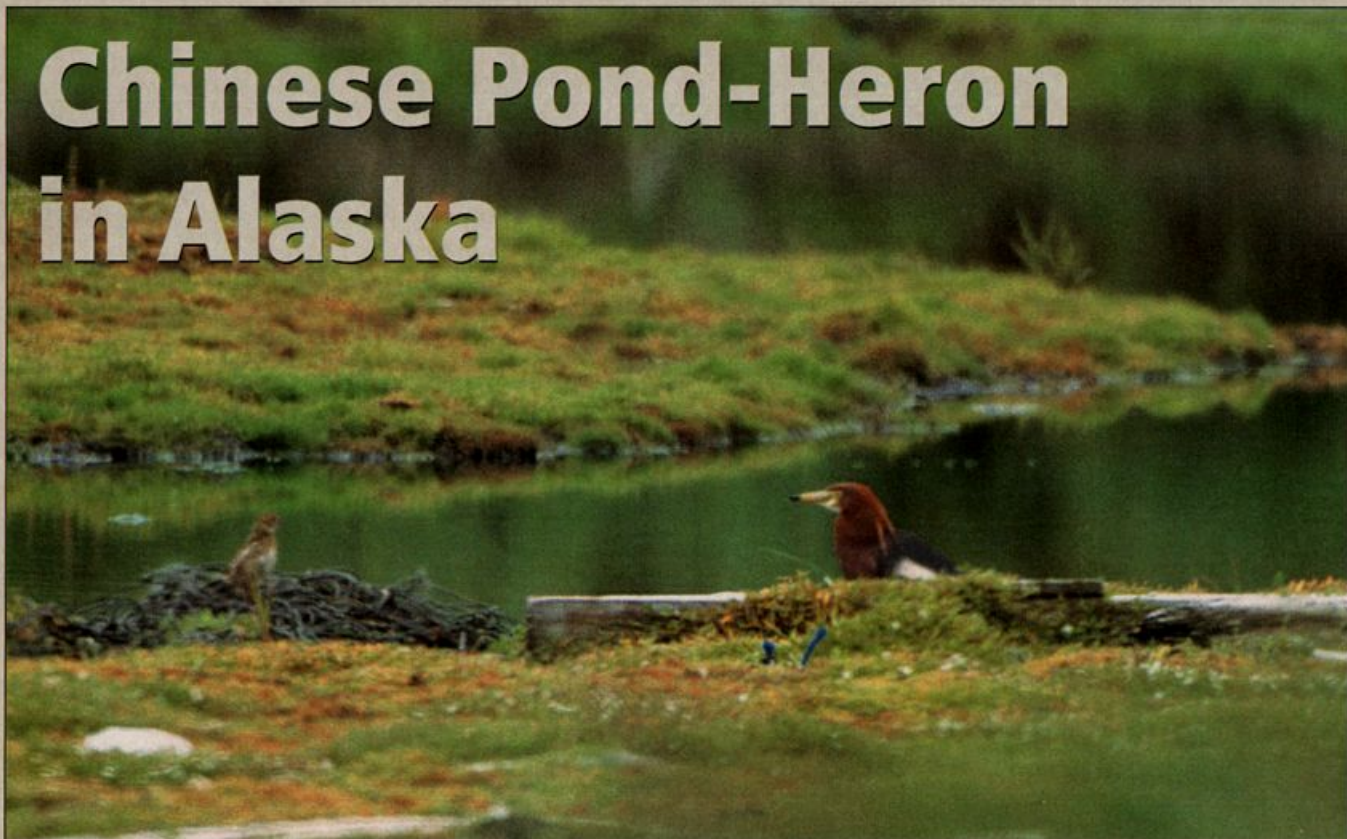


# Chinese Pond-Heron in Alaska



YVA MOMATIUK AND JOHN EASTCOTT

**RICHARD C. HOYER\* AND SEAN D. SMITH†**

Full migration had barely begun in earnest when birders on St. Paul Island, in the Alaskan Pribilofs, were presented with a discovery that shocked them like no other in a summer already filled with great birds. On August 4, 1996, Rich Hoyer, a local guide for the St. Paul Tour, found himself with a morning free to bird at leisure. He first stopped to investigate the marshy area around Antone Lake on St. Paul's southwest side. Although the birding had been slow here in recent weeks, over the years this spot had attracted a number of Pribilof rarities, especially shorebirds, including Mongolian Plover (*Charadrius mongolus*), Common Greenshank (*Tringa nebularia*), Wood Sandpiper (*Tringa glareola*), Gray-tailed Tattler (*Heteroscelus brevipes*), Common Sandpiper (*Actitis hypoleucos*), all four stints (*Calidris* sp.), and Ruff (*Philomachus pugnax*), to name a few. None of these previous occurrences prepared him for the next few hours of birding excitement.

Rich was most of the way through the best area of the marsh and disappointed in the lack of birds when a medium-sized bird suddenly flapped out from the border of the sedges only a few meters ahead of him. His first instinct to raise his binoculars was instantly met with a stunning realization that he was looking at a heron. Any heron other than the Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*) is rare in Alaska, and any is an incredible find out in the middle of the Bering Sea. Furthermore, he did not recognize this species! Hoyer followed the bird as it slowly flapped away, circling downwind. He tried to paint a mental picture of the bird and recited to himself the various field marks. The all-white wings and red head and neck were the out-

standing features. His fear that the bird would fly off forever abated when it landed out of sight in tall beach rye grass.

At the same time, only a quarter of a mile away, Sean Smith, oblivious to Hoyer's discovery, was at a Northern Fur Seal (*Callorhinus ursinus*) observation blind, giving the regular morning tour to a small group of non-birding visitors. Realizing that additional observers were needed to confirm this bird, whatever it was, Hoyer arrived at the seal blind breathless with excitement and making wild gesticulations. Hoyer explained to the highly amused tour participants that chasing such a bird would be a worthwhile venture, and we all proceeded to Antone Lake.

We tromped through the dense, thigh-deep growth down to the Antone channel. It wasn't long before the heron flushed from its hiding place. Its striking, completely white wings elicited *oohs* and *aahs* from the guests. The bird circled around the group and, fighting fairly brisk winds, again settled into tall grass. Luckily, the bird was large, colorful, and obviously out of place, keeping the interest of the non-birders. We recalled that the outer Aleutians had records of some Asian herons, but we hadn't committed the details to memory. This was clearly not a bittern or egret, so our guess was one of the southeast Asian herons, Chinese Pond-Heron being the only name coming to mind. In the meantime, we had frantically radioed the other tour guides to bring cameras and field guides. We stationed ourselves where we would be able to see the heron again when it flew, as it was impossible to see it in the thick grass. As the other guides drew closer, we asked them to look in the field guides for a heron fitting our description. They found one matching picture in *A Field Guide to the Birds of Japan*: we indeed had in front of us a Chinese Pond-Heron (*Ardeola bacchus*)!

When everyone finally had assembled, we converged once more

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on the spot where the bird had alighted. This time we held our breath as the bird continued to fly away, over the fur seal bachelor beach and beyond the breeding colony, but it finally did land on the rocky hillside above the seals about a third of a mile away. We were quite sure that there were no additional field marks that we needed to see in order to confirm the identification, but we still had to photographically document this occurrence.

Back in town we turned to the limited literature we had with us. In checking two books on the birds of Alaska, a complete checklist for the state that included hypothetical species, and the *A.O.U. Check-list*, we were unable to find any mention of Chinese Pond-Heron. The thought that Hoyer had stumbled upon a North American first seemed too far-fetched. A telephone call to David Sonneborn in Anchorage, however, confirmed the heron as the ultimate rarity.

#### DESCRIPTION

The bird was a rather short-legged heron with a medium-length neck. Its size was difficult to judge, given that it could be directly compared only with the abundant Lapland Longspurs (*Calcarius lapponicus*) in the area! It seemed to be smaller than a Cattle Egret (*Bubulcus ibis*) but larger than a Least Bittern (*Ixobrychus exilis*). Published data show it to be about the same length as a Green Heron (*Butorides virescens*), although in flight its white wings made it appear larger. The most impressive features of this bird in flight were the entirely white wings, including the coverts, flight feathers, and axillars. The lower breast, belly, uppertail and undertail coverts, rump, tail, and chin were also white. The white areas contrasted strongly with a slaty-black mantle and back and deep rusty-red head, neck, and upper breast. Draped over the upper back were two long and a few shorter head plumes, paler orangish in color. A fringe of thin, plume-like feathers from the lower back obscured most of the rump. The legs and feet were orange, and the toes extended beyond the tail in flight. The bill was pale yellowish with the distal one-third



The Chinese Pond-Heron (*Ardeola bacchus*) at Antone Lake, St. Paul Island, Pribilofs, Alaska, August 1996. Diagnostic for the species is the rich reddish-brown color of the head and neck, contrasting with the slaty back and white wings. The long plumes indicate that the bird was a male. Photograph/Yva Momatiuk and John Eastcott

to one-quarter being black. Yellow skin created a narrow ring behind the eye that was connected to the bill in a broad patch through the lores.

This bird was shy and did not allow close approach. It usually stayed near the border of the sedges (*Carex lyngbyaei*) which were taller than and partially concealed it. During the days which followed, however, it often came out in the open and foraged along a two-to-fifteen-meter-wide channel that runs from Antone Lake to the beach. (In some years the beach is eroded so that tidewater flows into Antone Lake via this channel, but it has been blocked since 1994.) It would patrol slowly back and forth along this channel, stopping occasionally to stand motionless on the mossy, peaty bank near the edge of the water, frequently catching small fish, apparently Three-spined Sticklebacks, (*Aulorhynchus flavidus*), by lunging. We never heard any vocalizations, and apparently voice remains undocumented for the species (Hancock and Kushlan 1984).

#### DISCUSSION

The Chinese Pond-Heron remained six days and was last seen on August 9 (although there was an unconfirmed report on August 11, seven miles from the original site). In all, about 35 people saw the bird, including a few St. Paul residents and many non-birding tourists. Only one fortunate birder, Ted Scudder, happened to be on the island at the time, and another, David Sonneborn, was persuaded to abandon plans for a week-long family vacation elsewhere in Alaska and saw the heron within a few minutes after landing on the island. David Kriska, Tonia Bittner, and Hadie Muller were the other tour guides who rushed to the scene. Smith was able to get some reasonable quality video footage of the bird in flight, and diagnostic photographs were obtained by Sonneborn, John Eastcott and Yva Momatiuk, and Timon Lestenkof.

The sexes of Chinese Pond-Heron are very similar, but females lack long plumes, show white on the foreneck, and lack the black area on the lower breast. Our bird did not show obvious black on the breast (perhaps its plumage was worn), but the restricted white on the chin and long plumes (visible in the photos) indicate that it was a male, especially when compared to the apparent female pictured in Reid (1992).

There are at least two, possibly three other species in the genus *Ardeola* that form a superspecies with *A. bacchus* (Payne and Risley 1976, del Hoyo et al. 1992). The Javan (*A. speciosa*) and Indian (*A. grayii*) pond-herons are the most similar and in fact appear to be inseparable from *A. bacchus* in the field in immature (predefinitive) and adult winter (definitive basic) plumages. Luckily, our bird was an adult in breeding (alternate) plumage, and the other species in this plumage have a brownish or buff head and neck. The pond-herons have been considered conspecific with the Squacco Heron (*A. ralloides*) (Hancock and Elliott 1978), but there is apparently little evidence to support this. Since the Chinese Pond-Heron's range, it has been seen breeding in the same colonies as Indian Pond-Herons, with no interbreeding occurring (Ali and Ripley 1968, Hancock and Elliott 1978).

The normal breeding range of the Chinese Pond-Heron is almost wholly within China, where in the southeast it is one of the most common herons. It breeds sparingly as far north as

Manchuria (at a latitude of about 44°N, same as the central Oregon coast), but is common only from Beijing south. It also breeds in East India, Burma, Bangladesh, and possibly northern Thailand. Northern populations are migratory (departing September and October), and in winter it is found from southern China through Southeast Asia to Borneo (Ali and Ripley 1968, Meyer de Schauensee 1984, del Hoyo et al. 1992). It has been found in a variety of habitats, including ponds, ditches, and rice fields, and it feeds on fish and invertebrates.

The status of the Chinese Pond-Heron outside its breeding range to the north and northeast is difficult to ascertain as a result of the lack of recent, English-language references. Brazil (1991), in his excellent book, notes a marked increase in sightings in recent years in Japan. Formerly known there as a rare but annual post-breeding wanderer, five to fifteen records per year became normal by 1986, some of which also involved spring overshoots and overwintering birds. There are isolated breeding records from 1981 and 1986 in the south of Japan, but the species apparently is still only a rare visitor on the northern island of Hokkaido (which is at the same latitude as the northernmost breeding areas in China).

There has also been a possibly parallel increase in the number of sightings in southeastern Russia. Dement'ev and Gladkov (1951) list only four records for the former Soviet Union, but the species is now an annual, mostly spring, visitor primarily along the coast from Khasan at the North Korean border (uncommon) north to Olga Bay (rare; just west of Japan's northernmost occurrences) (*vide* K. Mikhailov). Based simply on the number of records, breeding has been long suspected, but never confirmed, in this region (Knystautas 1983, Flint et al. 1984, *vide* K. Mikhailov). The reed-bed habitat where these pond-herons have been found, however, is unsuitable for breeding by this tree-nesting, colonial species.

It is difficult to say whether the increase in sightings noted in Japan and Russia represents a change in this species' status or is simply the result of an increase in observer coverage. Brazil (1991) suggests that an actual range expansion is occurring, but even if the number of birds reaching Japan has increased in recent years, this could simply be a result of a population increase within the species' normal range in China (see Patten and Marantz 1996). It is important to note that no new breeding colonies have been found, which would have been expected in the case of a true range expansion.

On the Russian coast north of Olga Bay the Chinese Pond-Heron is apparently unknown, and there are no records beyond Hokkaido from the Kurile Islands or from Kamchatka (the mark on the map at the mouth of the Amur River in Dement'ev and Gladkov (1951) is an error, *vide* K. Mikhailov). The one November record from Kyakhta on the Russian/Mongolian border south of Lake Baikal (Dement'ev and Gladkov 1951) appears to be a vagrant. More astounding than even the St. Paul Island bird is a record from western Norway, where an adult in breeding plumage was shot in the fall of 1973 (Folkestad 1978).

For some days previous to the pond-heron's arrival, St. Paul experienced fairly unusual sustained southwest winds. Apparently these winds were associated with a series of storms moving northeastward along the southeast Asian coast, which had culminated in a "super-typhoon." In late July, this storm hit the mainland of China where Chinese Pond-Herons are particularly common, perhaps suggesting that the St. Paul bird had been blown out to sea. On the other hand, this bird may have dispersed unusually far north on its own, making it to St. Paul Island only with the help of the local wind conditions. Many species of herons are known to disperse after breeding, being fairly common just north of breeding areas and occasionally found

much farther to the north. With this in mind, the lack of Chinese Pond-Heron records from the Kurile Islands and Kamchatka may only be an artifact of limited observer coverage. If it were found to be an occasional visitor there (as is, for example, Cattle Egret in British Columbia), a record in the Bering Sea would not seem so surprising—comparable to the occurrence of Cattle Egrets in mainland Alaska. Naturally, speculation on the provenance of this bird and how it arrived on North American shores, like that for many other accidentals, is necessarily based on conjecture.



**Besides the Chinese Pond-Heron, a number of other noteworthy birds occurred on St. Paul Island during August 1996. This bright juvenile Little Stint was present on August 7 and 8. Photograph/David W. Sonneborn**

## VAGRANTS TO THE PRIBILOFS

The Pribilof Islands have long attracted vagrant American and Asian species. Before regular trips were conducted to other western Alaskan outposts, notably St. Lawrence Island (Gambell) and the outer Aleutians such as Attu, this tiny archipelago accounted for a number of North American first records, including Bean Goose (*Anser fabalis*), Falcated Duck (*Anas falcata*), Jack Snipe (*Lymnocyptes minimus*), Long-toed Stint (*Calidris subminuta*), Brambling (*Fringilla montifringilla*), and Hawfinch (*Coccothraustes coccothraustes*). Unlike Attu or Gambell, however, the Pribilofs are not on or near any migratory pathways except those of alcids—for which the islands are famous—and a very few shorebird species. The vagrants that do reach St. Paul, the island that has the greatest variety of habitats (see Zimmerman and Jones 1991) and traditionally the most observer coverage, are often truly lost.

On St. Paul, many more migrants, especially shorebirds, are present during fall than during spring. Some, like Gray-tailed Tattlers, Red-necked Stints (*Calidris ruficollis*), Sharp-tailed Sandpipers (*Calidris acuminata*), and Ruffs appear to have an eastward dispersal from Siberian breeding grounds. They are rare but annual on the Pribilofs. Several individuals, mostly juveniles, of all these species oc-

# CHINESE POND-HERON

## ASIATIC VAGRANTS FOUND ON ST. PAUL ISLAND, ALASKA, AUGUST 1996

SPECIES	NUMBER	STATUS
Chinese Pond-Heron	1	1st North American record
Mongolian Plover	1	rare in spring and fall
Wood Sandpiper	>2	rare in spring, casual in fall
Gray-tailed Tattler	1-6	uncommon in fall
Red-necked Stint	>3	rare, annual in spring and fall
Little Stint	1	casual in spring and fall
Temminck's Stint	>4	casual in fall
Sharp-tailed Sandpiper	>9	uncommon in fall
Ruff	>3	rare, annual in fall

curred during or soon after the Chinese Pond-Heron visitation (table). In addition, a single juvenile Little Stint (*Calidris minuta*) and an adult Mongolian Plover were found in August 1996; several juvenile Wood Sandpipers and Temminck's Stints (*Calidris temminckii*) were present by the end of the month. Over the past ten years other August sightings have included Garganey (*Anas querquedula*), Common Ringed Plover (*Charadrius hiaticula*), Bristle-thighed Curlew (*Numenius tahitiensis*), Common Greenshank, Long-toed Stint, Spoonbill Sandpiper (*Eurynorhynchus pygmeus*), and Curlew Sandpiper (*Calidris ferruginea*).

The presence of a bird as exotic as a Chinese Pond-Heron in Alaska is not as unprecedented as one might initially think. Yellow Bittern (*Ixobrychus sinensis*), Great Egret (*Ardea alba*), Chinese Egret (*Egretta eulophotes*), Cattle Egret, Black-crowned Night-Heron (*Nycticorax nycticorax*), and possibly Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*) have all previously occurred in the state (D.D. Gibson, pers. comm.). Interestingly, Black-crowned Night-Heron has occurred twice on the Pribilofs, once on April 3, 1979, and the other exactly ten years before the pond-heron sighting, on August 6, 1986. Both of these birds were presumably of Asian origin. Nevertheless, *Ardeola bacchus* was not on anyone's list of expected vagrants.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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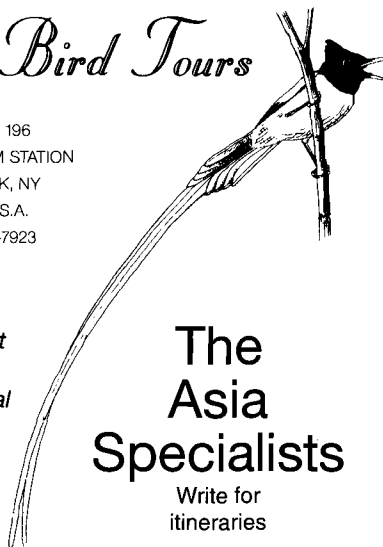
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