

AN ALBINISTIC BLACK-NECKED STILT: A SECOND RECORD

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Albinism has been recorded infrequently for the two North American members of the family Recurvirostridae. Gross (Bird-Banding 36:67-71, 1965) listed only one record of albinism for the Black-necked Stilt (*Himantopus mexicanus*) and one record for the American Avocet (*Recurvirostra americana*). To my knowledge no further reports of albinistic Black-necked Stilts have been published.

On 17 September 1977 I saw an albinistic Black-necked Stilt foraging in a small pond at Buena Vista Lagoon, San Diego County, California. The bird was with six to eight normally pigmented stilts. A description of the bird follows: plumage all white; legs light pink, lighter than normal; bill light yellow. Eye color was not seen.

During 5 minutes of observation the albinistic bird appeared to behave similarly to the other stilts, and I did not see any unusual behavior on the part of the normally pigmented stilts toward the albinistic bird. When the group of stilts flew away, the albinistic bird accompanied them. Presumably the same albinistic stilt was seen by two other observers at the same location on 7 September 1977.

Janice K. Victoria of the San Diego Natural History Museum critically reviewed this note; her comments are appreciated.

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IDENTIFICATION QUIZ



The shape of the bill and pattern of upperpart streaking identify this rather nondescript bird as some kind of sparrow or longspur. The Snow Bunting (*Plectrophenax nivalis*), the short-tailed, grassland sparrows (*Passerculus*,

Ammodramus and *Ammospiza*) and the long-tailed, *Spizella* sparrows can be eliminated by noting overall shape and tail length relative to body length, and nearly all other North American sparrows have distinctive patterns on the head and/or streaked underparts, including the flanks, which appear unstreaked on this bird. By process of elimination, we are left with a longspur (*Calcarius*), either an adult female or a bird in first basic plumage. Certainly the appearance of white in the outer tail feathers and the exposed situation are indicative of a longspur.

But which species? The bird is too pale and indistinctly patterned about the face for the two darker species, Smith's, *C. pictus*, and Lapland, *C. lapponicus*, and lacks the streaking on the sides that both would show in adult female or immature plumages. In addition, *pictus* usually (but not always) exhibits a striking black and white pattern on the lesser and middle wing coverts and buffy underparts, and *lapponicus* has rusty greater wing coverts (the area between the wing bars). This leaves us with McCown's, *C. mccownii*, and Chestnut-collared, *C. ornatus*, as possibilities. These two species may exhibit different patterns on the lesser and middle wing coverts (black and white on *ornatus*, similar to *pictus*, rusty and pearl gray on *mccownii*), but neither pattern is easily discernible on many birds, including this one. The different tail patterns of the two species (black triangle on white on *ornatus*, black T on white on *mccownii*) can't be distinguished when the tail is folded as in this case. Indeed, this latter character, even on a flying bird, is frequently hard to discern. We are left to seek other clues to the identification of our bird.

The bill is fairly delicate and does not seem large in proportion to the rest of the bird. The wings look somewhat rounded, as the tips of the primaries only reach a short distance beyond the tertiaries. The length of tail exposed beyond the uppertail coverts, however, is fairly extensive for a longspur. These features all point to this bird's being a Chestnut-collared Longspur. In addition, small black flecks are visible on the bird's underparts, which if actually feathers (and not mud specks, etc.) are also indicative of *ornatus*.

McCown's Longspur exhibits a rather large, thick-based bill, somewhat reminiscent of some western races of Fox Sparrow (*Passerella iliaca*), and has long, pointed wings (the primaries extending out considerably past the ends of the tertiaries in the folded wing) that nearly reach the tip of the relatively short tail. McCown's also frequently has a more distinct, buffy superciliary stripe, but this is variable in appearance.

Of course, if we could flush the bird we might be able to see the characteristic Chestnut-collared tail pattern, and would probably hear a finch-like, double-noted chirping, quite different from the rattle-like flight calls of other longspurs, including McCown's. The photo of a Chestnut-collared Longspur was taken at the Pawnee National Grasslands, Colorado, in October 1980, by Bruce Webb.

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