

HUDSONIAN GODWIT IN BAJA CALIFORNIA

MARK J. BILLINGS, 3802 Rosecrans Street, PMB #334, San Diego, California 92110; markjbillings@yahoo.com

GUY McCASKIE, 954 Grove Avenue, Imperial Beach, California 91932; guymcc@pacbell.net

On 28 August 2004, Claude G. Edwards, Michael U. Evans, Martha Heath, and Billings headed toward Ensenada in Baja California for a day of birding. At about 10:00, at the Río Guadalupe estuary near La Misión, Billings spotted an unfamiliar bird and quickly determined that its overall size, shape, and grayish-brown coloration indicated a Hudsonian Godwit (*Limosa haemastica*). Among those present, only Edwards had ever seen this species before. The location was a shallow freshwater estuary separated from the ocean by a wide sandbar. The estuary has exposed mud flats and is surrounded by pickleweed (*Salicornia* sp.) and Saltcedar (*Tamarix ramosissima*). At first the observers were looking east towards the sun, under a marine layer, resulting in a hazy image of the bird. As they began discussing the identity of the bird, Billings realized that it was no longer present. They then walked upstream along the estuary's northern shore and relocated it. At distances as close as 12 m, and under better lighting conditions, they were able to study the bird with the aid of Billings' Swarovski STS 80-mm HD spotting scope. At one point, the bird raised its wings and showed dark wing linings, eliminating the similar Black-tailed Godwit (*L. limosa*).

The Hudsonian Godwit was similar in shape to, but noticeably smaller than, an adjacent Marbled Godwit (*L. fedoa*). The bill looked to be about the length of that of a Short-billed Dowitcher (*Limnodromus griseus*; another species present for direct comparison) but was slightly upturned at the tip. The basal half of the bill was pink, the rest black. The dark cap and lores set off the whitish supercilium that extended to just behind the black eye. The whitish throat contrasted somewhat with the pale grayish-buff head and neck. The breast was rich brown, a color that extended down to the flanks, and the undertail coverts were white. The mantle was a rather uniform gray, the buffy feather edges giving the upperparts a scaly look characteristic of juvenal plumage. When the bird was in flight, the white uppertail coverts and base of the tail contrasted sharply with the mostly black tail. The tail itself was narrowly tipped whitish. The upperwings were grayish brown with a white stripe across the base of the outer secondaries and inner primaries, also visible from below. The underwing coverts were black.

Billings returned to the Río Guadalupe estuary four times over the next few weeks and each time found the Hudsonian Godwit with a Marbled Godwit, almost always feeding in belly-deep water. He heard the bird call once in flight: a squeaky, high-pitched *kweep*. The Hudsonian Godwit was last seen by Robert A. Hamilton on 3 October 2004.

The Hudsonian Godwit is a bird of the Americas. It is known to breed in disjunct areas from southern and western coastal Alaska, and northwestern British Columbia, east to Hudson Bay (Kessel and Gibson 1976, Godfrey 1986, Elphick and Klima 2002). A bird found in June during the late 1960s at Plover Bay on the Chukotskiy Peninsula in northeastern Siberia (Kessel and Gibson 1976) appears to be the only one recorded in Asia. In winter, the species is found from extreme southern Peru and Brazil to the southern tip of South America. The main wintering grounds lie on the eastern coast of Tierra del Fuego and adjacent areas, and on the coast of south-central Chile in the vicinity of Chiloe Island. The species is accidental on the Falkland Islands (Elphick and Klima 2002, A.O.U. 1998). Small numbers (up to nine reported per year) also winter regularly in New Zealand, and there are at least three records for

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Australia at this time of the year (Higgins and Davies 1996). One at Port Elizabeth in South Africa 1 March–25 April 1987 (*Ostrich* 59:144) probably wintered locally.

In North America, spring migrants move primarily through the interior from Texas and Louisiana north to northeastern British Columbia and Hudson Bay. In fall, migrants take a more easterly route, staging at James Bay, in the maritime provinces of Canada, and in the northeastern United States, then making a presumed nonstop flight over the Atlantic to South America. Some Hudsonian Godwits breeding in Alaska may make a flight over the Pacific directly from Alaska to western South America (S. N. G. Howell in litt.). Displaced birds accompanying migrant Bar-tailed Godwits (*Limosa lapponica*) probably account for the species' annual occurrence in New Zealand (Gill et al. 2005). Hudsonian Godwits found on Norfolk Island 5–17 November 1980 (Higgins and Davies 1996), in Fiji 2–9 May 1981 (*Notornis* 28:128–129), in the Marshall Islands (Elphick and Klima 2002), and on O'ahu, Hawaii, 21–29 July 1987 (P. Pyle pers. comm.) were probably in transit between Alaska and Australasia. Hudsonian Godwits have also occurred accidentally in Great Britain, in fall/early winter and in spring (Vinicombe and Cottridge 1996), and once in Denmark in fall (Lewington et al. 1991).

On the Pacific coast of North America south of Alaska, this species is a casual spring and very rare fall migrant along the coasts of British Columbia (Campbell et al. 1990), Washington (S. G. Mlodinow pers. comm.), and Oregon (Marshall et al. 2003). There are 23 records for California, with six in spring (two on the coast and four inland, all between 9 and 31 May) and 17 in fall (14 on the coast and three inland, all between 8 August and 18 October) (California Bird Records Committee data). Although the Hudsonian Godwit is an uncommon to fairly common spring migrant in southern Mexico, it was previously unconfirmed in fall (Howell and Webb 1995). One collected at San José del Cabo, Baja California Sur, 5 May 1988 (Navarro-S. et al. 1991) constitutes the only previous record for northwestern Mexico.

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Figure 1. Hudsonian Godwit in flight at La Misión, Baja California, 19 September 2004. The white wing-stripe and rump, along with the black underwings are all visible, clearly showing the bird to be a Hudsonian Godwit. The pale fringes on the mantle, scapulars, and upperwing coverts show the bird to be a juvenile.

Photo by Matt Sadowski

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