

**SOME OBSERVATIONS UPON THE NOTES AND
BEHAVIOUR OF THE GREEN SANDPIPER WHEN
FLUSHED.**

BY

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COMPARATIVELY little appears to have been written relating to the behaviour and calls of the Green Sandpiper (*Tringa ochropus*) in this country, when flushed, and so possibly the few observations we have been able to make may add a trifle to the sum of general knowledge, especially as they do not altogether agree with the descriptions already published.

The *Practical Handbook* states (Vol. II., p. 617) that it "rises with a sharp 'tui tui tui', zigzags in rapid flight for a few yards, then mounts high and goes clear away", while T. A. Coward in his *Birds of the British Isles* (Vol. 2, p. 164) describes it as "easily flushed it rises high towering to a great height" and "almost invariably it calls on rising a loud clear 'toie, toie, toie', with a rounder, fuller o-sound than the call of the Redshank. Though it does not as a rule alight within sight it will return to the same spot when the coast is clear."

It will be seen that in each case emphasis has been placed upon three characteristics: the triple call, which is the only one mentioned, the habit of towering, and a disinclination to alight again anywhere in sight.

We have observed this species upon forty-three occasions in numbers varying from one to four together, but it is only during the last two years that we have been able to make anything like close observations. On the sixteen occasions they were seen prior to 1930, our notes only mention towering on four, while no special attention was paid to call-notes other than recording the fact, and therefore no detailed records are available, but on four occasions they are noted as rising with a call and apparently no sound was heard on any of the other twelve. The birds were not marked down and so were not flushed more than once.

In 1930 a bird first seen on October 5th remained about the same place until November 16th, or at least we presumed it was the same bird. On October 5th it was flushed four times running and on each occasion it flew off low and with direct flight over the water, alighting again within sight. No note of any kind was uttered, and this behaviour was repeated on five subsequent occasions, the bird being flushed

twice on each visit, that is ten times altogether. On November 16th it rose with a loud call, and towering, flew out of sight and was not seen again.

Our observations for 1931/32 are far more varied and are given in the form of extracts from our diaries, our notes being made on the spot.

October 4th.—One, flushed twice, and each time it rose silently and flew low over the water.

October 11th.—Two from the gully below the reservoir dam. One rose silently, and the other with a triple call "*kwerl-weet-tweet*," repeatedly occasionally while in flight. Both flew low up over the dam and alighted on the pitching of the reservoir, and, when again flushed, flew off low over the water, one bird uttering the same call. Flushed a third time, separately, for they were feeding some distance apart, the first went off quite silently, flying low, and the other calling "*kwerl-weet-tweet*," also flying low.

October 18th.—Four, all feeding together at the edge of the water, Lisvane Reservoir, and we watched them from cover for a considerable time. They bob less frequently than the Common Sandpiper and the tail is not so constantly in motion. Silent when running about and feeding, but two flew 50 to 60 yards farther along calling "*kwee-weet, kwee-weet, kwerl-weet-tweet*". When the other two joined them the four flew together along the water's edge for a further hundred yards or so, rising with a rippling, bubbling call, "*klu-ludle-lu-ludle-lu-ludle*", followed by a sharp "*wit-wit*". On being flushed they rose to about 50 to 60 feet and circled around over the reservoir occasionally calling "*kwerl-weet-tweet*", but alighted again in a few minutes.

October 25th.—Two on Lisvane Reservoir. One called "*kwerl-weet-tweet*" as it flew off low over the water to the other side (200 yards), the other rose silently and followed in a similar manner, both recrossing again silently as we neared them.

November 15th.—One flushed from the gully at 4 to 5 yards range. It rose silently and just skimming the grass topped the dam and went down on the reservoir pitching. We walked right on to it there, at 3 to 4 yards, when it skimmed off over the water silently, mounting once to about 50 feet and then dropping again. Flushed for the third time it flew off over the water quite silently.

November 22nd.—Two flushed, at 25 to 30 yards, from the gully. Got up calling loudly "*kwee-weet*", and

"*kwerl-weet-tweet*", and flew right away out of sight but did not tower.

December 6th.—One flushed from the gully at 10 to 12 yards range. Rose silently and flew up over the dam about one foot above the grass and then out over the reservoir at the same height.

December 13th.—One flushed from the south-west corner of Llanishen Reservoir at 4 to 5 yards. Flitted off silently just over the surface of the water and, crossing the dam, went down on the gully. Two were put up from there at 25 to 30 yards, one rising silently and the other calling loudly "*kwee-weet, kwerl-weet-tweet, kwerl-weet-tweet, kwee-weet-a-weet*", and then "*klu-ludle-lu-ludle-lu-ludle, wit-wit-wit, kwerl-weet-tweet*", and after alighting "*kwer-weet*". Flushed again at 10 to 12 yards both rose together, one calling a sharp "*ple-ple*", followed by the rippling "*klu-ludle-lu-ludle-lu-ludle*", and then "*wit-wit-wit*", the other making off silently, low across the water, while the first towered to 300 to 400 feet, calling repeatedly "*klu-wit*" as it flew off, but it circled back, still calling, and passing overhead dived down to the gully again, the last few yards very fast and steeply. We flushed the silent bird again, and this time it rose to 50 to 60 feet and also dived down to the gully, steeply and swiftly.

December 20th.—Two flushed from the gully at 20 to 25 yards. Rose with a rapid succession of the sharp "*ple*" note, varied with an occasional "*wit*" and "*klu-wit*" as they flew up the gully below the banks, and then rose and crossed low over the reservoir dam. Flushed again at 6 to 8 yards they flew out over the water with loud "*klu-wits*" and, turning, crossed over into the gully again. From here they were flushed for the last time and once more rose with a medley of rapid "*ples*" and an occasional "*wit*", these giving place to the flight-call "*klu-wit*" as they flew out of sight.

January 17th, 1932.—Two flushed from the gully at 10 to 12 yards flew low up the stream for a few yards calling "*kwee-weet, kwee-weet, kwee-weet-a-weet*", with an occasional "*wit*". They then rose over the dam, their notes changing as they did so to "*klu-wit, klu-wit, klu-wit-a-wit*". It was impossible to be certain, but apparently only one bird was calling. They circled around about 20 feet up, as though returning to the gully, but finally went off over the water and we lost sight of them. On returning to the gully about an hour later we flushed them from almost the same spot.

Both rose silently, but as they crossed the dam one began to call "*wit-wit, klu-wit, klu-wit, wit-wit*", and both flew out a short distance over the water calling "*kwee-weet, kwee-weet*", and again turned and alighted on the pitching about 200 yards away. We descended the dam and, walking below it, crossed again almost on top of them, flushing them at 8 to 10 yards. They flew out over the water, one bird calling very rapidly "*kle, kle, wit, wit, wit, kee-wit, kwee-weet, kwee-weet-weet*", and then both towered high overhead, circling around for nearly two minutes, one calling continually "*kwee-weet, kwee-weet, kwee-weet-weet, klu-wit, klu-wit, klu-wit-wit*". We lost sight of them, but they must have descended to the pitching of the south dam for we flushed them from there some time later, when they skimmed off low over the water calling "*kwee-weet, kwee-weet, kwee-weet-weet*".

February 21st.—One flushed from the gully rose silently, and after flying a little way up the stream, flew low over the dam and went down on the pitching of the reservoir. Flushed from there it once more rose silently and just skimmed over the water to the other side. When put up from there it rose to some 50 to 60 feet and without a note of any kind flew across to the other reservoir. It was flushed there and simply skimmed off over the water silently and was not seen again.

February 28th.—Three flushed from the gully at 10 to 15 yards; their calls, if any, were drowned at that distance by the fierce wind. They flew up the gully and alighted again, and it was possible to get to within 5 or 6 yards of them before they caught sight of us and rose calling a succession of sharp "*klees*" and "*wits*". Flying low they just cleared the dam and alighted on the reservoir pitching, and when flushed from there skimmed off over the water to the other side, the wind again preventing any calls being heard.

March 6th.—One from the gully rose silently and flew low over the dam and alighted on the reservoir pitching. Flushed from there it skimmed the water for some distance and then mounted on a long slant to a great height and disappeared; no notes were heard, but there was a high wind.

March 13th.—One from the gully rose with a succession of "*klees*" and "*wits*", also "*kle-weet-kle-kle-weet, kwee-weet*", and then towered calling "*kwee-weet-weet*", repeating this call five times, and disappeared still flying high. Three more were flushed farther along the gully and rose with a succession of "*klees*" and "*wits*" and crossed low over

the dam calling "*kweet-kwee-weet-kweet*", and alighted on the reservoir pitching but moved again quickly and silently, resettling twice before finally alighting. Flushed at 5 or 6 yards they rose calling "*klee*" and "*wit*", and mounting high circled around calling all the time "*kwee-weet, kwee-weet-weet*", varied by "*klu-wit, kwer-weet, too-wit*", and also occasionally a slower "*too-twee*".

March 20th.—One from the gully rose silently and flying low crossed the dam and skimmed over the water to the other side without uttering any call.

March 27th.—Two from the gully where they were feeding apart. They rose separately and silently, flying low, over the dam, and alighting on the reservoir pitching.

April 3rd.—One from the gully rose silently and crossing low over the dam flew out over the water, but turning, re-crossed the dam and went down into the gully again. Flushed once more it repeated this flight but, although it returned to the gully, it did not alight but flew up again, towered to a great height and flew out of sight. It was apparently silent all the time.

April 10th.—Two from the gully rose calling "*wit, wit, klu-lu-wit, klu-lu-wit, wit, wit*", and flying low crossed the dam, alighting somewhere out of sight.

April 17th.—Two from the gully, separately, both rising silently and flying low, skimmed over the water out of sight. On this date Common Sandpipers (*Tringa hypoleucos*) were also seen.

April 24th.—One feeding on reservoir's edge close to three Common Sandpipers. All rose together and skimmed off over the water, the Green silently, the Commons calling loudly. The Green alighted by itself on the opposite side of the reservoir, while the Commons circled back to near the place they were first seen. This was the last time a Green Sandpiper was seen.

The reservoirs were visited weekly during the period between October 4th, 1931, and April 24th, 1932, and also after the latter date, but no birds were seen except on the dates recorded, although a careful search was made on every visit; it seems probable, however, that they must have been somewhere in the immediate neighbourhood during the whole of the seven months, that is of course assuming that those we saw so constantly were individuals of the same party and not new arrivals; it seems less probable that the latter alternative should be the correct one.

Summing up our observations, it is apparent that the triple call variously described as "tui tui tui", or "toie toie toie", does not in all cases consist of three similar notes, but rather of three dissimilar ones, the first of which at any rate is very distinctly different from the other two, in fact we never heard anything resembling the triple repetition of a single note, and this statement appears to be supported by a quotation, sent to us by our friend Bertram Lloyd, from a translation of A. Voigt's *Vogelstimmen*, 8th edition, 1920, p. 235. "The first ones I observed went off uttering a musical 'Dlu-e' call, but later I constantly heard flying birds utter a cry 'Djui-it' or 'Djui-it-it-it', as did Hesse, who syllables it as 'Gluhit-wit-wit'".

It is interesting also to compare the flight notes of the New World representative of this species, the Solitary Sandpiper (*Tringa solitaria*), with those we heard, and they are given in the *Practical Handbook*, p. 619, as "Peet-weet" or "peet-weet-weet".

An astonishing variety of other notes were frequently uttered, but when two or more birds were seen together it was not always possible to be certain how many were calling, for with one or two exceptions, they invariably kept close together when rising and while in flight. It may well be that certain combinations of notes we heard were used by one sex only, while the other remained silent or only made use of such general calls as the alarm, which was generally a rapid succession of a sharp note repeated a varied number of times which can be written as either "pee", "plee", or "klee", these being followed by the flying-away notes, sometimes a sharp "wit" repeated one or more times, often "kwee-weet", and when flying low over the water "kwee-weet" followed by "kwerl-weet-tweet" (which was the outstandingly characteristic call in October to December but not heard later), occasionally varied by "kwee-weet-a-weet" or "kwee-weet-weet," while the calls heard from birds towering were "klu-wit" or "too-wit", but sometimes "kler-weet".

The most interesting call was the one used by one bird when in company with others, the rippling "klu-ludle-lu-ludle-lu-ludle" heard on October 18th (four birds together) and again on December 13th (two birds together). Upon first hearing this we were instantly reminded of Miss Haviland's (Mrs. Brindley) description of the calls of her honey-mooning Wood-Sandpipers (*Tringa glareola*) in *A Summer on the Yenesei*, of which she syllables "taludle, taludle, lirra, lirra,

taludle". It seems quite possible that the birds we heard were males uttering some part or variation of their spring love-song, although it was not heard after December 13th.

Bertram Lloyd has here given us another extract from Voigt's book, p. 236. "Dobbrick (who has observed them for six years) says 'In the spring season . . . they utter a series of fluting notes a "*kick, kick*" mingled with a three-syllabled "*Tl̄e-dih̄t*" (often repeated several times) sometimes varied to a "*Kikilluht*" in which the first syllable is stressed'. According to Christoleit the pairing-season song has a silvery fluting sound something like '*Tit-luid-ie-tit-luid-ie*', the constantly recurring motif consisting of a short '*Tit*,' a rising '*Tlui*' and a falling '*Die*'."

Another point that emerges is the totally different behaviour of individual birds even when two were flushed together. The number of silent, low-flying birds is remarkable, the proportion being roughly two silent to one calling, and it is also evident that towering is not a constant characteristic, neither do they always evince a great desire to fly right away out of sight.

How far our birds' behaviour was influenced by their immediate surroundings is a question that can only be answered by further observations in different localities. Our records were all made upon two large, artificial reservoirs, around two sides of which a shallow stream runs between deep banks in an artificial gully, this last a very favourite haunt.

Charles Oldham, who has kindly given us his experiences with this species in Cheshire and elsewhere over a number of years, has only three notes of birds that flew a short distance after being flushed once, but on being put up again they flew right away, and he has only one record of a silent bird. He regards the triple call "*tui, tui, tui*" as characteristic and has only once noticed a disyllabic call, and once a musical "*tullic, whit, whit*".

Similarly Bertram Lloyd, amongst a number of records made at the Tring Reservoirs, notes only one bird which on being flushed twice flew off quietly and low to no great distance, and one which towered silently. He also considers the triple "*tui, tui, tui*", once "*tui, tui*", the characteristic call, but also once records "*wit, wit, twee, twee, twee*."