

The Eskimo Curlew in Britain

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Abstract This paper summarises the history and migrations of the Eskimo Curlew *Numenius borealis*, a formerly abundant species now possibly extinct. A recent review of all British records by BOURC concluded that the previously accepted first British record (Woodbridge, Suffolk, November 1852) is no longer acceptable. Details of all British claims are presented, and the review concluded that four British records are still acceptable. One shot at the summit of Cairn Mon Earn, North-east Scotland, on 6th September 1855 becomes the first British record.

Introduction

It may come as a surprise to many that the Eskimo Curlew *Numenius borealis*, a Nearctic wader that may well now be extinct, has occurred several times in Britain. However, the species had many attributes as a candidate for vagrancy – it was formerly abundant and it was a long-distance migrant, with an autumn migration route not dissimilar to that of the American Golden Plover *Pluvialis dominica*, which took it over the North Atlantic off the eastern seaboard of North America. As part of an ongoing review of species on Category B of the British List, BOURC recently reviewed all British records.

The type specimen

Johann Reinhold Forster first described the species in 1772 as the Eskimaux Curlew *Scolopax borealis*, from a specimen sent to him in 1771 by Andrew Graham of the Hudson Bay Company. At the time, Forster was a lecturer at the Dissenters' Academy in Warrington, Cheshire, so the type specimen was described in England (Forster 1772). The type locality was Fort Albany, Ontario, some 650 km southeast of the Severn River, where Andrew Graham worked, and it was in fact Humphrey Marten who collected and sent specimens to Graham from Fort Albany. Marten included some notes to accompany his specimens, with information on features

that would not be apparent from a specimen (such as diet, habits, local names) and for Eskimo Curlew these included: 'This bird hath two names given [to] it by the natives, first *waw-kee-coot-ta-sue*, or crooked bill. Second *wee-kee-mee-na-sue*, the Berry Eater, those being its favourite food...' (Houston *et al.* 2003). There is little doubt that Marten's bird was the type specimen as Forster included this second native name in his original description (Forster 1772).

There are earlier references to Eskimo Curlews, however, such as within the diaries of George Cartwright, who shot 'curlews' in Labrador from 1770 until 1786 (Gollop *et al.* 1986). At this time, the Eskimo Curlew was apparently one of the most abundant shorebirds in North America but just 100 years later the population was heading towards extinction. It is currently listed as Critically Endangered (Possibly Extinct) by the IUCN (www.birdlife.org).

Breeding records and migration patterns

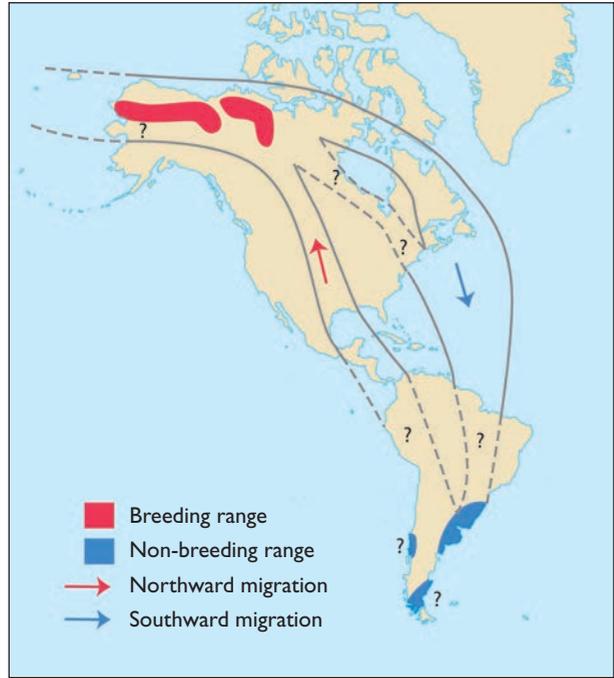
Eskimo Curlews were presumed to breed in Alaska and northern Canada, although the only nests that were ever found were on marshy tundra in Canada's Northwest Territories, near the base of the Bathurst Peninsula, and near Point Lake, 750 km to the southeast (Gill *et al.* 1998). Nests and eggs

were found only between 1821 (Swainson & Richardson 1831) and 1866 (MacFarlane 1891), all in late June or early July, at Fort Anderson, Rendezvous Lake, Franklin Bay and Point Lake (MacFarlane 1891; Bent 1929). Birds have been recorded in May in Alaska, though no nests were ever found, but an adult with young was reported in 1983 (Gollop *et al.* 1986).

In autumn, birds migrated eastwards across Hudson Bay and congregated on the coasts of Labrador and northern New England, where they apparently fed largely on Crowberries *Empetrum nigrum*: ‘Their food consists almost entirely of the Crow-berry, which grows on all the hill-sides in astonishing profusion. It is also called the “Bear-berry” and “Curlew-berry”... This is their principal and favourite food; and the whole intestine, the vent, legs, bill, throat, and even the plumage are more or less stained with the deep purple juice.’ (Coues 1861). They were also known to feed on intertidal invertebrates at this time of year. A journey of up to 8,000 km followed, to wintering grounds in the pampas grasslands of Argentina and Uruguay. The route was presumed to be a non-stop oceanic flight as birds were regularly reported passing over Bermuda as well as the Windward Islands in the outer Caribbean, although few stopped there unless grounded by bad weather (Gollop *et al.* 1986). In spring, they arrived on the coasts of Texas and Louisiana in March and headed north along a relatively narrow migration route along the valleys of the Mississippi, Missouri and Platte Rivers, through the prairies of central USA to north-west Canada, mainly through Oklahoma, Kansas, Missouri and Nebraska (Gollop *et al.* 1986; fig. 1).

Historical accounts

The species was sometimes extraordinarily abundant, but only in its restricted migration stopover areas. John James Audubon saw the species only once, and his illustration in *The*



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Fig. 1. Breeding and wintering range, and presumed migration routes of the Eskimo Curlew *Numenius borealis*.

Birds of America (1840–44, plate 16) was from a single specimen. Indeed, Audubon commented on its abundance in certain areas that contrasted with its absence elsewhere in North America. Its demise was rapid during the late nineteenth century. The reasons are not known for certain but its palatability, tameness, gregarious nature and predictable appearances led to enormous numbers being shot. For example, in Massachusetts in 1863, an estimated 7,000–8,000 Eskimo Curlews and American Golden Plovers were killed on Nantucket Island, while in 1872 just two hunters reportedly shot 5,000 Eskimo Curlews on Cape Cod. The numbers killed on spring passage through the USA were even greater (Gollop *et al.* 1986). The species was also shot on the wintering grounds, though not in such large numbers, and birds were offered for sale in the markets of Buenos Aires and included on the menu in the principal restaurants (Wetmore 1927).

Eskimo Curlews associated regularly with American Golden Plovers, and migrating flocks in autumn often contained similar numbers of each. Flocks sometimes numbered thousands but groups of 30–50 Eskimo Curlews are most frequently mentioned



16. Esquimaux Curlew *Numenius borealis* by John James Audubon from *Birds of America* (1840–44). This painting was made from a single specimen sent to Audubon by William Oakes of Massachusetts. Audubon had just one brief glimpse of the species in life: a flock at dawn, flying over an island off South Carolina.

(Mackay 1892; Gollop *et al.* 1986). Mackay (1892) kept annual records of birds on Nantucket Island and occasionally Cape Cod from 1858 to 1891, which showed that they were less predictable than generally perceived; in that time, they were absent or rare in 18 years, while ‘immense’ numbers were noted in just one year (1863). Mackay suggested that large numbers coincided with poor weather conditions that grounded migrants; since Cape Cod and Nantucket are slightly farther south than the main migration staging posts in Labrador, this is perhaps not unexpected.

Their appeal to shooters, in addition to the fact that they were easy to shoot (not least

because of their tameness, but also because of strong bonds within a flock that meant uninjured birds would circle or hover over the wounded, facilitating massacre), was graphically summarised by Mackay: ‘they are frequently so fat that when they strike the ground after being shot flying the skin bursts, exposing a much thicker layer of fat than is usually seen in other birds, hence their local name “Doughbird”. At this season they are considered by epicures the finest eating of any of our birds, and consequently they are watched for and sought after by sportsmen with great perseverance during the very short period they

are expected to pass along our coast’.

Population decline was probably exacerbated by dramatic agricultural changes to the prairies as settlers moved west across the continent, most importantly changes in the grazing and burning patterns; nowadays only 4% of the original prairie ecosystem remains (Samson & Knopf 1994; Gill *et al.* 1998). The birds fed on a variety of invertebrates on spring migration, and the Rocky Mountain Locust *Melanoplus spretus* was apparently an important food source (Gollop *et al.* 1986); the locust, formerly abundant, became extinct as a result of changes to its habitat, and was last recorded in 1902 (Lockwood & DeBrey 1990). Similarly sweeping agricultural changes took place on the wintering grounds, with extensive cattle grazing and burning (Wetmore 1927).

Nonetheless, there are many graphic



Don Bleitz, courtesy of WFVZ, California



Don Bleitz, courtesy of WFVZ, California

17 & 18. Eskimo Curlew *Numenius borealis*, Galveston Island, Texas, USA, April 1962.

accounts of the slaughter of Eskimo Curlews on an almost unimaginable scale, and this appears to have been a major factor in the species' demise. 'Fishermen shot them in their thousands, they shot into the flying masses, often bringing down twenty or twenty-five at a single discharge' (Packard 1891). 'In Newfoundland and on the Magdalen Islands in the Gulf of St Lawrence, for many years after the middle of the nineteenth century, the Eskimo Curlews arrived in August and September in millions

that darkened the sky. In a day's shooting by 25 or 30 men as many as 2,000 curlews would be killed for the Hudson Bay Co. store at Cartwright, Labrador' (Smithsonian Institution, Washington; Annual Report of the Board of Regents for year ending 30th June 1915). 'Flocks reminded prairie settlers of the flights of Passenger Pigeons *Ectopistes migratorius* and the curlews were given the name of prairie pigeons. They contained thousands of individuals and would often form dense masses of birds extending half a mile in length and a hundred yards or more in width. When the flock would alight the birds would cover 40 or 50 acres of ground. During such flights the slaughter was almost unbelievable' (Bent 1929).

Recent records

The last fully documented records of Eskimo Curlews were in the early 1960s. In April 1962, several observers saw three, possibly four, in cattle-grazed pasture on the western side of Galveston Island, Texas. Don Bleitz photographed two of these, which remain the first and only unequivocal photographs of live Eskimo Curlews (see plates 17–20 & 25) (Bleitz 1962). A



19. Eskimo Curlew *Numenius borealis*, Galveston Island, Texas, USA, April 1962.

Don Bleitz, courtesy of WFFVZ, California

single bird was shot on 4th September 1963 on Barbados (Bond 1965), although the species had been protected against shooting in the USA and Canada since 1916. All subsequent reports have been sight-only records, but there have been a number of credible claims, including a party of 23 on Atkinson Island, Galveston Bay, Texas, on 7th May 1981 (Gollop *et al.* 1986) and four apparently reliable sightings in Texas in 1987 (Gollop 1988). There was also a report of a bird in southwest Manitoba in May 1996 (Waldon 1996; Gill *et al.* 1998). The most recent published claim was from Nova Scotia in September 2006.



20. Possible Eskimo Curlew *Numenius borealis*, Galveston Island, Texas, USA, April 1962. It is not clear whether this photograph has been published before. Some doubts have been expressed over the identification of the bird in this photograph, largely because it shows a deeper bill than would be expected, but also because the upperparts appear more uniform than in other photos (plates 17–19). However, it shows the characteristic long wings of Eskimo Curlew, and it does not appear to have the bold head pattern of 'Hudsonian Whimbrel' *N. phaeopus hudsonicus*.

Don Bleitz, courtesy of WFFVZ, California

(www.birdersworld.com/brd/default.aspx?c=a&id=972). The last definite record from the wintering grounds concerns one shot on 11th January 1925 in Argentina, although two or three were reported in Argentina in 1937 (Wetmore 1939; Greenway 1958). There was an unsubstantiated report of four near Cordoba, Argentina, in October 1990 (Michelutti 1991).

Extensive searches have been made on the former breeding grounds, including those of T. W. Barry, who searched each year from 1972 until 1984, on foot and by helicopter (Gollop *et al.* 1986). In addition, there were extensive but fruitless searches of the former wintering grounds in Argentina and Uruguay during 1992 and 1993 (Blanco *et al.* 1993).

The British records

Assessing old records is never easy. Without a specimen, we have to rely on descriptions and the opinions of contemporary, respected authorities to verify identifications (e.g. Dresser 1871–72, Harting 1872, Saunders 1889). This is especially problematic with Eskimo Curlew because it was confused with ‘Hudsonian Whimbrel’ *N. phaeopus hudsonicus* in North America (Audubon 1840–44). Wilson (1808–14) illustrated and described Hudsonian Whimbrel under the name Esquimaux Curlew *Scolopax borealis* (plate

21) although Bonaparte’s supplement (Wilson & Bonaparte 1825–33) corrected the mistake and illustrated the right species (plate 22). Nuttall (1834) also included Hudsonian Whimbrel under the name Esquimaux Curlew, but he described the real *N. borealis* as Small Esquimaux Curlew in the same volume. This led to confusion over at least one British record, where measurements did not correspond with published biometrics. It is also significant that Eskimo Curlew’s sister species, Little Curlew *N. minutus*, was first described from Australia just a few years before the first British record of Eskimo Curlew (Gould 1841). Little Curlew is mentioned in only one of the British accounts of Eskimo Curlew, so it seems that the former was generally not considered as a confusion species.

Even with a specimen, there are issues surrounding provenance. The nineteenth century was the heyday of trading in birds and, since wealthy collectors were willing to pay high prices for British-taken specimens, there was the potential for fraud. During this period, specimens from North America were readily available in sales at Stevens’ Auction Rooms in London and those advertised as British-taken were in highest demand (Chalmers-Hunt 1976). Again, the opinion of contemporary authorities is important, although the extent of fraud may be more apparent in retrospect than it was at the time, as with the Hastings Rarities (Nicholson & Ferguson-Lees 1962).

The main decline of the Eskimo Curlew occurred during the 1880s and the species was considered rare by 1892 (Gollop *et al.* 1986). Significantly, all British records pre-date the decline.

Woodbridge (November 1852)

The generally accepted first British record of Eskimo Curlew was from Woodbridge, Suffolk (e.g. Witherby *et al.* 1938–41, Bannerman 1961, Evans 1994, Naylor 1996, Palmer 2000). Hele (1870) was the first to publish this record: ‘An example of this species was



21. Alexander Wilson’s painting of ‘Hudsonian Whimbrel’ *Numenius phaeopus hudsonicus* (left), which Wilson erroneously described and pictured as Eskimo (Esquimaux) Curlew *N. borealis* in his *American Ornithology* (1808–14). Dunlin *Calidris alpina* (as Red-backed Snipe), Willet *Tringa semipalmatus* (as Semipalmated Snipe) and Marbled Godwit *Limosa fedoa* are also pictured.

killed some years since, on the river [Alde in Suffolk], by Captain Ferrand, but was, unfortunately, not preserved. One in the possession of Mr Hilling of Woodbridge, in very similar dress, was obtained in the river in that neighbourhood.' Neither record was dated but the fact that Hele mentioned the River Alde record (which is discussed later) first and compared the Woodbridge bird with it suggests that the latter was the more recent of the two. Hele's statement was in a general local interest book (not a specialist bird book) that was published 15 years after the first Scottish record had been published. Since Hele lived in Aldeburgh, it is likely that he obtained the details from Ferrand and Hilling directly, as they both lived nearby. These two records were published by Dresser (1871–81), Harting (1872), Dalgleish (1880) and Saunders (1882–84), all citing Hele and giving no dates for either record.

However, in his *Birds of Suffolk*, Churchill Babington (1884–86) stated that *two* birds were obtained together at Woodbridge, in November 1852. Babington was rector of Cockfield (about 40 km west of Woodbridge) and was perhaps better known as a classical scholar and archaeologist than an ornithologist (Mullens & Kirke Swann 1917). (He was also second cousin of Charles Babington, the botanist after whom Babington's Leek *Allium ampeloprasum babingtonii* was named.) His statement was at least 14 years after Hele's published report of a single bird (at Woodbridge) and after four authorities had published the record without additional details, and it seems odd that additional detail should materialise that was not available to Hele. Babington was not simply confusing the two Suffolk records, as he noted the River Alde record as a third bird. Babington claimed that two birds were *obtained* together, but no further details of the second specimen are available. Babington stated that J. H. Gurney Jr had compared the existing specimen with an American skin and felt quite satisfied as to its authenticity, adding that it had clearly been set up from the flesh.

(However, if the skin had been properly preserved with salt, and all traces of fat removed, it could have been prepared over a year later yet appear completely fresh; J. Fishwick pers. comm.). J. H. Gurney Jr (son of J. H. Gurney, founder member of the BOU and after whom Gurney's Pitta *Pitta gurneyi* was named) was born in 1848, so the verification must have taken place many years after the specimen was apparently obtained; note also that it was Gurney Jr who verified the 1904 Great Yarmouth 'Citril Finch', later found to be a Cape Canary *Serinus canicollis* (BOU 1994; Bourne 1996).

Babington noted that the Woodbridge specimen owned by Hilling (in his book, Babington referred to Hilling in error as Mr Hillen) was later sold to Vauncey Harpur Crewe, whose collections were subsequently auctioned in six separate sales in London, at Stevens' Auction Rooms (Chalmers-Hunt 1976). The fifth sale, on 23rd February 1926, contained two Eskimo Curlews. It is not known which was the Suffolk specimen but it seems likely to have been the more expensive one, sold to a Mr Abden for 18 shillings. The other, a female, was sold to an unnamed bidder for 14 shillings. It is significant that another specimen of Eskimo Curlew had been sourced by Harpur Crewe, showing that this species was 'available' in Britain, presumably by importation. The whereabouts of both of Harpur Crewe's specimens after 1926



22. The painting by Alexander Rider in Wilson & Bonaparte (1825–33) which corrected Wilson's mistake in *American Ornithology* (1808–14). Eskimo Curlew *Numenius borealis* (centre); white-morph Reddish Egret *Egretta rufescens* (as Peale's Egret Heron) and Limpkin *Aramus guarana* (as Scolopaceous Courlan) are also shown.

are unknown. Harpur Crewe was a notoriously uncritical but enthusiastic collector of rarities and his zeal may have made him susceptible to fraud. For example, the February 1926 sale also included two Hooded Mergansers *Lophodytes cucullatus* and a Swallow-tailed Kite *Elanoides forficatus*, all claimed to have been taken in Britain. Harpur Crewe may even have perpetrated fraud himself as the auction included a clutch of Black-headed Bunting *Emberiza melanocephala* eggs, allegedly taken by Harpur Crewe at Skegness, Lincolnshire (Nicholson 1926).

It seems most likely that the collecting date of the Woodbridge Eskimo Curlew was generated to facilitate the sale of the specimen to Harpur Crewe, as were the particulars of the second Woodbridge bird, and that Babington published these extra details in good faith. Babington mentioned that he had corresponded with Gurney Jr and W. M. H. Carthew over the record, but it was Hilling (the vendor) who stood to benefit from the more detailed provenance. Many nineteenth-century rarities, including many of the Hastings Rarities (Nicholson & Ferguson-Lees 1962), involved pairs (this appears to reflect the preference of taxidermists and collectors for birds in pairs rather than an ornithological belief that birds habitually migrated in pairs). Nonetheless, the second Woodbridge bird may have been a ploy to boost the credibility of the record.

Dalgleish (1880) placed a question mark after the Woodbridge record, suggesting that at least one of his correspondents had expressed doubts about its authenticity. His correspondents for British records were Alfred Newton and H. E. Dresser, both highly respected authorities, although Dresser (1871–81) appeared not to question the record. If the November date was correct, it would make the bird considerably later than all other extralimital records, at a time when the species should have been on its wintering grounds in South America. Birds normally left Labrador and New England during August and September, with few remaining beyond early September; they were virtually unknown during October in Labrador (Gollop *et al.* 1986). Furthermore, the estuarine river habitat seems not to match its apparent preference for dry habitats,

although estuarine feeding was not unknown.

In summary, we know that a specimen existed and believe that it was identified correctly, but we do not know who collected it, nor are we sure about the date. The bird's discovery was not announced at the time of collection, and the specimen was not examined when fresh by any authority. At least one contemporary authority (Dalgleish 1880) expressed doubt about the record, and it seems likely that extra details were fabricated to add credibility to the record. Many of the details reported above were unearthed during preparation of this paper and necessitated a recirculation of the record following its acceptance (BOU 2007). BOURC members were initially reluctant to overturn a record that had been authenticated by Gurney Jr, but considered that the gaps and discrepancies in provenance were sufficient to make the record no longer acceptable.

River Alde, undated

As described above, Hele (1870) was also the first to report another Suffolk record: one shot by George Ferrand on the River Alde some years before 1870, the specimen not preserved. Captain George Ferrand, born in 1836, was a captain in the Suffolk Artillery Militia who lived at Aldeburgh, but appears not to have been an ornithologist of repute; he received no further mention in Babington (1884–86). Dalgleish (1880) also placed a question mark after this record, although he did not question three subsequent published Scottish records, and Ticehurst (1932) noted that Hele did not see the bird himself. This record was accepted by nineteenth-century authorities (e.g. Harting 1872, Saunders 1882–84), but was not endorsed by Witherby *et al.* (1938–41) or Bannerman (1961); both referred to the record as 'alleged'. The BOU Checklist for 1915 listed this record as 'reported', but it was omitted from the 1952 Checklist (BOU 1915, 1952). The fact that the specimen was not preserved means that fraud is unlikely, but the lack of detail makes it impossible to ascertain whether it was identified correctly; there was no verification of the fresh specimen by any authority. This record was not currently accepted and BOURC did not vote to reinstate it.

Cairn Mon Earn, Durriss, 6th September 1855

One was shot at the summit of Cairn Mon Earn (378 m asl), Durriss, North-east Scotland, by W. R. Cusack-Smith, who lived at Durriss House at the time, on 6th September 1855. It was first pointed out as a Golden Plover *P. apricaria* by Cusack-Smith's gamekeeper, and Cusack-Smith noted the bird's disinclination to fly or call, and that it allowed approach to within 20 yards. The bird was sent to Mr Mitchell, a taxidermist in Aberdeen, and the mounted specimen was examined a few days later by J. Longmuir (Longmuir 1855). It was exhibited at a meeting of the Aberdeenshire Natural History Society on 19th October 1855 and Longmuir announced the record at a meeting of the Linnaean Society on 6th November 1855, in London. It was not measured when fresh, and the sex was not determined, though Longmuir thought it was a female in winter plumage. The measurements and description taken by Longmuir accord well with Eskimo Curlew and the length alone (14", 356 mm) rules out Little Curlew (290–320 mm) and Hudsonian Whimbrel (400–420 mm). This record was published 15 years before the Woodbridge record, so at the time was considered to be the first British record (Yarrell 1856). The current whereabouts of the specimen are unknown. BOURC voted to uphold this well-documented record (BOU 2007) and it becomes once again the first accepted British record.

Slains Estate, near Ellon, 28th September 1878

A male on the Slains Estate, near Ellon, North-east Scotland, was shot on 28th September 1878 (note that Saunders 1882–84, 1889 reported the date incorrectly as 29th September 1879). It was shot by W. Ramsay, a gamekeeper on the estate, who sent the fresh specimen to George Sim, an Aberdeen taxidermist. Sim (1879) later published an account including some biometrics (e.g. length 343 mm, tarsus 45 mm), which again ruled out confusion with Little Curlew (tarsus 46–54 mm) or Hudsonian Whimbrel (tarsus 74–90 mm). The mounted specimen was exhibited by J. A. Harvie-Brown at a meeting of the Glasgow Natural History

Society, in November 1878. Its stomach was reportedly crammed with Crowberries, several flies and a caterpillar. Crowberries were an important food source of Eskimo Curlews during autumn migration in Labrador (see above), and the Slains Estate is famed as one of the best examples of fixed dunes with Crowberry in the UK. The whereabouts of the specimen are unknown. BOURC voted to uphold this record.

Hill of Craigston, early September 1880

This record did not receive contemporary notice by ornithological authorities. It concerns a bird shot at the beginning of September 1880, on the Hill of Craigston, 6 km south of Banff, North-east Scotland. This record is first mentioned in a letter to Harvie-Brown from George Sim of Fyvie (not George Sim of Aberdeen, taxidermist and author of *The Vertebrate Fauna of 'Dee'* in 1903), dated 13th August 1888. No details were given other than the approximate date and locality (Harvie-Brown archives, National Museums of Scotland). It was also mentioned by Serle (1895), though again with little detail. The specimen was preserved by Mr McBoyle of Peterhead, although its subsequent whereabouts was unrecorded (Sim 1903). George Sim of Aberdeen was reputedly a critical assessor of all records in his *Vertebrate Fauna*. He omitted or placed in square brackets any records with doubts as to their provenance, so his unqualified inclusion of this record showed that he viewed it with satisfaction (although it is not known whether he actually saw the specimen). This would be the fourth record from North-east Scotland and the third that Sim had had personal involvement with (see below), yet it seems odd that Baxter & Rintoul (1953) failed to mention it, despite using Sim's *Vertebrate Fauna* as a reference for other Eskimo Curlew records. The lack of a description or specimen means that neither Hudsonian Whimbrel nor Little Whimbrel can be ruled out. This and the lack of contemporary attention led BOURC to decide that this record should not be accepted (BOU 2007). Forrester *et al.* (2007) stated that the record might have been lost by default by its lack of contemporary notice.

Ren Hathway © Isles of Scilly Museum



Ren Hathway © Isles of Scilly Museum



23 & 24. The Tresco Eskimo Curlew *Numenius borealis* (September 1887), showing the characteristic Y-shaped marks on the flanks.

**Forest of Birse, near Aboyne,
21st September 1880**

In the same month as the Craigston record, another Eskimo Curlew was shot in North-east Scotland, on a hill in the Forest of Birse, near Aboyne, on 21st September 1880. It was shot by H. C. Hadden, who sent it to George Sim of Aberdeen as a 'queer looking plover'. Sim identified it as a male Eskimo Curlew, noted that its stomach contained Crowberries and that the length and wings were mar-

ginally shorter than those of the 1878 specimen. In two letters to Harvie-Brown, Sim reported the length as half an inch shorter, then a quarter of an inch shorter than the 1878 Slains bird (Harvie-Brown archives). This gives a length of 330–336 mm, still too large for Little Curlew and too small for Hudsonian Whimbrel. The bird was exhibited at a meeting of the Glasgow Natural History Society, where it was scrutinised by several reputable ornithologists who satisfied themselves that this was 'not *Numenius minor*' (Little Curlew) (*Proc. Nat. Hist. Soc. Glasgow* 1882, Vol. 5) – note that *minor* was the name given by Muller in 1841, but Gould's 1841 *minutus* takes precedence. The record was documented by Sim (1880) and Harvie-Brown (1880) and subsequently included in Harting (1901). As with the others, the fate and current whereabouts of the specimen are unknown. BOURC voted

to uphold this record (BOU 2007).

**Tresco,
10th September 1887**

The last British record was shot with a single Whimbrel on Tresco, Isles of Scilly, by T. A. Dorrien-Smith on 10th September 1887. It was identified as an adult in breeding plumage by Thomas Cornish (1887); it was preserved and remains on display in the Isles of Scilly Museum. It was accepted by all con-

temporary authorities, although Saunders (1899) was the only one to identify the bird as a female. There is no published description but Cornish noted that the tarsus was shorter than given by published biometrics. However, he quoted a discrepancy with Wilson (1808–14), who described and illustrated Hudsonian Whimbrel under the name ‘Esquimaux Curlew’. Cornish measured the Tresco bird’s tarsus at just one and a half inches (38 mm), below the range given by Ridgway (1919) for both female (41–45 mm) and male Eskimo Curlews (39.5–44 mm). Nonetheless, the smaller-bodied Little Curlew is actually longer-legged than Eskimo Curlew (male tarsus 46–51 mm, female 48–54 mm), so the Tresco bird is even further out of the range for that species. The mounted specimen shows the wings falling short of the tail, whereas the wings of Eskimo Curlew should be longer than the tail, but this may be a quirk of the way it was mounted. There is no doubt about the identification, since the flanks have the requisite Y-shaped markings and a less distinct head pattern than Little Curlew (plates 23 & 24). Furthermore, the pattern of hexagonal plates on the back of the tarsus eliminates confusion with Little Curlew. The ageing as an adult appears to be incorrect. Eskimo Curlews underwent a complete moult on their wintering grounds (Gill *et al.* 1998), so in autumn the plumage should be either juvenile (fresh) or adult (worn). The tertials and scapulars have a narrow buff margin with some spotting, which fits the juvenile pattern. Adults had their tertials deeply notched by broad, angular buff spots along the edges. Despite the extant specimen, this is one of the most poorly documented records. However, there is no reason to doubt that it was a genuine vagrant and BOURC voted to uphold the record.

One further record of Eskimo Curlew was never accepted by BOU (BOU 1952). A bird was reportedly shot at Jury’s Gap, Kent, on 7th September 1879 by J. Southerden, at which time it was believed to be an Upland Sandpiper *Bartramia longicauda*. The first major problem with this record is that nothing was published until it was sold to the Booth Museum in 1924, 45 years after it was

supposedly shot (Walpole-Bond 1938). The second problem is that it was tainted by the Hastings Rarities affair (Nicholson & Ferguson-Lees 1962). Witherby *et al.* (1938–41) placed the record in brackets and Bannerman (1961) followed suit. The specimen passed through the hands of the Bristow firm of taxidermists in St Leonards-on-Sea, who sold it many years later, in 1924, to Arthur Griffith for the Booth Museum in Brighton (Walpole-Bond 1938). The Southerden family and Bristow’s taxidermists were both implicated in the Hastings Rarities. The statistical review of the Hastings Rarities dealt with the period from 1892 until 1930 (Nelder 1962), so the Eskimo Curlew record was 13 years before that period, but there is no verification for the specimen being collected in 1879. The other Hastings Rarities were announced soon after their alleged collection, yet the Eskimo Curlew remained incognito for 45 years. The Southerden family were occasional suppliers of rarities to Bristow’s. For example, J. Southerden shot a Collared Pratincole *Glareola pratincola* at Jury’s Gap on 30th May 1903, the same day that one of his relatives shot a Black-winged *G. nordmanni* on Romney Marsh. The Southerden family also provided Bristow with two further Collared Pratincoles, plus a Ruddy Shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea*, Killdeer *Charadrius vociferus* and Little Bittern *Ixobrychus minutus*, all of which were subsequently rejected as Hastings Rarities (Nicholson & Ferguson-Lees 1962).

Other European and extralimital records

There is a single record from Ireland. On 21st October 1870, W. R. Duff saw an Eskimo Curlew for sale in McArdles’ poulterer’s shop, in William Street, Dublin. The bird remained until 25th October, when Mr Bushe (a friend of Duff’s) directed a local taxidermist, Mr Glennon, to purchase and preserve it. The bird was in a putrid state when purchased, and Glennon had great difficulty in making a tolerable specimen from it (Blake-Knox 1870). Blake-Knox thought that it had been killed in Ireland because ‘no game is sent from America at this season’. Moreover ‘it was not sent to be sold as a rarity, for Mr Duff tells me sixpence purchased it’ (Blake-Knox

1870). Blake-Knox added that the bird had since been sold to Sir Victor Brooke, who claimed that the bird had been shot in Co. Sligo (Harting 1872), although there is no evidence for that. Brooke exhibited the specimen at a meeting of the Zoological Society, where it was examined by Dresser and compared with skins from North America (Dresser 1871–81). The specimen is still on display at the National Museum in Dublin.

The only other possible European record is from Iceland, noted by Ridgway (1919) as Kjaerbölling (*Naumannia* 1854, Vol. IV, p. 308). However, Slater (1901) confirmed that this reference refers to Dr Kjaerbölling being sent a specimen of Hudsonian Whimbrel from Iceland; the confusion probably arose as a consequence of Wilson (1808–14) illustrating and describing Hudsonian Whimbrel under the name Esquimaux Curlew. There are no other accounts from the Western Palearctic although there is a curious report of an Eskimo Curlew arriving on board the SS *Baltic* on 26th May 1906, half way between Newfoundland and Ireland (49°06'N 27°28'W). This is highly unusual as the species' spring migration was through the interior of North America, unlike the autumn route over the Atlantic. Mackay (1892) knew of only one east-coast record in spring, a bird shot on Cape Cod in May 1873. This was presumed to have been a wounded bird that had overwintered there as it was 'very thin and sedgy in taste when eaten'. An Eskimo Curlew would have been extremely rare at this date, and there were no unusual weather conditions in May 1906. However, a normally gregarious bird may be more prone to getting lost when it does not have a flock with which to migrate. The bird was exhausted, captured by hand and fed with chopped beef and chicken, which it ate heartily. It was also seen to defecate before it was captured, suggesting that it had fed recently. Despite being fed, it died a few hours before the ship reached Sandy Hook Lightship (Barbour 1906).

The only other extralimital North Atlantic records are four undated specimens from Greenland (Hahn 1963). Reinhardt (1861) gave details of one of these, shot at Julianchaab (in southern Greenland, at a similar latitude to northern Labrador) in 1858.

The timing of records and the effects of weather and habitat

Apart from the Suffolk bird, the British records all occurred between 6th and 28th September. The Irish record is undated but is likely to have arrived during October as it was on sale in Dublin on 21st October. The dated records all fell within a narrow period coinciding with autumn migration down the western Atlantic. (Mackay 1892 stated that adults gathered in Labrador during the first three weeks of August, with juveniles between about 8th September and 1st October.) George Cartwright's diaries suggested that Eskimo Curlews were never common in Labrador before 19th August or after 3rd September (Gollop *et al.* 1986). Greenway (1958) noted that large flocks were seen at Concepción del Uruguay on 9th September 1880, but were not usually seen after mid October as the birds had passed through to their wintering grounds on the pampas grasslands.

Of interest, in the four years when British & Irish records coincided with Mackay's diaries, three were years when the species was rare on Nantucket Island (1870, 1880, 1887) and the other (1878) when few flocks were seen. This is perhaps not unexpected as Mackay suggested that in fine weather birds would continue out to sea to begin their migration southwards, whereas they were grounded mainly in bad weather.

There is some coincidence between the British and Irish records and Atlantic weather patterns, notably the occurrence of mid-Atlantic hurricanes. In particular, there was an exceptionally complex weather system in the North Atlantic in 1870, when 11 hurricanes or tropical storms were recorded. A mid-Atlantic category 1 hurricane tracked eastwards during 10th–11th October with 70-mph winds, which probably just preceded the Irish record. The pattern in 1880 was similarly complicated, with another 11 hurricanes. One during 8th–10th September swept east from Labrador and another was mid Atlantic during 6th–11th September, preceding the two records in North-east Scotland. Perhaps the clearest example was in 1887, with 19 hurricanes, one of which was mid Atlantic on 1st–6th September and which tracked all the way across the Atlantic,

almost to Ireland, and was closely followed by the Scilly Eskimo Curlew. (Weather data from <http://weather.unisys.com/hurricane/atlantic/index.html>.)

Witherby *et al.* (1938–41) summarised the views of various earlier writers on habitat preference of the Eskimo Curlew on passage: ‘On migration [it] is stated to have been rarely seen by water, visiting fields, pastures, and arable land, sand dunes, and the drier portions of salt-marshes, but also fed on tidal flats.’ It is noteworthy that the four Scottish records (including the unaccepted Hill of Craigston record) were not on the shore, and three records were well inland in upland areas. There is no information about the Scilly and Irish records, but the Suffolk one stands out from the rest, although of course vagrants will to some extent use whatever habitat is available.

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Don Bleitz, courtesy of WFWZ



25. Eskimo Curlew *Numenius borealis*, Galveston, Texas, April 1962. Previously unpublished photograph.