

HUDSONIAN WHIMBREL AT FAIR ISLE

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WHILST bird-watching over an area of close-cropped grassland at the south end of Fair Isle on 27th May 1955 the writers, together with visitors to the Bird Observatory, disturbed a party of half-a-dozen Whimbrels (*Numenius phaeopus*). As they flew off, V.M.T. remarked that one of the birds was without a white rump.

During the remainder of the day, and on the 28th, we kept this party under observation, often at very close quarters from the cover of dry-stone dykes, and were able to satisfy ourselves that the odd bird was an example of the American race, the Hudsonian Whimbrel (*Numenius ph. hudsonicus*)—called Hudsonian Curlew in the *A.O.U. Checklist*.

The bird was distinctly smaller than its companions (some of the observers estimated from one-third to one-quarter smaller) and of slenderer build and sleeker appearance. The disparity in size was most obvious when the birds were in flight. The head-markings were similar to those of the European Whimbrel but were more pronounced, due to the paler colour of the cheeks and more complete eye-stripe. In flight, the bird offered a distinctive pattern of dark brown primaries contrasting with paler brown, buff-mottled secondaries and coverts, and a warmer brown mantle, rump and tail. The last, in fact, appeared in some lights to have a russet tinge. The bill was similar in length to the Whimbrel's, blackish in colour, and strongly decurved over the distal half. The legs were grey: the American authorities consulted later say these project noticeably beyond the tail in flight, but in our bird this projection was very slight and was not obvious until looked for.

As mentioned, the head markings were characteristic of the species, a rich brown cap divided by a whitish line, greyish-white cheeks, white chin and throat, and a complete blackish-brown stripe running from the base of the bill to half-an-inch or so behind the eye. At a distance the under-parts looked immaculate, the belly and vent white and the breast suffused with brownish-buff; but at really close quarters the breast seemed to have a lovely pearly mottling quite different from the boldly streaked front of the Whimbrel. Later, when we had an opportunity of examining skins, we saw that this effect was due to a difference in the marking on the individual feathers, for whereas the European bird has a dark brown mesial streak, the most obvious mark in the American is a paler sub-terminal bar. Nor were the upper-parts so boldly marked, the dark streaking being less heavy and considerably reduced on the upper mantle, which was a rich, warm brown contrasting with the more greyish tone of nape and sides of neck. In flight, the buffish underwing and axillaries were seen to be strongly barred with brown, and the tail was also barred. The primaries appeared to be uniform blackish-brown, but a very close view of the flying bird revealed that the inner ones at any

rate were obscurely barred. A white line, visible near the wing-edge, appeared to be due to the exposed quill of the outermost feather.

The bird remained on the island until 31st May, although the Whimbrels it was with on 27th-28th May had gone by the 29th. We found it much more difficult to approach when on its own, and when disturbed it would take longer flights—nearly always descending, however, on some area of close-cropped pasture. Only very occasionally was it seen to visit the weed-grown tidal rocks, and it did not remain on the shore for any length of time. When K.W. and Mrs. Williamson watched it on the afternoon of the 28th it was feeding desultorily with the Whimbrels, and the group, growing suspicious of our cautious approach, adopted the "pseudo-sleeping" posture. The call-note was heard on a number of occasions, and there were ample opportunities for comparing it with that of the European bird, but we were unable to detect the slightest difference. Its action in flight would not have distinguished it from others in the flock, and its feeding behaviour was also similar. On a few occasions it was aggressive towards its larger companions, which always gave way before it.

Summarizing the field-characters, we would say that the absence of white on the rump, and the pale grey-brown area in mid-wing contrasting with the warm brown back and the uniform blackish-brown primaries, were at once diagnostic. On the ground identification was less easy, but at close quarters the whiter cheeks and under-parts combined with the mottled rather than streaked effect on the infuscated breast, and the warmer coloration of the mantle, sufficed to distinguish it from the Whimbrel.

Those who saw the bird, and submitted notes upon it, were Mr. and Mrs. Ian Waddington, Mr. and Mrs. Compton James, Mrs. K. Williamson, Miss Anna Burt, Mr. Alex M. Mackenzie, Mr. K. Linford, Mr. Donald M. Walker, Mr. Harry A. Crow and the writers. Mrs. A. W. Thom arranged with Dr. A. C. Stephen of the Royal Scottish Museum to send skins of the two races to Fair Isle, and we are grateful to them for this assistance.

A METEOROLOGICAL NOTE

It may seem idle to speculate on the immediate origin of this bird, since it could have been pursuing a northwards migration in company with European Whimbrels after being some time on the European side; but some interest attaches to the question since A. W. Boyd informs us that he identified a Baird's Sandpiper (*Calidris bairdii*) in Cheshire, the first for that county, also on 27th May (see p. 417). Writing of the return migration of the Hudsonian Whimbrel from its winter quarters on the Pacific coast of South America, Bent (1929) says: "It reaches Florida during the latter half of March, the Carolinas about the middle of April, and Massachusetts about the middle of May." Thus, for a fortnight or so, many must have been sufficiently far north to sustain a trans-Atlantic drift in suitable weather conditions. Examination of *The Daily Weather Report* of the Meteorological Office of the

Air Ministry shows that such conditions did in fact exist during the four or five days previous to 27th May, there being a belt of moderate to fresh westerly winds between 40° and 50° North, and periodic fog on the New England coast associated with frontal weather.

A TAXONOMIC NOTE

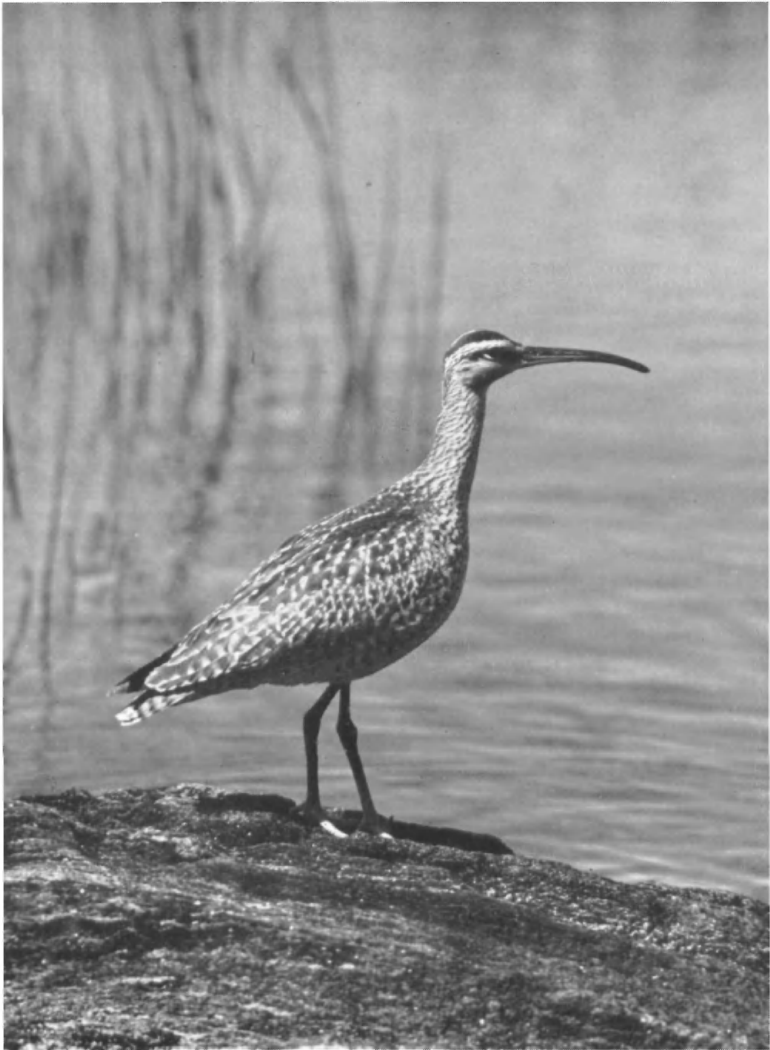
Although Bent (1929) and Forbush and May (1939) give this bird specific rank, the *A.O.U. Checklist* treats *hudsonicus* as the American race of *Numenius phaeopus*. Considering the degree of similarity usually implied by racial relationship, we found this form markedly distinct. One feature which impressed us was the noticeably smaller size and altogether slimmer build; but Mr. Derek Goodwin, who took measurements of a series of European and American birds in the British Museum (Natural History) collection, found some overlap between the two forms. It has also to be remembered that the majority of the Whimbrels migrating through Fair Isle are bound for Faeroe and Iceland, where the European race attains its upper size limit and has indeed been separated from Scandinavian stock as a larger form, *islandicus* (see Salomonsen, 1935, for measurements). The disparity in size, therefore, cannot be significant.

More important to the question of speciation is the lack of a white rump in the American bird, since this could lead to ethnological differences which might establish reproductive isolation if the ranges of the two forms were ever to overlap. In the closely-related Curlew (*Numenius arquata*) the white rump appears to have valency in courtship behaviour (see *The Handbook*, vol. iv, p. 169) and this could also be true of the European Whimbrel, though there appears to be very little information concerning the courtship of this bird. On the other hand, the Asiatic Whimbrel, *variegatus*, would appear to provide a morphological link, having the white rump boldly barred with brown, and there appears to be no difference in general behaviour and voice. For the present, therefore, it is best to regard the American and European birds as conspecific, with the very slightly differentiated *islandicus* synonymous with the nominate race; but a critical study and comparison of the courtship behaviour of the Old and New World forms would be of great theoretical interest to the problem of speciation.

Bent records an occurrence of the Hudsonian Whimbrel in Iceland in 1854, on the authority of Kjaerbölling, and Dresser (1895-96) says Lord Lilford obtained one in the Coto de Donaña, Spain, on 3rd May 1872. These appear to be the only previous European records, though the bird is casual in Greenland.

REFERENCES

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Allan D. Cruikshank

HUDSONIAN WHIMBREL (*Numenius phaeopus hudsonicus*): AMERICA
Unfortunately a photograph of a bird standing in this position cannot show the most striking feature of this very distinct race of the Whimbrel—the fact that the back and rump are coloured like the rest of the upper-parts. The plumage is otherwise very similar to that of the Whimbrel, except that the cheeks tend to be paler and the breast is spotted rather than streaked (see pages 379-381).