

CURLEW SANDPIPER IN MANITOBA

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On 1 June, 1981, while John Christie and I were doing a routine shorebird count at Oak Hammock Marsh near Winnipeg, I was very surprised to find an adult Curlew Sandpiper in full summer plumage feeding about 55 m away. The bird was unmistakable to me as I have seen the species many times over the past 24 years in Europe, Australia, and just 12 months previously at Lake Baikal, U.S.S.R. In addition I have mist-netted birds and handled specimens in all plumage stages.

The following is a summary from field notes.* Sketches were also made. The measurements have been translated into metric.

Description

The principal features that identified the bird were that it was approximately the size of the Dunlin beside it, and had a long, thin, decurved bill, but much thicker than those of the Wilson Phalaropes also in the general area; it had a white rump when flying, and a blackish tip to the upper tail. The front and underparts of the bird were almost entirely a deep red wine colour (#8 Carmine in Smithe²). This colouration together with the 50 mm long decurved black bill (the curve more pronounced at the tip) ruled out Red Phalarope, Wilson's Phalarope, Red Knot and Stilt Sandpiper. The bird had a prominent

white wing bar in mid-wing upper side when in flight. The underwings were white.

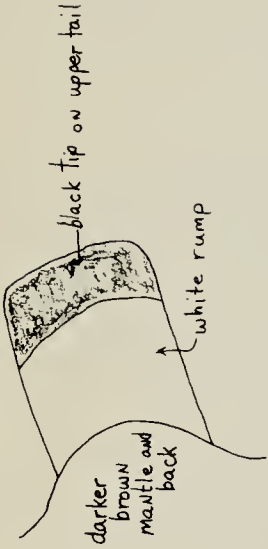
The bird was feeding among Dunlin and White-rumped Sandpipers with Stilt and Semipalmated Sandpipers plus Wilson's Phalaropes in the general area. It was longer legged than Dunlin, but not as slim looking as the Stilt Sandpipers. It was not as "dumpy looking" as the Dunlin. Body shape, bill shape, and colouration were totally different from the Stilt Sandpipers.

The main plumage pattern was that the whole front of the bird and underparts to beyond the leg area were a deep red wine colour. This colour was uniform on the breast and underparts but faded on the flanks; it was darker on the side, the neck, cheeks, ear coverts, and throat. This colour blended into very dark brown on the back of the neck and crown. The mantle had a somewhat scaly appearance, as had the wing coverts. The bird's eyes were completely black with an area of pale feathers surrounding them. The legs were thin and black and an estimated 100 mm long.

The tail was rounded at the tip, but not as pointed as in the Upland Sandpiper. The wings were pointed at the tips and extended beyond the tail; the underwings were white. The upper side

* Abridged to reduce repetition. The original notes were made on a form under the following headings: General Impressions; Comparison Species; Similar or Confusing Species; Field Marks; Important Details; Tail and Wings; What was the bird doing?; Habitat; Behaviour; Food and Feeding and Viewing Conditions. Although details can be repeated under the headings, and additional headings could be useful, this method of recording field observations is valuable in avoiding the all-too-common error of not recording details important in distinguishing similar species. The illustration on the following page is a copy of the original field sketch. — Ed.

UPPER TAIL



dark red wine crown
 back of neck dark brown changing into almost black rust color on face and sides of neck
 front of neck deep rusty red (red wine color)

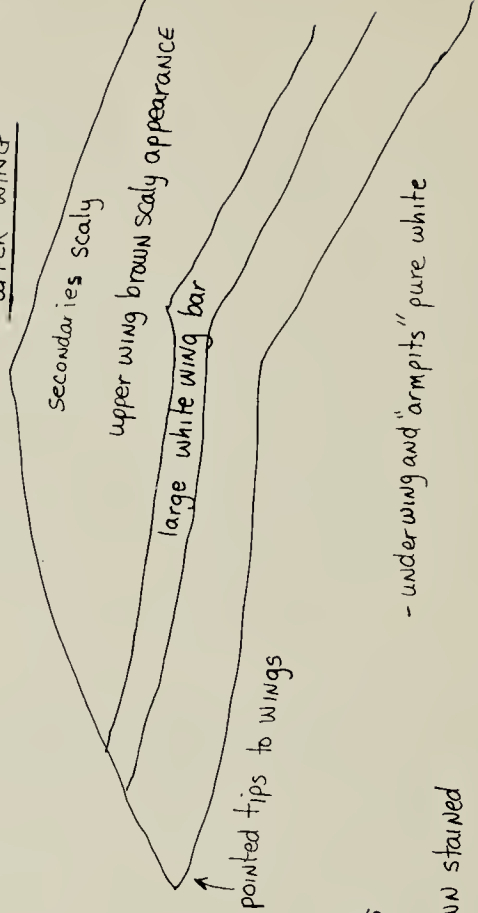
brown scaly appearance
 white rump seen when preening

lighter brown and whitish streaks due to feathers making up the wing bar
 wing tips extended beyond tip of tail
 white under tail coverts
 light sandy brown in area of vent

deep rusty red breast or deep red wine colour (carmine #8 in colour guide)

3-4" long black legs, thin stood taller than dunnin and longer bodied but less dumphy looking

UPPER WING



secondaries scaly

upper wing brown scaly appearance

large white wing bar

pointed tips to wings

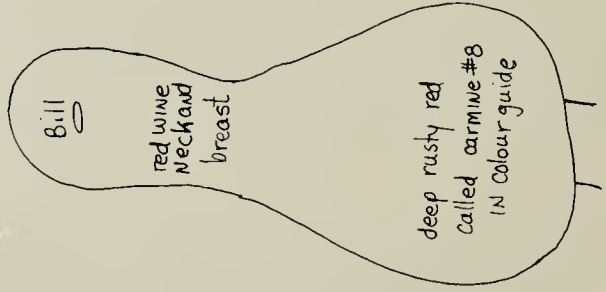
- underwing and "armpits" pure white

- eye completely black
 - very small pale area around eye seen on occasion

bill thin black, 2 inches long
 curved most of its length
 bill thinner than dunnin's bill but not as thin as stilt sandpiper

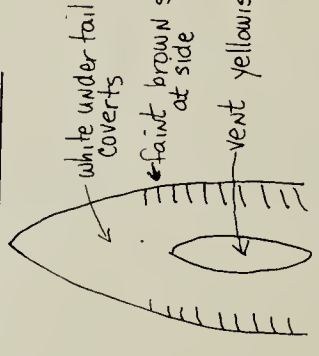
very small pale area at base of bill and around eyelids. rest of front part of bill was various shades of deep rusty red. This extended over total underparts to beyond legs where it faded into a lighter rust colour and eventually almost white with fine brown markings in vent area.

BIRD LOOKING TOWARDS OBSERVER



bird fed in water almost up to folded wings, continually emerging its bill under water at a 70° angle

UNDERTAIL & VENT AREA



white under tail coverts

faint brown streaks at side

vent yellowish brown stained

deep rusty red called carmine #8 in colour guide

of the tail had a black band at the tip; this band was estimated to be more than 13 mm wide.

Habitat and Behaviour

The habitat where the bird was seen was a large shallow pool in what was formerly a field, but is now surrounded by dykes and is usually covered by water to a depth of 1-2 metres.

The bird spent most of the time feeding and walking about in water belly deep or even as far as its folded wings. It emersed its head under water with almost every feeding movement. The bill action was rapid (15 strokes per minute) up and down at a 70° angle. The gait and manner of walking were similar to Dunlin with which it was seen walking around on the mud. It was also seen preening, and flying parallel to the observers. The bird was seen below, or at the eye level of the observers. Its movements were slow and measured, except for its bill action which was rapid as it put it under water continually to feed on unknown organisms. The Curlew Sandpiper flew with the Dunlin and White-rumped Sandpipers whenever they flew, for a few seconds only on each occasion. The bird preened in the normal manner of a shorebird, working on the breast, underparts, wings and rump areas. When it was preening a white membrane was flicked across its eye on a few occasions.

Observation Conditions

The bird was seen continuously between 1915 and 1945 h. in light sunlight. It was in the open with the sun behind the observers. The bird was viewed at estimated distances of 55 to 91 m. Optical equipment used was a tripod mounted 22 x 80 binocular and a tripod mounted telescope.

Discussion

Curlew Sandpipers breed along the Arctic coastal regions of Siberia and occasionally to Alaska. They winter in Africa south of the Sahara, around the Indian Ocean, and S.E. Asia and Australia.³ In Canada it is regarded as a casual visitor.¹ This was the first recorded observation of this species in Manitoba. Another observation of a Curlew Sandpiper was reported from North Dakota around the same week.

- ¹ GODFREY, W.E. 1966. The Birds of Canada. National Museum of Canada Bulletin 203.428 pp.
- ² SMITHE, F.B. 1975. Naturalists' Color Guide. The American Museum of Natural History.
- ³ WILSON, J.R., M.A. *Czajkowski* and M.A. *Pienkowski*. 1980. The migration through Europe and wintering in West Africa of Curlew Sandpipers. *Wild Fowl* 31:107-122.



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