

# NOTES AND LETTERS

## COMMENTS ON ESKIMO CURLEW SIGHTINGS

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Your editor persuaded (actually, harassed) me to comment on two recent reports of Eskimo Curlews in *Blue Jay*. Hence this micro-manual on dealing with such observations.

Several field marks contribute to the validity of a sighting of Eskimo Curlew, Canada's rarest native breeding bird which, when seen alone, is difficult to differentiate from a Whimbrel in the prairie provinces. The differences are (1) *size* (Black-bellied Plover length, larger than Golden Plover or Killdeer and smaller than Willet; the Whimbrel is avocet- or Marbled Godwit size, a difference more regularly noticeable in spring than fall), (2) *stripe on top of head* (indistinct vs distinct),<sup>1</sup> (3) *underwing linings* (cinnamon, rather than grayish-brown), (4) *underside of primaries* (unbarred, as opposed to barred), and (5) *plumage* (brownier, not grayer, particularly in spring).

Leg colour and eye stripe contrast may not be sufficiently different between the two and, while the ratio of bill length to head length is usually smaller in the Eskimo, this is a difficult determination and is less reliable in fall when the bills of young Whimbrels have not yet reached full length. In terms of bulk, as indicated by weight, at one extreme, small Eskimos are about half that of large Whimbrels; at the other extreme, while there is no overlap, the difference is less than 10%.

Any of the four most common field guides are good for size (but only

Peterson's gives minimum and maximum lengths) and under-primary barring (although in his eastern guide, Peterson states this can be determined only with a bird in the hand!). Peterson's western guide (p. 153 more than p. 131) and Robbins' may be best for the reddish underwing lining. Scott's National Geographic pictures immature fall Whimbrels as closer in colour to Eskimos than adults are.

Vocalizations are difficult to describe and different people hear and report the same sound differently. The Eskimo apparently repeats a note 2-3 times vs 6-7 for the Whimbrel. The calls of both species are given in each of the guides.

Every tool available should be used to document an Eskimo Curlew (or any other rare bird) sighting. The minimum should be a *detailed* written description of every part of the bird, particularly the head and bill. Note the different bill shapes in the two photos. A detailed sketch, labeling colours, is also recommended — no matter how poor an artist you are. Begin without reference to a field guide but, when you think you are finished, check one (or a copy of this article) to see if a key mark has been missed.

Describe and sketch any sounds — short vs long notes, different intervals between them, higher vs lower, turning up or down, louder or quieter. Were some sounds the quality of any other bird you are familiar with?

If you have a still camera, finish off the roll and use a second one. If I had a video camera with me, I would finish the tape, hopefully permitting an hour's filming. The advantage of a



*Eskimo Curlews, Galveston Island, TX.*

*Don Bleitz*

video camera is that it also records sound. (Might be worth carrying during the 8-day period these curlews have been reported.) I would then wait for the bird to fly or I would flush it at least once to determine (or confirm) and photograph the underwings and document its calls. (A spring migrant is not likely to remain put for hours until other birders arrive to view it. Fully document it now!)

Eskimo Curlews migrate through the prairie provinces (away from Hudson Bay) only in spring and often are found in summer fallow fields. Dated reports have been: *14 May* 1982 near Monica Slough, 5 km east-southeast of Regina; *15 May* 1996 near Killarney, MB, 360 km east-southeast of Regina; *20 May* 1996 near Kipling Marsh, 140 km east-southeast of Regina; *21 May* 1980 at St. Ambrose, MB, 475 km east of Regina. Several of these birds were probably shot near Moose Jaw, 70 km west of Regina, in early May 1891. John Richardson referred to specimens taken in spring 1827 at Carlton and Cumberland House, SK. On *19 May* 1890 a museum specimen was collected near Calgary and another in spring 1826 near Jasper, AB. Beginning in July, the major southward migration of this western-arctic-nesting species is east across the Northwest Territories, over the Labrador coast, the northeastern United States and the ocean to South America. A minor route passes through Churchill and continues southeast.

John Pollock's "possible sighting" of a single bird on *20 May* 1996 at Kipling Marsh, as reported in the June 1996 *Blue Jay*, is tantalizing — as he recognized. The observation was made long enough before sunset (1.5-2.5 hours) that the sun would not contribute to the "reddish

brown" wing lining, and he noted that there was no distinct midcrown stripe. However, these definitive field marks have to be balanced against "large shorebird" and "grayish-brown" plumage (neither is particularly negative) and the seemingly large bill. I think there is a better than 50% chance that the bird was an Eskimo Curlew — like 7 on a scale of 1 to 10.

Gwen and Lloyd Powell's "possible sighting" of three birds on *15 May* 1996 south of Killarney, MB, as reported by Bob Waldon in the September 1996 *Blue Jay*, emphasizes measurements, based on a Killdeer beside them. They give the curlews' lengths as 11-14"; the eastern Peterson guide they had with them gives 9-11" for Killdeer. Measurements in the National Geographic and both Peterson guides are of museum skins — specimens stuffed and laid out in a straight line. Only in Robbins' guide is length based on "thousands of live birds hand-held in natural positions." For Eskimo Curlew, Robbins gives 11", which is probably an educated guess because he would have had only a few century-old skins to work with. Peterson gives 12-14" and, for Whimbrel, 15-19".

The important point is that the "dainty" birds were just a little larger than a Killdeer, much too small for a spring Whimbrel. Other medium-sized shorebirds with noticeably down-curved bills are smaller than Killdeer. As for the chances of the birds being Eskimo Curlews, I would restrict my rating to a 9 because of the somewhat ambiguous reference to "light stripes and brown stripes on the head." (It should be noted that even my or any number of 10s would not be accepted as a confirmed record in many jurisdictions without adequate photos or sound recordings

— a stipulation that may warrant review.)

I gave an early draft of this article to, in alphabetical order, Stan Shadick, Al Smith, Guy Wapple and Michael Williams for comment. Their ratings, from low to high, were 5, 5, 6 and 7 for the Saskatchewan observation and 8, 8, 9, 9 for the Manitoba one.

Strictly speaking, the above ratings infer the chances of the birds' not being a Whimbrel. They do not consider the possibility of the Eskimos' being Asia's Little Curlew (with only two fall California sightings confirmed for North America). Among the big four field guides, only the western Peterson illustrates this species. The Little has the Whimbrel's underwing colouring and contrasting crown stripe. At rest, the Little Curlew's wing tips are about even with the tip of the tail (may be same for Whimbrel); they extend beyond it in the Eskimo (illustrated by photos in Nature Saskatchewan's monograph on the species<sup>1</sup>). When very close, it may be possible to decipher the scales on the back of the leg: small

and hexagonal for Little, long (transverse) and narrow for Eskimo and Whimbrel. The Kipling bird was probably not a Little Curlew because of wing lining and crown descriptions. The Killarney birds could have been.

Turning to reference books, *The Audubon Society Master Guide to Birding* (1983, Vol. 1) has a coloured photo of an Eskimo Curlew and a painting which is erroneous in that the underwing linings are not "cinnamon" as described in the text. Houghton Mifflin's *Shorebirds* — an identification guide to the waders of the world by Hayman, Marchant and Prater (1986) is well worth studying. It has twice as much text devoted to description as the four field guides combined and 30 images of the three curlews, including one that shows how short a fall Whimbrel's bill can be — equal in length to the longest Eskimo's. Fall "Eskimo Curlews" on the southern prairies probably are not.

1. GOLLOP, J.B., T.W. BARRY and E.H. IVERSEN. 1986. Eskimo Curlew — a vanishing species? Saskatchewan Natural History Society, Regina. 159 pp.