

## CALIDRIS PARAMELANOTOS: A PERPLEXING STORY

by David C. Morimoto

I did not know what that bird was that I had spent over an hour peering at in the cold, wind, and rain. I only knew that someone had called it a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper (*Calidris acuminata*), but it didn't look like anything in my field guides. When I heard that it was identified as a Cox's Sandpiper (*C. paramelanotos*), my reaction was probably fairly typical -- "What's a Cox's Sandpiper?" My curiosity got the better of me, and I started to do some research.

I came across the name of Fred T. H. Smith and dug out his address in Kew, Victoria, in Australia from the "Recent Ornithological Literature" *Supplements to The Auk*. I dropped him a line requesting some reprints and any other information he might have on Cox's Sandpiper. To my surprise, I received the reprints, together with a detailed letter and some photographs only a few days later. The letter told of an intriguing story about the discovery and naming of this species -- a veritable "Coxgate" (see acknowledgment).

It seems that Fred Smith first sighted what he thought was a Dunlin (*C. alpina* -- a rare vagrant in southern Australia) in 1955 at the Laverton Saltworks, Victoria (Smith 1984a, 1984b). He continued to see these birds locally over the years, and by 1972 he and Bob Swindley realized that something was wrong with the Dunlin identification. From then on they referred to them as "dunlin-style" birds, seeing one every two or three years.

John Cox, seeking Smith's expertise on "waders" (this term includes shorebirds), corresponded with Smith for several months, during which time he learned of these dunlin-style birds. Cox subsequently took specimens of the unusual birds in 1975 and 1977. The birds were called hybrid "Curlew-sharp-tails" (*C. ferruginea*-*C. acuminata*) by the British Museum of Natural History and aberrant Pectoral Sandpipers (*C. melanotos*) by the Smithsonian Institution. The South Australia Museum accepted the latter identification (Cox 1976).

In the meantime, Smith, unaware of what was happening in South Australia had already begun to entertain the possibility that his dunlin-style birds were hybrids or even a new species. After seeing Cox's article, Smith commenced a correspondence with Shane Parker, curator of birds at the South Australia Museum, pointing out the similarities between his dunlin-style birds and Cox's specimens, and suggesting the possibility of a stereotyped hybrid or even a new species. For fifteen months they collaborated (although never actually meeting each other) on the identification of this bird (Smith 1981, 1982, 1984a). Smith sent me a photocopy of a letter from Parker dated April 6, 1981. In it Parker stated that he was "seriously considering" describing the bird as a new species, and he thought Smith's suggestion of *Calidris perplexa* for the bird's name was

an excellent one. Parker suggested "False Dunlin" as a common name. He further stated that Smith (and Cox) would certainly be included in the authorship of the description.

Then, in June 1982, the *South Australian Naturalist* published "A New Sandpiper of the Genus *Calidris*" by S. A. Parker. In it Cox's Sandpiper (*C. paramelanotos*) was described, and no mention was made of Smith's major contributions even in the many acknowledgments. This perplexed Smith, and since then he has struggled for "due recognition in the discovery of this species." Smith has seen more of these birds than anyone else -- approximately thirty since 1955, including five this past season (two in late 1986 and **three birds together** for the first time on March 8, 1987. It seems unfair that he has not been officially recognized for his contributions. Smith feels that his nonprofessional status has put him at an "ornithological disadvantage." But this should not be so, especially since many professionals have specifically sought his expertise in wader (shorebird) identification.

At any rate, I feel obligated to let this interesting matter be known, now that Cox's Sandpiper is a part of Massachusetts, indeed North American, ornithology. It remains to be seen whether or not it will ever be resolved, at least from Smith's point of view.

**Addendum.** In a recent letter Fred Smith informed me that John Cox, whom Smith has never met and with whom he has no argument over the bird, had written a paper disputing Smith's earlier sightings of Cox's Sandpipers. However, Smith has reliable witnesses to support his sightings. And so the controversy continues. A further interesting note is Smith's response to the photograph from *The Boston Globe*, which I sent him: "The photo is certainly one of the birds in question."

#### REFERENCES

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The term "Coxgate" originated with Nancy Clayton.

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