

## A SPOTTED REDSHANK IN WELLFLEET

by Michael R. Smith

On the morning of July 31, 1990, I was leading a bird walk for children, six to eight years old, when we arrived at Goose Pond at Massachusetts Audubon's Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary. We had already identified the songbirds at Silver Spring Pond, and I wanted to discuss with my group the adaptations of shorebirds. The tide was coming in, and it was a hazy morning, so I thought there would be a lot of activity in this pond.

We started in the blind on the eastern side of the pond, the site of much activity. I began to review the regular visitors to the pond with the students, starting with the Greater Yellowlegs (*Tringa melanoleuca*), of which there were close to a hundred. These were all very active, catching fish in the shallows and following the schools of mummichogs (*Fundulus* sp.) in the deeper spots. The dike holding the pond's waters was slowly leaking, so the fish were concentrated in the central area of the pond at a depth of eight inches, providing an excellent opportunity for both birds and birdwatchers.

As we continued exploring the pond, we came across a few Lesser Yellowlegs (*Tringa flavipes*), one Solitary Sandpiper (*Tringa solitaria*), and one Spotted Sandpiper (*Actitis macularia*). Before leaving, I glanced through my binoculars one more time at a bird that was not familiar to me. It was slightly smaller than a Greater Yellowlegs, much darker, and with an obvious bicoloration of the lower mandible. I could not make out the leg color, for the legs were totally submerged. To get a better look, we went up on the dike on the north side, where we encountered another man, Phil Kaufman of New York, observing this strange shorebird. I discussed it briefly with him before moving on, still without an identification.

Upon returning, we again stopped at the pond, but most of the birds had moved out on the tide flats, leaving little to look at. I consulted my books when I got back to the sanctuary headquarters and found that there could be only one identification for the shorebird I had seen—Spotted Redshank (*Tringa erythropus*). I discussed this possibility with the sanctuary director, Robert Prescott, and we went back to look for the bird but did not find it.

The next morning, August 1, I rose early in hopes of again seeing the bird. I arrived at the pond at 8:30 A.M. and proceeded to the blind. A quick search rewarded me with a good look at the bird, confirming the deep red leg color and my suspicions that, indeed, it was a Spotted Redshank. I left the blind, meeting Phil Kaufman again, who said the same thing. I went back to get Robert Prescott and Diane Reynolds, who confirmed the sighting. Robert took pictures and called birders in the area. All who came agreed with the identification.



*Spotted Redshank in Wellfleet*      Staff photo by Steve Heaslip, Cape Cod Times

From then on I observed the bird almost every day it was at the sanctuary, noting its feeding patterns, plumage, and the plumage changes that occurred.

The head and neck were streaked black and white. The neck and upper breast showed more white, with a few dark feathers intermingled. Dark feathers predominated across the lower breast and belly. Light feathers dominated the flanks, on which were scattered darker spots of two tones, dark brown and lighter cinnamon. On the head, dark feathers along the lores and behind the eyes suggested an eye line. The tail was thinly barred, black on a white background, with white extending up the rump almost to the mantle. The wing coverts were predominantly dark, each feather tipped with a single white spot. Other coverts showed creamy brown feathers fringed with white. The primaries and secondaries appeared solid black as they lay, but disturbed feathers showed a hidden white notch on the proximal edge of each. The scapulars were all black, tipped with white.

As the days went by, the bird continued to molt its neck and belly feathers, becoming paler underneath and on the flanks. The overall appearance was that of a lighter colored bird. The legs seemed to lose color as well, changing from a deep red to a reddish orange.

The Spotted Redshank showed different methods of feeding on the tide flats and in the ponds. On the flats, the bird was always found in the water and could be seen feeding on sand shrimp (*Crangon* sp.). I timed its feeding at a rate of

twenty shrimp per half hour. It appeared to feed chiefly by sight, peering into the water, then running and probing. The bird's activity in the pond seemed more effective, though less directed. It chased schools of mummichogs, sweeping its open beak from side to side through the water, catching any fish struck by the beak. The results were twenty-five fish per half hour.

The history of the Spotted Redshank in New England is a short one, with only two confirmed prior sightings. The first was a bird collected in New Haven, Connecticut, on November 15, 1969 (*Audubon Field Notes 1969*), and the second, a redshank that was photographed on Plum Island in 1981 (Arvidson 1981). The second bird was seen by only the two women who discovered and photographed it, Peggy Bayer and Joyce Cloughley. Also there is an unconfirmed report of one at Tiverton, Rhode Island, in May, 1955 (*Records of New England Birds 1955*).

In addition to these, there is only a handful of sightings for the Atlantic Coast. A winter-plumage Spotted Redshank was reported by Charles Clark and Peter Fahey in the Brigantine National Wildlife Refuge on September 14, 1978 (Paxton, Smith, and Cutler 1979). Also a partial-breeding-plumage bird was seen on Cape Hatteras in May, 1987 (*American Birds 1987*). Records before this show sightings in Texas and Barbados (A.O.U. *Check-List 1983*).

So how did this Spotted Redshank get to Wellfleet? A review of its normal range and some speculations about vagrants should help to narrow the possibilities.

*Tringa erythropus* nests on open or lightly wooded tundra in Iceland, Scandinavia, northern Europe, and the U. S. S. R., and winters south to Africa, Saudi Arabia, India, and southeast Asia. It is a vagrant to Barbados, southern Africa, the Aleutians, the Pribilofs, British Columbia, Oregon, and California. The females leave the breeding ground first, from mid-June on, and the males leave in late July (Hayman, Marchant, and Prater 1986).

There are several ways to explain this vagrancy. First, the bird could have nested at the easternmost limit of its range, migrating southeasterly to Alaska and on to Cape Cod. Second, it could have been caught in a storm and blown across the North Atlantic. The third idea would have it make a direct transatlantic flight from its westernmost breeding site (Arvidson 1981). Finally, it could have been caught on the trade winds while wintering in western Africa and made its way north to Cape Cod (Forster 1989).

The Spotted Redshank in Wellfleet could have arrived under any of those conditions, but two seem more plausible. The fact that it arrived in late July and was already molting suggests that the bird was perhaps a female, having left the nest first. If it was indeed a breeder, it could have flown from either end of its range. The possibility of a storm-assisted flight is not likely as Hurricane Bertha was too far south at the time of the bird's arrival. The redshank may have flown

north from South America. But what is the explanation for its appearance south of the nesting grounds in postbreeding plumage at the appropriate time of year for its southward journey?

Wellfleet's Spotted Redshank was last seen on August 19, 1990, on the tide flats between Hatches Creek and Fresh Brook. It remained for the longest stay of any redshank in Atlantic coastal records, providing North American birders a fine opportunity to appreciate this rare bird.

#### References

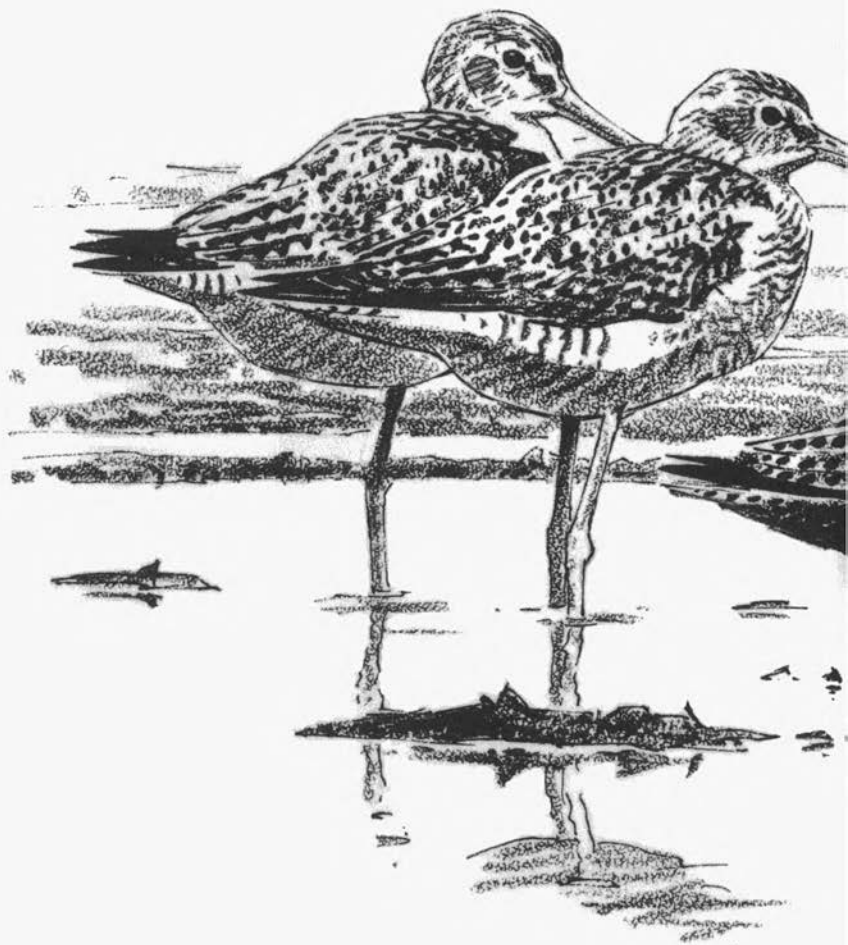
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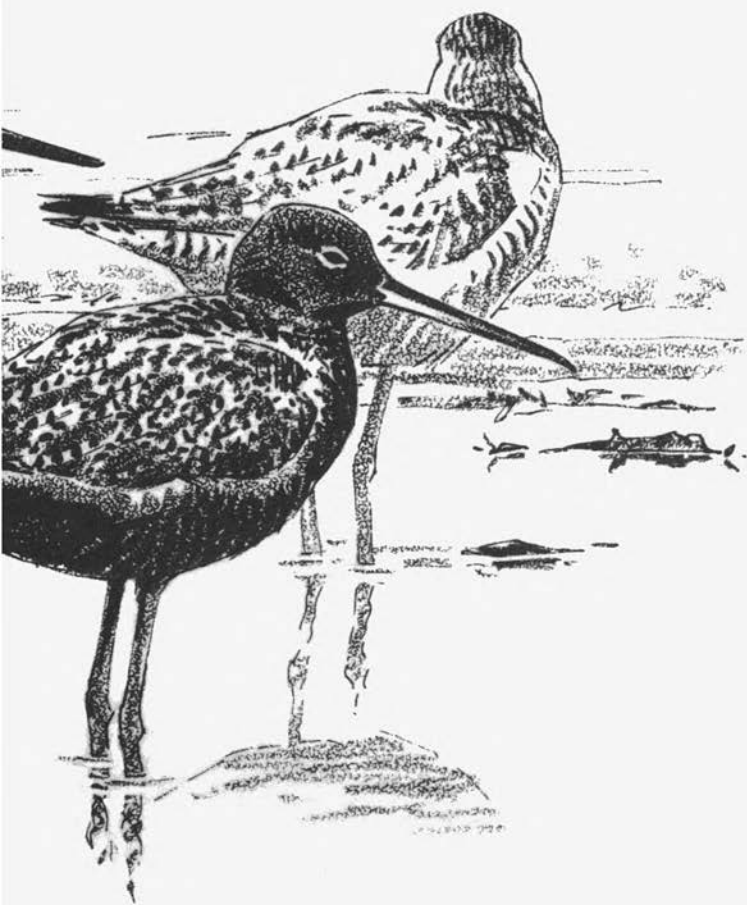
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#### ADDENDUM to *Bird Observer*, June 1990: "Sighting of a Ross' Gull"

On page 161 of the article, "Sighting of a Ross' Gull (*Rhodostethia rosea*) at Niles Pond, Gloucester" by Richard A. Forster, *Bird Observer* 18 (3), a record was omitted from the table listing the occurrences of this species in North America exclusive of Alaska and Churchill. The well-documented sighting on April 4, 1984, of a Ross' Gull that remained for at least ten days at Agassiz National Wildlife Refuge, Marshall County, Minnesota, should be inserted on the list just after the Ontario, Moosonee record of 1983. We thank Robert B. Janssen, editor of *The Loon*, for calling our attention to this oversight. The record was published in the *The Loon* 56 (2) Summer 1984: 128-9.



Greater Yellowlegs  
and Spotted Redshank



*Samy n. Van Dine*