

A Ruff at Pascagoula -- First Mississippi Record

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On 1 August 1982, we observed a Ruff (Philomachus pugnax) at Pascagoula, Jackson County, Mississippi, in the south diked pond-mudflat of the area known as PRM. Because this is a first Mississippi record, all details are herewith submitted.

The Ruff was found at approximately 08:00 from a distance of about 200 m, during a routine scanning of shorebirds. It was almost immediately apparent that the subject was not a Lesser Yellowlegs (Tringa flavipes), although it bore a close resemblance to that species. There were, however, various differences in plumage, posture, behavior, feeding habits ... enough so that it stood out in the crowd of both Lesser and Greater (Tringa melanoleuca) yellowlegs with which it associated. At that time the Ruff was tentatively identified without reference to any field guide.

We moved to a position east of the bird and managed to get as close as 80 m (soft mudflats prevented getting any closer). The sky was overcast, there was an intermittent mist, but viewing conditions were generally good with no glare or shadow. We studied the Ruff for at least 1½ hours, through 7X35 binoculars and through 20-45-power zoom and 20 power spotting scopes.

There was ample opportunity for direct comparison with both species of yellowlegs, and for indirect comparison with numerous other shorebird species.

Because the Ruff was in close association at all times with Lesser Yellowlegs and because of its superficial resemblance, in size and shape, to that species, the following notes use Lesser Yellowlegs as a model for the relative differences which we observed.

**Size:** The Ruff was very nearly the same size, from bill tip to end of tail, as Lesser Yellowlegs. It did, however, present a stockier appearance, being obviously thicker in the neck and pectoral areas.

**Plumage:** The most obvious difference between the Ruff and Lesser Yellowlegs, and the "field mark" which first caught our attention, was its brown plumage. The head, nape, back, and wings were of a moderate brown, appearing at a distance of 80 m to be rather even in coloration or finely mottled with light tan against a medium brown. This brown of the Ruff was quite a contrast to the

dark, mostly gray and blackish plumage of Lesser Yellowlegs. In addition the Ruff had an area of white under the chin, and an area of light brown which extended from high on the throat, just under the white of the chin, to well down on the belly, below the area covered by the "bib" of a Pectoral Sandpiper for example. This area of light brown was uneven. It was not evenly patterned, either horizontally or vertically, by feather edgings one associates with species such as Least Sandpiper. This breast coloring was blotched but showing far less contrast than that shown in breeding plumaged Ruff or Reeve. At the time we suspected that the bird was either immature or in adult winter plumage.

There was a rather indistinct pale eyeline which was more prominent from the base of the bill up to the eye than it was from the eye to the side of the head.

In addition, the white of the undersides was not "clean" or "bright" as in Lesser Yellowlegs, but gave the appearance of being off-white or creamy white, and contrasted dramatically with the white of nearby yellowlegs.

The characteristic tail pattern of a Ruff was seen during wing stretching and preening. The tail was banded by fairly narrow stripes, pale against dark, and the base of the tail was white, extending to the banding. Enough was seen of the dark center of the tail to establish that the tail pattern was certainly in keeping with Ruff and at variance with that of Lesser Yellowlegs ... it was the definitive field mark.

The outstretched wing which we saw as the Ruff preened was darkish brown, with a light wing stripe which was not very prominent.

Bill: The bill length was just slightly shorter than that of Lesser Yellowlegs, but it was thicker throughout, tapering from base throughout its length. Bill color at 80 m appeared black with light area at base of bill.

Legs: Legs were yellow, not as bright as Lesser Yellowlegs. As noted above, legs were well-proportioned and by close attention to legs of both Ruff and Lesser Yellowlegs we determined that the legs of the Ruff were shorter, but not distinctly so.

Shape: The Ruff had the same general shape as Lesser Yellowlegs, but was very noticeably heavier, or stockier, in the neck and pectorals. In general contrast, the Ruff appeared more robust than the yellowlegs. The tail extended perhaps 0.5 cm beyond the wing tips as the bird was at rest.

Posture: Upright, head high, back horizontal.

Feeding behavior: This was an area of great difference between the Ruff and Lesser Yellowlegs. Although the Ruff was first seen "picking for food" on an exposed mudflat surrounded by fresh/brackish shallow water, at times it joined Lesser Yellowlegs to feed in the water (barely covering toes) along the edge. At those times, with both species feeding, differences in habits and feeding posture were most pronounced. The Lesser Yellowlegs was much more active while feeding, moving rapidly through the water in a fairly constant pecking motion, its body length angled downward. By contrast, the Ruff did not move as fast; its actions were slower and more deliberate. At all times its body was held horizontally. When picking at food, it bent forward from the shoulders, coming back up to its non-feeding position after almost every pick into the water. The Lesser Yellowleg's carriage was also marked by a bobbing head motion, while the Ruff's was not.

No vocalization by the Ruff was noted.

During the long period of observation, we moved our scopes and attention to other birds to obtain comparisons. The "gestalt" of the Ruff was great enough to enable us to relocate it without difficulty even though at least 500 other shorebirds, including at least 50 Lesser Yellowlegs in that one pond, were present.