

Hudsonian Godwits at Pascagoula, Mississippi

Peter V. Donaldson

501 Patton Avenue
Biloxi, Mississippi 39531

On 13 May 1978, James S. Perkins and I were watching birds at a large shallow pond at the spoils area south of U.S. Highway 90 in Pascagoula, Mississippi, near the Ingalls West Bank Shipyard. At about 10:30 CST the sky was completely clear and the sun was high in the sky behind us. The temperature was in the high 70's and a light wind was from the northwest. Out in the shallow water of the pond, about 60-70 meters away, a large number of shorebirds were feeding. There were dowitchers (Limnodromus sp.), Stilt Sandpipers (Micropalama himantopus), Black-necked Stilts (Himantopus mexicanus), and American Avocets (Recurvirostra americana). While observing these birds through a Questar telescope at 40 and 60X magnification we noticed a large, brownish bird with a long upcurved bill. The bird's bill was orange at the base and black at the tip. Because of the distinctive bill, we identified the bird as a godwit (Limosa sp.). The bird appeared to be about 3 inches longer than nearby dowitchers and was brownish-gray above with a rufous breast. While we were watching, the godwit flew and we could see white markings on the wings and a white rump. We saw the bird land in another part of the pond and after viewing some other shorebirds we walked over to where we had seen the godwit land. At somewhat closer range we again spotted the godwit through the Questar. The bird's rufous breast was clearly visible. Because of the rufous breast, white rump, and wing stripes, and the size of the bird, we decided it was a Hudsonian Godwit (Limosa haemastica) rather than a Marbled Godwit (Limosa fedoa), and it is highly unlikely that it could have been a Black-tailed Godwit (Limosa limosa) because of the European range of that species.

After leaving the spoils area, Jim and I talked to Judith Toups and she told us that the Hudsonian Godwit was a rare bird in this area with no Mississippi sightings on record. I returned to the same spot at the Pascagoula spoils area at about 16:30 the same afternoon with Judith Toups, Malcolm Hodges, and Bob and Diane Best, and we found two Hudsonian Godwits. One bird looked like the one I had seen in the morning while the other bird was a dull gray with no rufous breast coloration. The second bird also had the white rump and wing stripes however. I took a series of photographs of the birds through my Questar at focal lengths of 1600-1800 mm (magnification 32-36X) and at distances of 30-80 meters. The photography was done using Ektachrome 200 and Kodacolor 400 at f16-18 and shutter speeds of 1/60-1/250. In the afternoon it was still cloudless with the sun at right angles to our viewing direction. The late afternoon temperature was in the mid 80's and the northwest wind had increased to about 15 knots from the west with gusts to 20 knots.

(Ed. Note: Prints of Pete Donaldson's slides are filed at Mississippi State and confirm the identity of these Hudsonian Godwits as the first Mississippi record. The birds at Pascagoula may have been a part of a larger movement; 15 Hudsonian Godwits were seen the same day at Swan Creek Wildlife Mgmt. Area, Decatur, Alabama, (D.M. Brown, pers. comm.).)