

IDENTIFICATION AID
SHORT-BILLED vs. LONG-BILLED DOWTICHER
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For many Ohio birders, the sight of dowtichers on mudflats in spring and fall is a familiar experience. While identification of this medium-sized shorebird with a long bill is relatively easy, distinguishing between the two species is more difficult. The popular field guides provide little assistance as they present mostly inaccurate field marks which are frustrating to use in the field. The following article describes the primary field characteristics for distinguishing between long-billed (Limnodromus scolopaceus) and short-billed dowtichers (L. griseus) in breeding and winter plumages.

Several words of caution. The plumage characteristics described below are only reliable in good light and at relatively short distances, usually less than 150 feet with a 20X telescope. Hence, many birds will remain unidentified unless the flight calls are given. Secondly, these plumage characteristics are not reliable for molting birds which are accurately identified only by flight call.

There are three races of short-billed dowticher in North America. Only the interior race (L. g. hendersoni) occurs in Ohio. These races differ with regards to size, bill length, back color, and color of the belly and undertail coverts in breeding plumage. This discussion primarily applies to distinguishing the long-bill from the interior race although it is generally applicable to the other races of short-billed dowticher as well.

Breeding Plumage

In this plumage, the primary difference between the two species is the pattern on the sides of the breast. On the short-bill, these feathers are spotted although the spots may be obscure. On the long-bill, the sides of the breast are barred. These differences are adequately described and depicted in Godfrey (1966) and Palmer (1967). Note: Contrary to the popular field guides, both species have barring on the flanks and sides of the belly.

When the sides of the breast cannot be adequately seen, the color of the lower belly and undertail coverts might be diagnostic. If a bird has white on the belly or undertail coverts, it is a short-bill. However, if the entire underparts are cinnamon, the bird may be either species and cannot be identified by this characteristic.

A minor difference between long-bills and the interior race of the short-bill is their back color. Long-bills have a darker back. Unfortunately, this difference is only noticeable when direct comparisons are possible. Note: Other races of the short-bill (especially along the east coast) have dark backs similar to a long-bill.

Winter Plumage

Differences between the two species are more subtle in the winter. In general, the short-bill has a clearer breast with fewer spots while the long-

'bill has a darker and more heavily spotted breast. On the short-bill, the spots continue down the sides to the flanks while the spots change to barring on the flanks of the long-bill (Pitelka, 1948). These differences are distinct at close range although they are most reliable when direct comparisons are possible. Flight calls should be used to confirm any doubtful identification in this plumage. I also do not recommend total reliance on these plumage characteristics until an observer has considerable experience with both species.

Juveniles of both species can be readily identified in the field (see Prater, et al., 1977, for these characteristics). However, by the time they reach Ohio, the juveniles are undergoing their post-juvinal molt and are similar to adults. Hence, these juvenile characteristics are of little value for Ohio birders in the field.

Tail Pattern and Length

Many field guides emphasize differences between banding patterns on the tails of the two species. Unfortunately, these tail patterns are not accurate field characteristics (as anyone who has tried to use them in the field already knows). For the record, the long-bill tail is evenly barred with the dark bars larger than the white bars. The short-bill tail pattern is quite variable. It may be identical to the long-bill, it may have the white bars larger than the dark bars, or it may have combinations of the two patterns in the same tail (Prater, et al., 1977).

Lane and Tveten (1980) state that the tail extends beyond the wing tips on the short-bill while the wings are longer than the tail of the long-bill. These characteristics are notoriously difficult to determine in the field and I do not have enough experience with them to judge their merits. The serious observer might want to make note of this field mark in conjunction with other characteristics to determine if it is a valid means of separating these species.

Bill Length

While their names imply differences in bill lengths, there is much overlap between the two species. Both sexual and racial differences contribute to these overlapping bill lengths. While female long-bills have the longest average bill length, the difference amounts to only a few millimeters longer than the average bill lengths of female short-bills (a difference that is at best questionably reliable as a field mark). Only the foolhardy would separate these species by bill lengths when other characteristics are available.

Flight Calls

While most observers are familiar with the ringing "tu-tu-tu" given by the short-bill in flight, they may not realize that this species has other calls as well. In particular, this species frequently gives a grating "kreeek" note which is similar to the call note of a dunlin (and sounds suspiciously like the note attributed to the long-bill in many texts).

Fortunately, the call note of the long-bill is distinctly different from the short-bill. Its call is normally given as a single whistled note. This note is more mellow and has a higher pitch than the ringing note of the short-bill (see Petersons Western Bird Songs Album). While I have not heard any other notes from the long-bill, it would not surprise me if this species has a variety of calls as well.

Migration Patterns

Since the long-bill breeds in Alaska while the short-bill breeds in central Canada, it is not surprising that the long-bill tends to arrive early in spring and later in fall while short-bills occur later in the spring and are the first fall migrants. However, these temporal differences in migration patterns are generally insufficient for the positive identification of a dowitcher when plumage characteristics cannot be ascertained.

In spring, there are very few valid observations of the long-bill in Ohio. These observations are quite early, late March through mid-April, long before the peak short-bill movement in May. It is not safe to assume that an early dowitcher is a long-bill and any early migrant should be carefully identified by plumage and flight call characteristics. With proper identification, the long-bill may prove to be more common in spring than the few records currently suggest. The May dowitcher movement is almost exclusively composed of short-bills (although it is not impossible for an occasional long-bill to be mixed in these flocks). There are no current long-bill records for May. When field marks cannot be determined, it is probably safe to assume all May birds are short-bills.

The migration pattern is more complex in fall. The first short-bills may arrive by the end of June although peak numbers are present between late July and late August. Small numbers of short-bills may linger until early October. While a few long-bills appear in July and August, their peak occurs after mid-September. Large numbers may still be present through the end of October and a few birds frequently linger into November. While it may be reasonable to assume that any dowitcher seen after mid-October is a long-bill, any dowitcher seen before that date should be identified by the previously described field marks.

Literature Cited

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Varied Thrush at Findley S.P., Lorain Co., Ohio 1980. Photos by Don Tumblin.

