

What to look for: Eskimo and Little Curlews compared

by John Farrand, Jr.

[Ed. note — Although the many specimens of Eskimo Curlew now lying in museum trays in North America are apparently correctly labeled, and all recent sightings at locations normal to its known migration routes, the Little Curlew of Asia, considered by some to be conspecific with the Eskimo, might conceivably appear sometime, somewhere in North America. For this reason we have asked John Farrand, Jr., to compare the two. His thesis is that the two species (?) are separable in the field under ideal conditions, and most certainly in the hand. Unfortunately, the specimens selected for the accompanying illustrations seem to indicate that the characteristic differences are not always obvious, and that there is considerable overlap in size, bill length, etc.]

The Little Curlew (*Numenius minutus*) of Siberia is very similar to the Eskimo Curlew (*Numenius borealis*), and were one to occur as an accidental in North America, great care would be required to distinguish it from the nearly-extinct Eskimo. However, an examination of specimens of both species in the American Museum of Natural History, New York, reveals several characters by which such a distinction would be possible under favorable conditions. The Eskimo Curlew is a more boldly and coarsely marked bird, with heavier streaking on the sides of the face and neck, and dark chevrons on the breast and flanks; the Little Curlew has a relatively more finely streaked face and neck, and the breast is streaked rather than marked with chevrons, the chevrons being few in number and confined to the flanks. In both species the under wing coverts and axillaries are barred with dark brown, but in the Eskimo Curlew these feathers are a rich cinnamon, while in the Little Curlew they are a much paler buff or sandy color. Finally, the pale pinkish area at the base of the

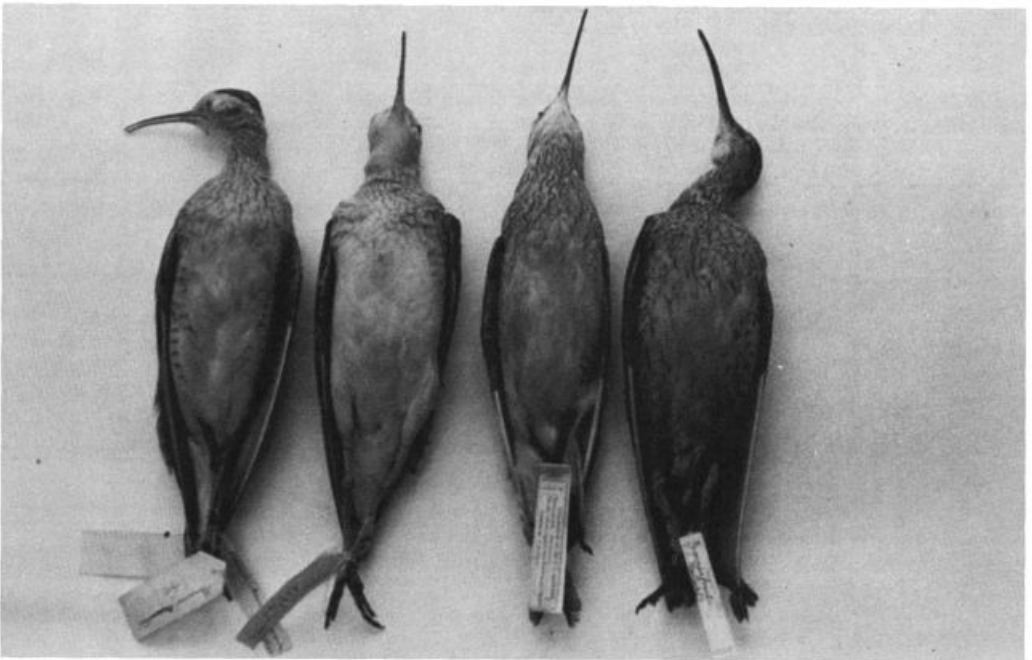


Fig. 1. Ventral view comparing two Little Curlews, *Numenius minutus*, left, with two Eskimo Curlews, *N. borealis*, right. Note similarity of size and the difference in ventral markings (especially two center specimens). The apparent bill length differential is not a consistent characteristic — lengths vary by sex and age and overlap is normal. Specimens shown, 1 to r: *minutus*, ♂ Shanghai, April 1886, AMNH¹ 737920; ♀ Shanghai, April 1911, AMNH 114475; *borealis* ♀? Mar del Plata, Argentina, Sept. 19, 1914, AMNH 752067; unsexed, Montauk, N.Y., undated, AMNH 335779.

¹American Museum of Natural History, New York.

lower mandible is more extensive in the Little Curlew, reaching to or beyond the middle of the bill, whereas in the Eskimo Curlew this light area occupies less than half the length of the bill.

In the hand, the two species may readily be distinguished not only by these characters but also by the fact that in the Eskimo Curlew the rear surface of the tarsus is covered with very small, more or less round scales, while in the Little Curlew the rear surface is covered by transverse scutes like those seen on the front of the tarsus in both species.

The Little Curlew breeds in northeastern Siberia and winters in the Moluccas, New Guinea, and Australia, where it is called the 'Little Whimbrel.' It has occurred casually in the Philippines, Borneo, Celebes, and New Zealand. While there are no records of the species in North America, its appearance on this continent is conceivable, and because of the great rarity of the Eskimo Curlew, and small curlew suspected of being the latter species should be distinguished carefully not only from the Whimbrel (*Numenius phaeopus*) but also from the Little Curlew.

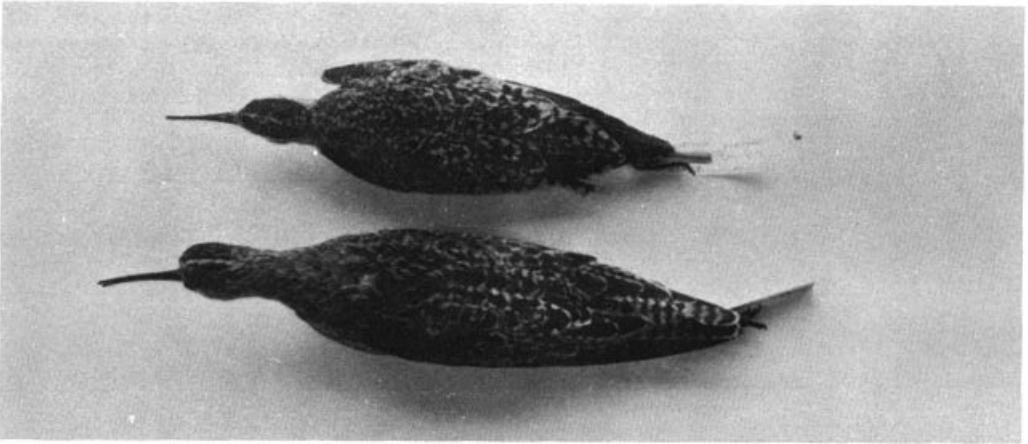


Fig. 2. Dorsal view, showing light median crown stripe in both curlews, a variable characteristic. Note similar feather edging on back and upper wing surfaces. Above, *minutus*, ♀ Western Australia, Oct. 24, 1964, AMNH 803832; below, *borealis*, unsexed, Labrador, Aug. 20, 1918 AMNH 752069. Photos by Doug Rod

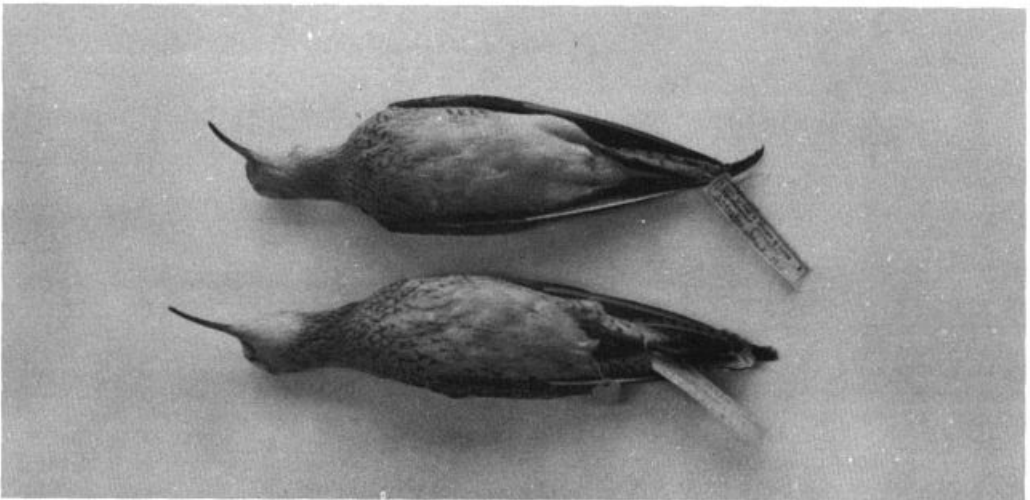


Fig. 3. Ventral view, showing comparative bill length and body size similarity. In these two specimens *borealis* soft parts (bill and legs) seem darker, but this is not always a reliable characteristic. Above, *minutus*, ♀ Shanghai, May 5, 1911, AMNH 114475; below *borealis*, ♂ Magdalene Islands, undated, AMNH 149312.