

Far Eastern Curlew in Canada



Figure 1. The Far Eastern Curlew's call, "cur-lee, cur-lee," was repeated in rapid couplets at 4- 5 second intervals, reminiscent of the call of the Eurasian Curlew. Photos/Ervio Sian.

The sighting of this Siberian species in British Columbia provides a first record for continental North America.

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ON THE AFTERNOON OF SEPTEMBER 24, 1984, the authors and several other birders were searching the intertidal mudflats of Mud Bay, Delta District Municipality, British Columbia (49°04'N, 122°55'W), for a Bar-tailed Godwit (*Limosa lapponica*),

that had been first reported September 22. Mud Bay is a well-known shorebird staging area near the mouths of the Serpentine and Nicomekl Rivers, 35 kilometers southeast of Vancouver. This location hosts up to 2000 Black-bellied Plover (*Pluvialis squatarola*) and many

thousands of peeps and other sandpipers each year during August and September, and has a reputation for harboring rarities. At approximately 1700 PDT, Kautesk and Ireland sighted a large curlew flying overhead and calling "cur-lee, cur-lee" in rapid couplets. Both, who were familiar with the typical calls of the Long-billed Curlew (*Numenius americanus*), which is a regular transient in small numbers in the Vancouver area (Campbell *et al.* 1974), commented that the calls sounded odd but resumed the search for the Bar-tailed Godwit as the curlew flew north and disappeared.

About one-half hour later the authors, along with B. Macdonald, A. Lau, G.



Figure 2. Observers were searching through a concentration of shorebirds for a Bar-tailed Godwit when the curlew landed nearby.

Ansell and G. Thomson, were searching through a large concentration of shorebirds when the curlew landed along the margin of a sandy spit 40-50 meters away. Sian approached the curlew to within 15-20 meters and began taking photographs (Figs. 1 and 2), while the other observers continued searching for the godwit. The curlew continued calling and Ireland commented that the call reminded him of the Eurasian Curlew (*N. arquata*), with which he was very familiar from years of birding in England.

After 15-20 minutes the bird flew east along the mudflats, circled overhead and landed only 10-15 meters away from the observers. It was at this point that we saw that the wing linings were white, densely cross-banded with brown streaking, and contrasted strongly with the buffy flanks. The rump and lower back were brown, the same color as the upper back. Since the Long-billed Curlew has cinnamon wing linings in all plumages this species was discounted, and the Eurasian Curlew was eliminated owing to the absence of a white rump, lower back and wing linings. Since the bird was large and had no distinct head stripes, we concluded that it was not a Whimbrel (*Numenius phaeopus*), Bristle-thighed Curlew (*N. tahitiensis*), or any of the other smaller curlews, but that it was a Far Eastern Curlew (*N. madagascariensis*).

In addition to the features already discussed, the following field marks were noted and compiled from the authors' field notes. The head was brown with no stripes, heavily streaked and rather blackish brown on the posterior facial area. The underparts were buffy white with brown streaking, the streaking on the breast continuing up and becoming finer on the throat and sides of the neck, the streaking on the sides continued down onto the flanks and became coarser. The tail, uppertail coverts and rump were brown, the tail barred with darker brown. The bill was strongly decurved over its entire length, the basal one-half of the lower mandible pinkish flesh colored, with the remaining tip of the lower mandible, the upper mandible and the legs grayish-blue. Most noticeable on the standing bird was the pattern on the scapulars and tertials. The feather centres were dark blackish brown, scalloped and notched along the edges, with the feather edges bright reddish buff. The coverts had a similar pattern, but were whitish-edged and noticeably lighter in colour (cf. Kobayashi 1956, Prater *et al.* 1977). The bird was observed for approximately 15-20 minutes at distances as close as 10 meters before it finally flew off to the southeast.

Copies of the field notes and photographs have been placed on file at the

British Columbia Provincial Museum, Victoria, and the National Museum of Canada, Ottawa.

At the crest of the evening tide, shortly after sunset, after the curlew had flown off, the Bar-tailed Godwit (fifth British Columbia record), and two Hudsonian Godwits (*Limosa haemastica*), were found roosting on the mudflats among a large flock of Black-bellied Plovers.

Despite a thorough search of the area on the following evening by more than 40 birders, and searches of lesser intensity on several subsequent days, the Far Eastern Curlew was never sighted again.

We considered the bird a juvenile Far Eastern Curlew, since it had a relatively short bill, seemed less heavily streaked below than adults, and had white tips on the first to eighth primaries (see Prater *et al.* 1977).

The Far Eastern Curlew is a large curlew similar in size to the Eurasian Curlew, the Far Eastern Curlew averaging 53-61 centimeters (20.8-24 inches) and the Eurasian Curlew 50-60 centimeters (19.6-23.6 inches) (Pizzey 1980 and Cramp *et al.* 1983), which incidentally is larger than the 43 centimeters (17 inches) given for the Far Eastern Curlew in Scott (1983). Kiyosu (1959) has excellent photographs of both of these species.

The calls of these two species are noted in several references as being virtually identical, the descriptions matching the rapid, uninflected "cur-lee, cur-lee" given by the Vancouver bird. This couplet was given in series at approximately 4-5 second intervals.

Copies of the photographs taken by Sian and field notes by the authors were forwarded to Dennis Paulson of the Burke Museum, University of Washington, who reviewed the descriptions and compared the photographs to a specimen of a juvenile Far Eastern Curlew in the museum's collection, and photographs of two juveniles in his possession.

A set of the photographs was also compared with specimens of Far Eastern Curlew and other curlew species at the British Museum by Frank Walker and reviewed by Fred T. H. Smith and Robert Swindley of Melbourne, Australia. Paulson noted that "the short bill, unworn plumage and relatively light striped ventral surface," indicated juvenal plumage and presumed the bird to be a male owing to the very short bill this late in the season. Smith stated that the bill was the shortest he had ever seen on a juvenile Far Eastern Curlew, almost certainly due

to the fact that he had apparently never observed one so young.

The Far Eastern Curlew's breeding range, like that of many Siberian species, is imperfectly known but seems to encompass eastern Siberia from the Oljutorski Peninsula west, to include the Kamchatka Peninsula and the northern shore of the Sea of Okhotsk, north to about latitude 63°N, and west to the Oljokma River, then south to northern Mongolia and southeast to Sachalin Island and the northern Sea of Japan (American Ornithologists' Union 1983, Dement'ev *et al.* 1959). The species is noted as a long-distance migrant to eastern China, Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Philippines, Indonesia, Solomon Islands, Australia and New Zealand (Pizzey 1980, King *et al.* 1975). In North America Robertson (1980) listed eleven Alaskan records involving fourteen individuals during spring migration on Adak and Amchitka (Aleutian Islands), St. Paul and St. George (Pribilof Islands) and at Wales on the mainland, plus a probable record for St. Michael, Norton Sound. From 1981 to 1984 there have been an additional six sightings during May to mid-June in the western Aleutian Islands (Gibson 1981, 1982, 1983 and 1984). Our sighting is therefore the first non-Alaskan, and apparently first fall record, for North America.

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