

Great Spotted Woodpecker at Attu Island, Alaska: first record for the Near Islands and for North America

George F. Wagner

ATTU IS THE LARGEST AND WESTERN most of five islands in the Near Island group of Alaska's western Aleutians (Fig. 1). Most of us know it from the list-birders who journey there each spring in the hope of ticking off species, which in the course of migration wander there from the nearby Asian mainland. Approximately 200 species, almost half those of the entire state of Alaska, have been recorded in the Near Islands. It is an impressive list for such a remote outpost of the state, especially considering its inhospitable environment. The Near Islands, as well as the rest of the Aleutians, are best known for their rugged and treeless terrain and for some of the worst weather conditions

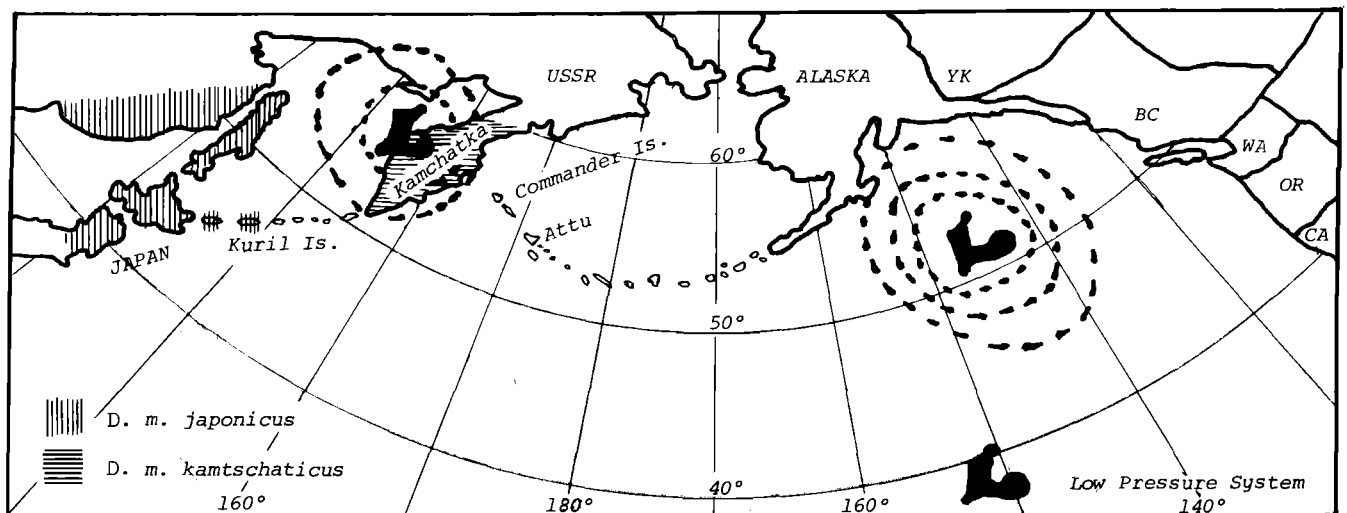
in the world. They are the habitat of the Red-faced Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax urile*), Rock Sandpiper (*Calidris ptilocnemis*), Lapland Longspur (*Calcarius lapponicus*), and Snow Bunting (*Plectrophenax nivalis*). Few forest birds are ever encountered here and then only in passing. So the occurrence of a nonmigratory species of woodpecker in the Aleutians may seem quite extraordinary.

A woodpecker of the genus *Dendrocopos* was encountered in Attu's Massacre Valley on the morning of October 9, 1985. It was first detected by its harsh, out-of-place call: *kek, kek* and observed with 10 × 40 binoculars at an estimated distance of 60 meters (200 feet) on an old, leaning utility pole. Although this initial sighting was extremely brief—lasting no more than six or eight seconds, the bird's main features were clearly noted.

In structure, size, and basic coloration, it appeared similar to the Hairy Woodpecker (*Picoides villosus*) of North America. However, this bird's plumage differed from that of the Hairy in other ways. It displayed a large white face patch, a bright red lower belly, a completely black back and an elongated white patch on each wing. These features suggested only one likely species—the Great Spotted Woodpecker (*D. major*) of Eurasia

My first thought was to document

Figure 1. Weather charts (courtesy of USFWS) revealed a strong low-pressure system over USSR's Kamchatka Peninsula at 1800 hours, on April 25, 1986. This easterly moving storm is believed to have aided the second Great Spotted Woodpecker to Attu.



the sighting with photographs. In the few seconds that my eyes were directed away from the bird in an attempt to retrieve a camera, the woodpecker left the pole and flew out of view. During the next few minutes, it was heard and seen only briefly and at great distance, and was lost thereafter. Despite much effort during the remainder of that day and the following four days, the bird was not found again.

The second sighting took place on October 31, 1985—in the very same area where the previous encounter took place. The woodpecker proved no more cooperative than on October 9. However, it was kept under observation for a longer period of time and some half-dozen photographs (of extremely poor quality) were taken before the bird was lost. Several subsequent days were spent trying to relocate the bird, but without success. When that failed, large amounts of suet (beef fat) were placed in strategic locations in the area of these sightings. It was hoped that if the woodpecker remained on the island, it would be attracted and held at that location by the food. Under such conditions, better photographs might be taken. These hopes faded when the bird had not been rediscovered by mid-November. By then, the encroaching blanket of winter snow had descended from the mountains to the ocean beaches to entomb every part of Attu for months to come.

Then on the evening of April 27, 1986, a Great Spotted Woodpecker was seen on Attu's Alexi Point. This individual was observed probing the few pieces of driftwood found above the debris line on the beach. That bird was collected and is now a specimen (UAM 5337) at the University of Alaska Museum in Fairbanks. Although its gonads were destroyed by shot, this individual was judged to be a female by the lack of a red band on the back of its head. It weighed 79.2 grams and had very light subcutaneous fat. Its measurements were: wing—133 millimeters; tail—89 millimeters; tarsus—25 millimeters.

The Great Spotted Woodpecker is the most numerous and wide-ranging member of its genus in the Palearctic. It ranges from the British and Canary Isles and Morocco east across Eurasia to the Kamchatka Peninsula in the Soviet Union and Korea as well as the

Kuriles and Japan. In the boreal and temperate forests of Eurasia, it is the commonest woodpecker. It exploits a wide variety of forest types: deciduous, mixed and coniferous; either moist or arid; from the lowlands to the mountains (Harrison 1982). Its food consists of insects, seeds, nuts, and berries, but it has been known to consume carrion in winter (Dement'ev and Gladkov 1968). None of the nineteen subspecies is migratory but several have exhibited nomadic tendencies, especially in fall and winter (Dement'ev and Gladkov 1968).

A direct comparison to a series of skins at the United States National Museum by D. D. Gibson determined that the individual collected on Attu was of the subspecies *D. m. kamtschaticus*.



Photo 1. A view of West Massacre Valley and the Great Spotted Woodpecker, near the top of the closest utility pole. By October 31, 1985, all the vegetation had succumbed to subfreezing temperature to produce the brown terrain seen here, and snow is becoming apparent at higher elevations.

"I compared the Attu specimen (UAM 5337), which I had prepared as a study skin and trunk skeleton, with series at the United States National Museum in August 1986. I compared UAM 5337 with a series of female *D. m. japonicus* and with one (their only) female *kamtschaticus*. The Attu bird agrees well with the only female *D. m. kamtschaticus* at the United States National Museum in being clear white ventrally and in having only rudimentary barring on the undersides of the rectrices. The United

States National Museum series of *japonicus* agrees well with the published assessment of that form by Vaurie (1965:705–706) in being darker ventrally, less pure white, and in having the undersides of the rectrices heavily barred. I did not regard this subspecies identification as a difficult one. It is the race (*kamtschaticus*) known to have occurred in the Commander Islands (Johansen 1961, *Auk* 78:44–56)." *Excerpt from letter of D. D. Gibson.*

This race is restricted to the Kamchatka Peninsula in the U.S.S.R. It breeds there commonly, only 600 kilometers (400 miles) from the Near Islands. This subspecies has also been documented as a wanderer away from Kamchatka. It has been recorded in

the Gizhiga area of the U.S.S.R. and along the Anadyr River (Dement'ev and Gladkov 1968), some 800 kilometers (500 miles) north of its breeding range. Several records exist from the U.S.S.R.'s Commander Islands (Stejneger 1885, Johansen 1961), 320 kilometers (200 miles) northwest of Attu. Thus it was not unreasonable to expect stragglers to be encountered eventually in the Near Islands.

Because the three sightings of this species on Attu in 1985 and 1986 are isolated from each other in time, an evaluation as to the number of birds (records) involved is in order. The



Photo 2. By mid-November, the winter snow blanket had descended to Attu's shores as seen in this photograph of Massacre Bay on November 20. Thereafter, all insect and vegetable matter was beyond the woodpecker's reach.

sightings of October 9 and 31, 1985 were of extremely short duration, and at great distance. Photographing the bird for documentation was given priority over obtaining a detailed plumage description. The photographs of October 31 confirm that particular sighting but only under extreme magnification, and overall their quality leaves much to be desired. As a result, no detailed plumage features were noted during the first two encounters, which in turn might raise questions as to whether or not the same bird was involved. Moreover, those two sightings took place three weeks apart, despite continuing coverage of the area in the meantime. Such a prominent and vocal bird as the Great Spotted Woodpecker, if present in the area, should have been encountered easily on the treeless tundra of Attu.

On the other hand, it is certainly conceivable that the bird may simply have been missed during those three weeks. It is also reasonable to assume that if food were available such a non-migratory species might survive and remain for that length of time. Sufficient food is certainly not available on Attu in the form of wood-boring insects. Attu supports only stands of shrubs: willow, mountain ash, blueberry and a few, dwarfed, introduced spruces. These rarely exceed a height of 1.2 meters (4 feet). The large amount of lumber and building materials, brought to the island during World War II and now littering the landscape, have been treated to pre-

vent insect damage. Only driftwood, which is quite rare on Attu's beaches, appears capable of supporting this food source for the woodpecker. Wood-boring insects would thus not sustain this bird on Attu for any length of time. Likewise, the 1985 crops of blueberry and mountain ash were total failures and of no help to this bird.

The Great Spotted Woodpecker is, however, also known for its habit of feeding on the ground (Dement'ev and Gladkov 1968). Attu's tundra and lush vegetation are host to a variety of insects as well as at least one species of slug (family *Limacidae*), which is quite common there during the summer and fall. The Great Spotted Woodpecker could easily exploit these food sources. In fact, on October 31, 1985, the bird was first seen on the ground, presumably feeding.

In light of such a food source, it seems plausible that the woodpecker could have remained on the island and survived for the three weeks in question. In addition, both sightings took place at the same spot. Both encounters involved a bird with similar behavior. Given the foregoing circumstances and the improbability of the occurrence of a second bird, it seems fairly safe to conclude that only one individual was involved in the sightings of October 9 and 31, 1985.

However, this same conclusion cannot be applied to the sighting of April 27, 1986, some six months later. In fact, circumstances suggest the con-

trary. First, the odds are overwhelming against a woodpecker surviving a winter on Attu. The entire island, from the highest peak to the high-tide line, remained frozen and buried under several feet of snow from late November through the last days of February. During this period, no plant and insect material was available to this bird because of the snow and ice. The only conceivable sustenance that might have been found, would have been along the beaches—a washed-up seabird or the carcass of a marine mammal. Even if present, such a rare source of food would be difficult for the woodpecker to locate. Even if it had chanced upon such a carcass, the bird would have been forced to compete for it with the island's Common Ravens (*Corvus corax*) and Arctic Foxes (*Alopex lagopus*). During these difficult months, numbers of even these adept scavengers crash by 60% (Wagner, pers. obs.). Under such severe conditions on Attu during the winter months, the woodpecker would have been an early casualty. It certainly would not be expected to survive.

Secondly, the suet put out on November 3, 1985, on various utility poles in Massacre Valley still remained intact and untouched six months later. If the woodpecker remained there during the winter, it surely would have found at least one or more of these food sources.

Thirdly, the April sighting resulted in a bird whose behavior was noticeably different from that of the earlier sightings. It was easily approached and spent all of its time probing for grubs in the few pieces of driftwood found on Alexi's beaches. This bird was relatively tame compared to that encountered six months earlier.

And finally, an argument can be made that the 1986 bird had only recently arrived there. Alexi Point, being a peninsula two kilometers long, is easily searched; a woodpecker would have been easily detected there. Yet it was not encountered during the two censuses of Alexi in the week prior to the sighting. Being a prominent point in the island's shoreline, Alexi is one of the first landfalls for new arrivals. In late April, it was the only large expanse of snow-free land on the island and thus would have been a desirable target for a flying bird. It can be argued that the bird's

tameness was a result of exhaustion, perhaps due to a recent, long flight over the ocean. The amount of driftwood that had been probed suggested that the bird had been present in the area for no more than a day or so. This is also consistent with weather events in the area. A low-pressure system was traced moving toward Attu over the center of the Kamchatka Peninsula, the nesting forests of *D. m. kamtschaticus*, on the night of April 25, 1986 (Fig. 1), two days before the sighting. That storm, whose track proved quite unusual for the region, was most likely responsible for the woodpecker reaching Attu.

Hence, I believe the 1986 sighting to be of a second Great Spotted Woodpecker. Thus, the three encounters with this species on Attu in 1985 and 1986 represent two separate birds, which arrived there independently some six months apart. It is interesting to note that the occurrence dates of these two birds correspond with those of Stejneger (1885) from the Commander Islands. He recorded and collected one specimen of this species there on October 12–26, 1882, and one each on May 8 and May 9, 1883. Such seasonal dates and parallelism are suggestive of a migratory species; not of a random wanderer.

As with most extralimital records, this species' method of arrival on Attu must be discussed. Human assistance must be considered, since the Great Spotted Woodpecker is a nomadic species. Deliberate release or escape from captivity is not even a remote possibility in cases of sightings in the Near Islands. However, ship-assisted arrival or partial passage, is quite probable.

The heavily travelled shipping lanes between Japan, Korea and the north-west coast of North America lie within sight of the Near Islands. A disoriented bird might board an eastbound cargo vessel off the coast of Japan and not leave until it sighted land. That landfall would be the Near Islands, about two or three days later. Likewise, this would apply to avian ship borders off the southern Kurile Islands. The Great Spotted Woodpecker would be a prime candidate for such a mode of arrival.

The 1986 individual was collected and identified to the Kamchatkan subspecies, *D. m. kamtschaticus*. This race is not found in Japan or on the

Kuriles but is resident to the north, on the Kamchatka Peninsula of the Soviet Union. Since no shipping exists between these breeding grounds and the Near Islands, this subspecies was not likely a shiprider to Attu. Furthermore, *D. m. kamtschaticus* was recorded as a straggler to the Commander Islands before there was any shipping activity in the area, thereby demonstrating its ability to cross several hundred kilometers of open ocean in free flight. *D. m. kamtschaticus* is also the race closest to the Near Islands and thus the most probable vagrant there of this species. Given these considerations, ship-assisted arrival can almost certainly be ruled out when discussing the April 27, 1986, record of this species on Attu.

In accepting this Attu record and adding the Great Spotted Woodpecker to the North American list, the A.O.U. (1987) separated the genera *Picoides* and *Dendrocopos*, which they had earlier (A.O.U. 1976, 1983) merged under the older name *Picoides*. All the other woodpeckers of this group occurring in North Amer-

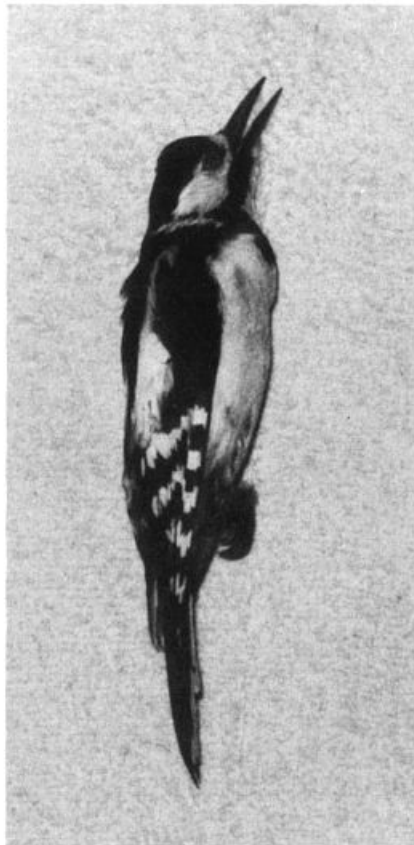


Photo 3. Specimen of *D. m. kamtschaticus*, collected on Alexi Point, Attu Island, Alaska, on April 27, 1986.

ica remain in the genus *Picoides*. The Attu specimen is the first record of the genus *Dendrocopos*, as now defined, in the A.O.U. Check-list area.

In conclusion, the western Aleutians in 1985 and 1986 produced two records of the Great Spotted Woodpecker. At least one of these records involved a free-flying vagrant that originated on the Kamchatka Peninsula in the Soviet Union, thus constituting the addition of a new genus and species to the avifauna of Alaska and North America.

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