

The Status of Vagrant Whimbrels in the United States and Canada with Notes on Identification

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The Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus* is a common shorebird in the United States and Canada that is present throughout the year. In addition to the widespread form of the Americas, *N. p. hudsonicus* (the "Hudsonian Curlew"), Old World subspecies of the Whimbrel have occurred on occasion; indeed, nominate birds are almost annual along the Atlantic Coast. An understanding of the status and identification of taxa in this complex is important to our understanding of movement patterns in this species (or species group), particularly when one considers that there is a high likelihood that there is more than one species of the Whimbrel.

It seems clear that the current relegation of the various taxa to subspecies status is, unfortunately, impacting our data. Although I doubt that most serious birders place less emphasis on identification as a result of their taxonomic status, there can be little doubt that this complex has garnered less attention than has other vagrant shorebirds. As an example, few photographs are available of vagrant birds. Indeed, I was unable to locate any good photographs of nominate birds from the Atlantic coast. It is certainly true that not all birds are cooperative, and a vagrant Whimbrel picked out in a flock of North American Whimbrel might not lend itself to being photographed. Nevertheless, finding vagrant shorebirds, be it from Asia or Europe, is one of the more exciting birding events of any migration. A comparison with records of other Old World shorebirds, for example the Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica*, Red-necked *Calidris ruficollis* and Little *C. minuta* stints, or Curlew Sandpiper *C. ferruginea*, shows a significantly higher percentage of those records accompanied by identifiable photographs. I believe that this problem is in part related to reduced effort compared to what one would invest for a vagrant accorded full species status.

Birding and taxonomy have an interesting relationship. Just because a body of scientists state that a population is or is not a distinct species, such a decision has no bearing on our ability to identify them. Perhaps only with such a taxonomic change will more birders search for and document vagrant Whimbrel, but I am hopeful that increased attention be given to this vagrant regardless of any pending decision. And indeed, this issue does not stop with the Whimbrel, but applies to all subspecies, whether common or rare in North America.

TAXONOMY

Authorities generally recognize three or four subspecies of the Whimbrel. Our regularly occurring subspecies is *N. p. hudsonicus*; no other subspecies is thought to breed or regularly migrate in North America. *N. p. variegatus* from Asia is a regular migrant in western Alaska, and casual along the Pacific Coast, with one record for interior California. The European race or races are slightly more complicated. The nominate subspecies breeds widely throughout northern Europe. *N. p. islandicus*, which breeds on Iceland, is not given subspecific status in most recent works, and *N. p. alboaxillaris* is also of uncertain taxonomy. Whereas some treat *alboaxillaris* as valid, Vaurie (1965) treated it as a color morph and most recent works follows this treatment. It is smaller and paler than the nominate race. Shirihaï (1996) mentioned that some birds in Israel, where Whimbrel migrates and winters, are intermediate in size between *phaeopus* and *alboaxillaris*. The general sense is that there is an intergrade population south of the Ural Mountains in Russia (Cramp and Simmons 1983). For purposes of this paper, nominate *phaeopus* includes *islandicus* and *alboaxillaris*. There are some taxonomists who believe that separate species are involved. As an example, Zink et al. (1995) compared mitochondrial DNA and found that the two groups (*hudsonicus* and *phaeopus*) were strongly differentiated. North American birds would be called the Hudsonian Curlew, with the remaining races maintained in the nominate group under the Whimbrel moniker.

DISTRIBUTION

Numenius phaeopus hudsonicus. The breeding range of the North American subspecies apparently lies in two areas. In the west it breeds from northern Alaska, northern Yukon, and northwest Mackenzie, south to west and central Alaska and southwest Yukon. In the east it breeds in southern Keewatin, northeast Manitoba, and north Ontario. It has been recorded in the breeding season on Southampton and Banks islands, but breeding confirmation is needed (Godfrey 1986, AOU 1998). Nonbreeding birds might spend the summer without migrating at all, or move part or all of the way to the breeding grounds. South of its breeding range, it is found along coastal California, Panama, and Ecuador in the west, and from New Jersey to South Carolina and in the West Indies in the east.

Migration is primarily along both coasts, although there are inland sites that attract large numbers of migrant Whimbrels. Much of the migration in the western part of the range is noted from Mexico to Alaska along, or just off, the immediate coast. There is also

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a large movement north from the Gulf of California through the Salton Sea in interior southeastern California. This population angles northwest through interior California in the Antelope Valley and through the San Joaquin and Sacramento valleys. At this point the Whimbrel is generally rare east of the Sierra Nevada range. Farther north, in British Columbia, it is common on the coast and remains rare in the interior. It is a scarce spring transient in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and interior southern Manitoba. Similarly, in Colorado they are rare in spring and casual in fall (Andrews and Righter 1992).

To the east, it is found from the Gulf of Mexico, and points east to the West Indies (rarely), and to the Atlantic Coast north to New England. It is regular in the lower Great Lakes region, and local elsewhere in the interior and to the west of Hudson Bay. Similar flyways are used in fall, although it is found both east and west of Hudson Bay, east to Labrador and Newfoundland, the north shore of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, and the Maritime Provinces (Godfrey 1986, AOU 1998).

The Whimbrel winters on the Pacific Coast from Washington (rarely southern British Columbia) to southern Chile. The eastern part of the winter range extends from the coasts of Texas, Louisiana, and South Carolina, south to the Caribbean coast of Colombia and from Venezuela to Brazil (AOU 1998). On the Pacific side, it is casual in the Pribilof Islands (in the Bering Sea), Clipperton Atoll (well off western Mexico), Hawaii, and New Zealand. On the Atlantic side, it is casual on northern Baffin Island and western Greenland, Europe, and the Azores. There is even a record for Sierra Leone in West Africa (Urban et al. 1986).

***Numenius phaeopus phaeopus*.** The nominate subspecies breeds from Iceland, northern Scandinavia to northwestern Siberia, south to the Orkneys, Shetlands, Scottish mainland, southern Scandinavia, Estonia, central Russia and central western Siberia. It winters from the British Isles (rarely), Mediterranean, Arabia, and western India south irregularly to the Azores, Madeira, Canary Islands, southern Africa, Madagascar, Seychelles, and Sri Lanka. There is much uncertainty over the dividing ranges of the *phaeopus* group at this season, but birds ringed (banded) in Europe and northwestern Russia have been recovered in West Africa (Urban et al. 1986). Compare this range with that of the following subspecies. Nominate birds are casual along the Atlantic coast of North America from southern Florida up the coast to Newfoundland. There are also records from Barbados, the Virgin Islands, and in the interior of the East in Ontario and Ohio (AOU 1998).

***Numenius phaeopus variegatus*.** This Asian subspecies breeds in eastern Siberia and winters from Burma, eastern China, and the Philippines, to Guam, Fiji, the Malay Peninsula, New Zealand, and Australia. Populations wintering in southern and East Africa are thought to be of eastern Russian and Siberian origin (Urban et al. 1986). This subspecies is rare in western Alaska (north to Barrow), and casual in Europe and the Pacific States.

SUMMARY OF VAGRANT RECORDS

N. p. variegatus is rare but regular in Alaska, where there are at least 15 specimens (Gibson and Kessel 1997), with one from 1938, indicating this area has long been on the fringe of its range. Away from coastal Alaska, there are only five records, with singles at Ocean Shores, Washington, 16 May 1987 (Paulson 1993) and Clatsop Beach, Oregon, 25 September 1985 at (Paulson 1993), and in California in Humboldt County 29 October–1 November 1981 (*Am. Birds* 36:213), in San Mateo County 4–21 September 1997 (*Field Notes* 52:120), and inland at China Lake, Kern County, 9–16 June 1999 (pers. obs.) A briefly seen bird at Ocean Shores 15 May 1998 was

almost certainly *variegatus*, and no doubt occurred due to the weather system that delivered the Bristle-thighed Curlews to the West Coast (Patterson 1998), but is not included due to the brevity of the observation (Mlodinow et al. 1999). The birds at Clatsop Beach and China Lake were photographed.

N. p. phaeopus is far more regular, being almost annual in fall somewhere along the Atlantic Coast, meaning anywhere from coastal Canada to the West Indies. Records range from 9 August to 12 November, with one bird staying to 28 December. This area is extensive geographically, so observers should keep in mind that the chance of encountering one is not high. Still, it is clear that *phaeopus* has been found far more frequently along the Atlantic than *variegatus* has been seen south of Alaska. It is casual in spring, with records from Labrador 14 May 1932 (van Tyne 1948), Sable Island, Nova Scotia, 23 May 1906 (Brewster 1909), Plum Island, Massachusetts, 17 June 1972 (Veit and Petersen 1993), Hartlen Point, Nova Scotia, 23 June 1983 (Tufts 1986), and Pistolet Bay, Newfoundland, 27 June 1943 (Godfrey 1986).

Interior records are particularly interesting, and will be discussed in more detail the next section. Briefly, there are three records for Ontario, near Kingston 24 May 1969 (Cooke 1970), near Pt. Pelee 3 September 1989 (A. Wormington pers. comm.), and at Lake Ontario 23 May 1991 (Yukich 1991). There are also inland records from Quebec 1–12 May 1991 (*Ontario Birds* 10:52) and from Ohio 10–16 July 1988 (Anderson and Kemp 1988).

IDENTIFICATION

Separation from Other Curlews. Separation of the Whimbrel from its congeners is generally straightforward. All *Numenius* are fairly uniform brown and rather tall shorebirds. The Whimbrel is categorized as a large curlew, as opposed to the Little *N. minutus* and the presumably extinct Eskimo *N. borealis* curlews. However, of the large curlews the Whimbrel is generally the smallest.

Using *hudsonicus* as a starting point, the Whimbrel is a rather even brown, lacking much warm coloration. The brown is broken on the upperparts (to include the wings, back, and rump) by buff notches, visible only at rather close range. The crown is dark with a pale central stripe and a pale supercilium, yielding a boldly patterned head. The bill, while long for a wader, is short for a curlew, and is curved primarily near the tip. The neck and breast are comprised of brown streaks on a buff background and a pale belly, extending to the lower breast.

The Long-billed Curlew *N. americanus* is the only other regularly occurring curlew on the continent. It is larger, with a much longer and more evenly curved bill. Although juvenile curlews have shorter bills, their length and shape still differ from that of a Whimbrel. The curlew's head is uniform, lacking the bold brown striped effect present on a Whimbrel. Finally, Long-billed Curlews have a warm cinnamon tone to much of the plumage, particularly noticeable in flight. The Eurasian Curlew *N. arquata* has the long bill of *americanus* and lacks the head stripes of Whimbrel, but it has the white rump of nominate Whimbrel so could be mistaken if seen in flight, however, the wings are much darker on the Whimbrel. The Far Eastern Curlew *N. madagascariensis* is a vagrant to Alaska, with one record for British Columbia 24 September 1984 (Kragh et al. 1986). This curlew is large and wholly brown, with an extremely long bill and an unmarked crown and thus presents no identification problems vis-à-vis Whimbrel. The most similar species is the Bristle-thighed Curlew *N. tahitiensis*, a casual vagrant along the Pacific Coast and a rare and local breeder in northern and western Alaska (Patterson 1998). This species has the bolder head stripes, recalling a Whimbrel, and a shorter bill than most congeners. The rump color is

the single most important difference, with the Bristle-thighed having a warm cinnamon or orangish tone, obviously different than the uniform brown of a *hudsonicus* Whimbrel. See Patterson (1998) for more information.

From an aging and molt perspective, most curlews are similar in this regard. Using an adult Whimbrel as an example, they have scapulars and tertials that are pale brown with rather indistinct pale bars and spots. They start their molt in the fall, usually upon reaching the winter grounds, finishing this molt from November to January. Conversely, juveniles seen in fall are fresh with clear buff spotting; the separation of young birds from adults is obvious at this season (with a good view). In spring, adults will be fresher than second-year birds, as their feathers are newer. With an ability to age these birds, it would be interesting to note what percentages of the vagrant Whimbrels are juveniles in fall or are second-year birds in spring. There are minor measurement differences between the various races of the Whimbrel, but there are also differences between the ages and sexes, so their use in the field is rather doubtful. See Prater et al. (1977) for more information on aging and measurement differences.

Separation of Whimbrel Subspecies. In general, the separation of the Whimbrel from the larger curlews is straightforward, given reasonable views and a basic understanding of their field marks. The fun really begins when trying to understand how to separate the various subspecies of the Whimbrel from one another. In addition to providing an increased understanding that comes with such evaluations, the identification of Whimbrels to race has added significance in that some authorities believe more than one species is involved. Therefore, it makes sense that diligent efforts be made to understand the status and distribution of the various races, so that in the event of a split, the birding community will better understand the frequency with which the unexpected (sub)species might occur.

As noted earlier, *hudsonicus* is an evenly brown bird on the upperparts (Fig. 1). The neck and breast are brownish with vertical dark brown streaks on a pale (whitish or buff) background. The streaking is less obvious toward the lower breast; the belly, through to the

undertail coverts, are pale (again, either buff or off-white). The underwing coverts and axillaries are comprised of dark brown bars with a buff ground color. There is little or no warmth to this coloration and the general impression is of a brown wing when seen from below.

Nominate *phaeopus* differs in having a large white wedge on the rump and lower back. This area is (usually) totally unbarred. It further differs by usually having white underwing coverts and axillaries. In some birds, these areas are white with dark barring (see below). It appears somewhat cooler brown, with an almost grayish tone, as compared to the slightly warmer (brownier) *hudsonicus*. Additionally, it averages slightly larger than *hudsonicus*, which might be more obvious with birds from Iceland (which probably account for many East Coast records). *N. p. alboaxillaris* is generally smaller and whiter than the nominate race.

N. p. variegatus is somewhat intermediate to nominate birds and *hudsonicus*. The underwings are generally barred white and dark brown. Under most field conditions, this area looks more like a dark gray and white, but the barring is extensive. The rump and back are variable and, in prior literature, have been described as being either brown or white with brown barring. No doubt many birds have a more uniform look, but many show uniform white in this area and would be indistinguishable from *phaeopus* on this mark alone. Many *variegatus* have dark barring across the rump and back, but with wear, combined with any distance at all, the effect might result in an area that appears unmarked. The dark barring on the breast is a bit more extensive than it is on other races, reaching to the sides of the belly. Like *phaeopus*, it tends to be slightly cooler brown than *hudsonicus*. Although overlap renders size somewhat useless in the field, it does average small than *hudsonicus*.

For North American birders, the identification of a vagrant Whimbrel can be based on the presence of a white rump. There is no evidence that *hudsonicus* shows this feature. Once *hudsonicus* has been eliminated, determining which Old World subspecies it is becomes complicated, and at some point geography and probability



Figure 1. Whimbrel of the North American subspecies *Numenius phaeopus hudsonicus* at Bolivar Flats, Texas, 20 April 1990. Note the entirely brown lower back and rump. Photograph/Victor Fazio III



Figure 2. Whimbrel showing the characters of the Asian subspecies *Numenius phaeopus variegatus* at China Lake, California, 9–16 June 1999. Note the white lower back and rump. Photograph/Bob Steele

must play a role. Vagrant Whimbrels are generally restricted to coastal regions, so it is simple to conclude that those found on the East Coast are from Europe and those from the West Coast are from Asia. There is no reason to think this supposition is not correct, but birders should be armed with the necessary information to try to make sense of it. Because *variegatus* winters south to Australia and New Zealand, it is conceivable that a bird wintering on the wrong side of the Pacific could actually winter as far south as southern Chile (where some *hudsonicus* winter) and then head north on the Atlantic side. Similarly, *phaeopus* winters south to the tip of South Africa, so they, too, could find themselves on the wrong coast (especially so when one considers how off-track they already are). Note too that there are inland records (Ohio, Quebec, and Ontario in the eastern part of the continent, and interior California in the West). At some point, relying strictly on geography will increase the probability of error and interior records will be particularly difficult to assess.

In trying to separate *phaeopus* from *variegatus* the only seemingly safe feature is the all white underwings of some *phaeopus*. Rump or back color is useful to the extent that a bird obviously barred brown and white is *variegatus*, whereas a bird with a seemingly unmarked white rump and back could be either. But the bird needs to be seen extremely well to ensure that small brown spots and bars are truly absent. Nominate birds can show some brown markings on the rump, so the fact the rump is not entirely white is not enough to conclude that a bird is *variegatus*. The underwing is another clue, but also seems subject to individual variation, with *phaeopus* sometimes showing rather extensive barring on the underwing coverts and axillaries and *variegatus* sometimes being quite pale, approaching *phaeopus*. In my experience, *variegatus* is heavily barred and this is easy to see with reasonable views. From a distance, however, it will look mostly dark, although typically more on the gray end, as opposed to the brownish tones of *hudsonicus*. There is some speculation that these two races intergrade in north-central Russia. In addition to explaining these overlapping features, it points out that perhaps only those extreme birds can be safely identified to race.



Figure 3. Whimbrel showing the characters of the Asian subspecies *Numenius phaeopus variegatus* at China Lake, California, 9–16 June 1999. Note that the white traces up the back to form a wedge. Photograph/Bob Steele

Returning to the geographic probability of records, it would seem most rational to start with some type of default (sub)species, as inexact as that sounds. Specifically, for vagrants on (or near) the Pacific Coast, observers should assume a vagrant Whimbrel is *variegatus* unless the bird shows wholly white underwings. Even then, given the fact that *variegatus* is known to get somewhat paler, it would be wise to stop short of insisting such a bird were of the nominate race. It gets tougher on the Atlantic side. Remembering that the bird is likely being identified by a rather white rump and back, any bird showing extensive barring on the underwings is more likely to be a heavily marked *phaeopus* than a *variegatus* on the other side of the globe from its intended range. Theoretically, an individual might have a rump and lower back that is heavily barred dark and white, outside the range of variation in *hudsonicus*, but too dark for *phaeopus*, but we are now in uncharted territory. It is somewhat analogous to the Thayer's *Larus thayeri* and Kumlien's *L. glaucooides kumlieni* gull problem. Birds comfortably identified where they are expected are less comfortably called the same thing when out of range. In this case, some form of geographic filter simply must be used, at least in part, in determining the origination of a vagrant Whimbrel.

Returning to the inland records with this information, in the western half of the United States the only inland record is the photographed bird from China Lake. The underwings were heavily barred, although this is not visible in the pictures (Figs. 2, 3). The combination of this mark and the geographic probability would lead me to conclude that it is most likely *variegatus*. For the four Canada records, on range they are likely *phaeopus* and there is nothing in any of the descriptions to suggest this conclusion is wrong. Indeed, on some of the descriptions there is a mention of them being possibly larger than adjacent *hudsonicus*, which would suggest the larger birds from Iceland (another geographic probability). The most difficult record on which to reach a conclusion is the Ohio bird. Peterjohn (1989) treated it as most likely *variegatus*, but I do not feel I can make a guess, as such a record is unprecedented. The underwings were described as being intermediate between these two subspecies, as were the rump and lower back. There is nothing in the description to suggest *variegatus* over *phaeopus*, and an argument can be made that given geographical proximity a nominate bird was more likely involved (and that is why I have treated it under the nominate subspecies). Yet this record is further unique in that it was from early July, indicating a probable adult. It is too early for a juvenile, but could also be a one-year old. Thus, there is not too much we can make of the timing, other than recognizing its unique nature. Of course there can be no certainty with such an intermediate bird, so the mystery will remain. Future records should be carefully scrutinized, with photographs taken if possible. Perhaps in time, more will be learned with regard to the various subspecies. In the meantime, since Hudsonian Curlew is the most different subspecies, detecting one of the other races should be relatively easy.

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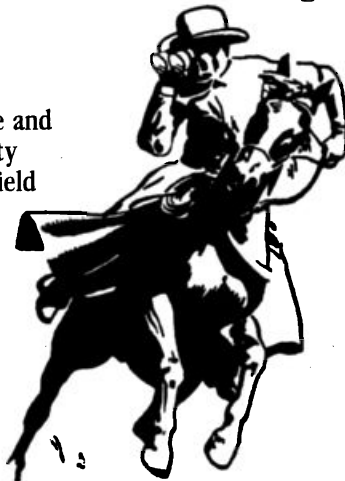
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