

A GUIDE TO THEIR IDENTIFICATION

CURLEWS, GODWITS, 'SHANKS' AND LOOK-ALIKES

The previous article in this series (Vol. 3(1): 53-61) dealt with the identification of small sandpipers and their allies. Some readers may have found this a little daunting, but these small sandpipers do present some of the greatest identification challenges. Fortunately, the larger migratory waders covered in this article are, on the whole, considerably easier to identify. Here, Phil Hockey concentrates on the essential identification features of larger migratory waders that still cause confusion in some quarters. The illustrations of waders by Peter Hayman are reproduced from *Shorebirds* by Peter Hayman, John Marchant and Tony Prater, with kind permission of the publisher, A & C Black, and from *Sasol Birds of Southern Africa* (Struik).

EURASIAN AND SLENDER-BILLED CURLEWS, AND WHIMBREL



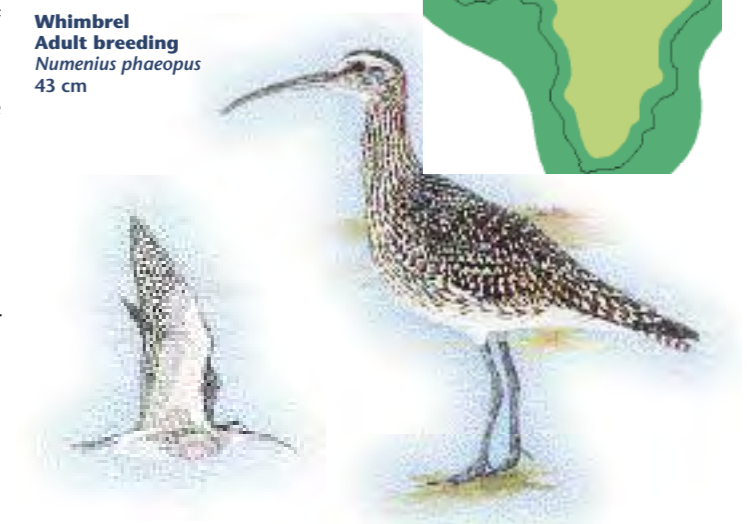
Eurasian Curlew
Adult breeding
Numenius arquata
55 cm

Eurasian Curlew has, on average, much the longer bill of the two, but some long-billed adult female Whimbrels have longer bills than the shortest-billed juvenile male Eurasian Curlews. To place these differences in perspective, the bill length of Whimbrels ranges from about 55 to 95 mm, whereas that of the nominate race of Eurasian Curlews ranges from 107 to 168 mm in adults; bills of juveniles are shorter (down to 80 mm). The eastern race of Eurasian Curlew (*orientalis*), which is widespread in Africa, has bill measurements of up to 192 mm! Among waders, only the Long-billed Curlew *Numenius americanus* of the Americas and the Far Eastern Curlew *N. madagascariensis* of

the Orient have longer bills. The bill shapes of Whimbrel and Eurasian Curlew are also subtly different: the former's bill curves gradually along almost its entire length, whereas the curvature of the Eurasian Curlew's bill is obviously greatest towards the tip. These two species often feed and roost in close association and, when seen side by side, the size difference between them is so great you wonder how you could ever have been confused! The Whimbrels are literally dwarfed by the longer-legged curlews. Also when seen side by side, both

These species are characterized by having fairly long, grey legs, white backs and rumps, and long, slender, obviously decurved bills. They show no significant changes in plumage with either age or sex. Both Eurasian Curlew and Whimbrel are widespread on the African coast, occurring inland less frequently. Both can regularly be found together, when direct comparison makes separation easy, but even solitary birds should not cause confusion. The three key aspects to concentrate on are head patterns, length and shape of the bill,

and size. The head and neck of **Eurasian Curlew** are closely and finely streaked, appearing dull brown at a distance. Some show a hint of a pale line through the eye, but there is no obvious eyestripe, nor does the bird's head seem capped. The head of **Whimbrel**, by contrast, is strongly patterned. This patterning includes a poorly defined dark stripe through the eye, an obvious pale supercilium extending from the base of the bill to well behind the eye, and a dark, almost blackish crown bisected by a narrow buffy or whitish stripe.



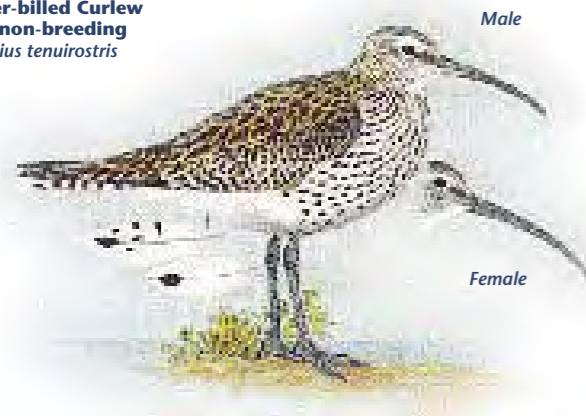
Whimbrel
Adult breeding
Numenius phaeopus
43 cm

~ AFRICA'S WADERS ~

A guide to their identification

EURASIAN AND SLENDER-BILLED CURLEWS, AND WHIMBREL

Slender-billed Curlew
Adult non-breeding
Numenius tenuirostris
38 cm



Some races of Eurasian Curlew (especially *orientalis*) are paler than Whimbrel.

In flight, the two species present broadly similar patterning – the white backs being particularly striking. Even without a direct size comparison or clear view of the bill, however, they can be separated with fair confidence on the upperwing pattern. In Whimbrel, there is little contrast between the colours of the inner and outer wings.



In Eurasian Curlew, the inner wing is almost always considerably paler than the outer wing.

Slender-billed Curlew is a species which few birders have been fortunate enough to see. It is extremely rare, occurring in very small numbers at a handful of localities in Morocco and Tunisia. It is much smaller than Eurasian Curlew and slightly smaller than Whimbrel. Although streaked on the breast and belly like the other two species, the background to this streaking is much whiter. There is usually a dusky stripe extending from the eye to the bill, and a poorly defined white supercilium. In flight, the best identification feature (apart from the very white underbody) is the predominantly white underwing – it is much paler even than that of the very rare Whimbrel race *alboaxillaris* which occurs on the coast of East Africa.

HABITS, HABITATS AND ASSOCIATIONS

Eurasian Curlews and Whimbrels typically are birds of estuarine and lagoon mudflats. Both species probe deep into soft sediments in search of worms, prawns or crabs. In the tropics, they also chase crabs on the surface. Other coastal habitat types, including rocky shores, are visited less frequently – mostly by Whimbrels – but during migration both species have been recorded at a diversity of inland habitats (I have even watched a Whimbrel chasing scorpions in the Kalahari Desert!). Both species forage singly or in loose groups and are more likely to roost with one another than to join large, multi-species wader roosts.

Outside the breeding season, Slender-billed Curlew is a habitat generalist, foraging in estuaries and lagoons, on the edges of freshwater lakes, and in grasslands and farmlands.

BAR-TAILED, BLACK-TAILED AND HUDSONIAN GODWITS

Bar-tailed Godwit
Adult non-breeding
Limosa lapponica
38 cm



Bar-tailed and Black-tailed godwits (known affectionately as Barwits and Blackwits) are fairly widespread and common in Africa. The third species, Hudsonian Godwit, is a vagrant which, to

date, has only been recorded in South Africa and it is possible that all records are of the same individual. All three species have long, straight or almost straight bills. In flight, the godwits are easily separable in all plumages. **Bar-tailed and Black-tailed godwits** have pale under-

wings. The underwing of Black-tailed Godwit is very white and is narrowly but conspicuously edged with black. Bar-tailed, however, lacks a conspicuous white wingbar (present in Blackwit), has a white back (that of Blackwit is dark) and a black-and-white barred tail.

Black-tailed Godwit, as its



Black-tailed Godwit
Adult male breeding
Limosa limosa
40 cm



~ AFRICA'S WADERS ~

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BAR-TAILED, BLACK-TAILED AND HUDSONIAN GODWITS

name implies, has a black tail which contrasts strongly with its white rump. In Bar-tailed Godwit, the toes project beyond the tail tip in flight, but in Black-tailed Godwit a substantial part of the tarsus also projects.

The upperpart colouring of **Hudsonian Godwit** in flight is very similar to that of Black-tailed Godwit, but the underwings have striking black coverts, rendering this species unmistakable.

Confusion between these three can really only arise when they are *on the ground*. Morphologically, Bar-tailed and Hudsonian godwits are the most similar. Neither appears particularly long-legged or long-necked, and both have a very slightly upturned bill of which the basal one third to one half is usually pink. Black-tailed Godwit, on the other hand,



and neck. In Bar-tailed Godwit uniform chestnut colouring extends on to the belly, whereas in Black-tailed Godwit the belly is predominantly white with heavy crescent-shaped black markings. The entire underparts of Hudsonian Godwit are more reddish, and crescent-shaped



Black-tailed Godwit

appears both long-legged and long-necked, and the long bill – which is not upturned – is usually pink or pinkish-orange for more than half of its length. If Black-tailed Godwit is seen alongside either of the other species, it is obviously larger.

In *breeding plumage*, all three species have extensive rufous or chestnut coloration. In Bar-tailed and Black-tailed godwits, this colouring extends to the head

black markings extend all the way to the upper breast. The head and neck, however, are whitish, heavily but finely streaked with dark grey. Hudsonian Godwit has never been recorded in breeding plumage in Africa (and such a record in the future is highly unlikely).

Separation of adult Bar-tailed and Black-tailed godwits *in non-breeding plumage* is fairly easy. Bar-tailed Godwits gener-

Hudsonian Godwit
Adult non-breeding
Limosa haemastica
39 cm



ally are well-marked above (with obvious whitish or buffy feather margins) whereas Black-tailed Godwits are a much more uniform grey. Importantly, the upper breast and neck of Bar-tailed Godwit are lightly, but clearly streaked – those of Black-tailed Godwit are uniform pale grey and unstreaked. Adult Hudsonian Godwits in non-breeding plumage are more similar in colour to Blackwits than to Barwits, but any Hudsonian Godwits seen in Africa are likely to be juveniles (which present more of a problem).

Juveniles of all three godwits are buffy below, this colour being richest in Black-tailed Godwit. All have buffy or whitish margins to the otherwise dark upperpart feathers, imparting a scalloped effect. Black-tailed Godwits can usually be picked out on a combination of morphology (see above) and the warm buffy underpart colour, which extends almost to the undertail coverts. Juvenile Bar-tailed and Hudsonian godwits are, in my experience, extremely difficult to separate in the field (except in flight).

When watching a known juvenile Hudsonian Godwit, one can almost convince oneself that it does look different, but it is very difficult to pinpoint exactly how! The bottom line with Hudsonian Godwit in Africa is that unless you see a bird in full breeding plumage (an unlikely event), you have to see it in flight to clinch the identification – and certainly to get it past any rarities committee!

HABITS, HABITATS AND ASSOCIATIONS

Bar-tailed and Hudsonian godwits are essentially birds of coastal soft sediments, especially mud- and sandflats of lagoons and estuaries. Bar-tailed Godwits do occur inland on migration, but rarely.

Black-tailed Godwits are much more catholic in habitat choice, occurring at both coastal and inland wetlands. Very large numbers occur inland at wetlands in tropical West Africa, where they frequent river floodplains, rice paddies and lake margins. They usually forage in loose flocks. In coastal habitats, Black- and Bar-tailed godwits may forage together, but Blackwits, with their longer legs and necks, often forage in deeper water than Barwits. Like Eurasian Curlews and Whimbrels, godwits frequently form high-tide roosts separate from those of other waders. ▷



Bar-tailed Godwit

~ AFRICA'S WADERS ~

A guide to their identification

COMMON AND SPOTTED REDSHANKS, AND RUFF

Common Redshank
Adult non-breeding
Tringa totanus
25 cm



It really should be impossible to confuse these birds with each other or with any other species. Nevertheless, they are frequently misidentified, the most common error being the misidentification of Ruff as Common Redshank. This confusion arises because many adult **Ruffs** in Africa have orange-red legs (which are fairly long) and many have a pinkish base to the bill (which can also be fairly long). For a

standing bird, these are the two obvious features of Common Redshank illustrated in field guides!

Bill shapes of the two are, however, quite different. **Common Redshank** has a straight, evenly tapered bill; that of Ruff is always slightly decurved and thickens noticeably at the base.

The Ruff has variably scalloped upperparts, the dark feathers being conspicuously fringed with buff; this scalloping is more pronounced in the adult than in the juvenile. Adult Common Redshank is a much more uniform, greyish sepia colour above. The upper breast of the adult Common Redshank has fairly fine, dark, vertical streaking on a white or cold grey background. This streaking is less obvious in juveniles (especially in worn plumage): juveniles are also browner above than adults. The foreneck of Ruff is more uniform and is sometimes marked with indistinct, short, crescent-shaped bars.

Juvenile Ruffs have very uniform, dark

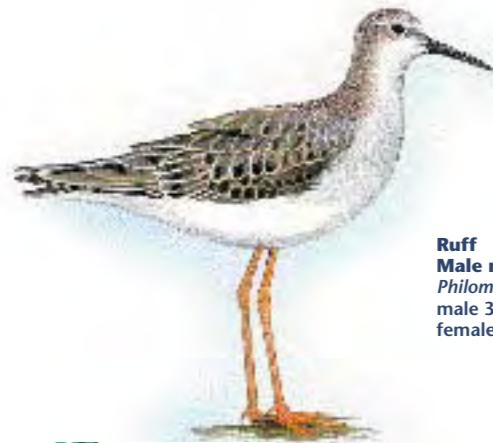
buffy underparts which, especially in the case of small females, can cause confusion with Buff-breasted Sandpiper *Tryngites subruficollis*. Leg colour of these juveniles ranges from grey-green to yellowish green. It is important to remember that there is a great deal of size variation among Ruffs: males, which account for about one in 10 Ruffs in Africa, are much larger than the more abundant females.

If you are still uncertain of the identity of a bird on the ground, once it stretches its wings or takes to flight, all doubts are gone! Common Redshank has a highly distinctive flight pattern, with a black-and-white barred tail and rump, a white back, dark outer wings and white secondaries. Ruff lacks any startling upperwing pattern and shows clear white ovals on either side of a dark rump – these white ovals are formed by unusually long upper tail coverts.

Ruff
Juvenile female



Ruff
Male non-breeding
Philomachus pugnax
male 30 cm
female 24 cm



Buff-breasted Sandpiper
Juvenile

~ AFRICA'S WADERS ~

A guide to their identification

COMMON AND SPOTTED REDSHANKS, AND RUFF

Spotted Redshank
Adult non-breeding
Tringa erythropus
32 cm



The upperparts of Spotted Redshank in non-breeding plumage are paler and cleaner grey in colour

than Common Redshank, and the bill is much longer and is slightly decurved at the tip. The underparts are very pale and the lores are conspicuously white. Although the secondaries of

The probability of confusing Ruff and **Spotted Redshank** is zero, but Spotted and Common redshanks could possibly be confused in non-breeding plumage (the jet black breeding plumage of Spotted Redshank, finely spotted with white – hence its name – is unmistakable, but birds in breeding dress are unlikely to be seen south of the Equator).

Spotted Redshank are paler than the primaries, they are barred dark and pale grey and are not pure white as in Common Redshank. Common Redshanks are often first located by their call – a loud 'tyuu hu hu', with the first note longer than the other two. It is quite different from the three-note call of Common Greenshank.

HABITS, HABITATS AND ASSOCIATIONS

All three of these species can be found at a range of coastal and inland wetlands. The only species likely to be found foraging in dry lands (usually agricultural areas, and including farmyards) is Ruff. Ruffs sometimes form spectacularly large roosts, especially in West Africa where some roosts may contain more than half a million birds. Ruffs forage solitarily or in loose flocks, but Common and Spotted redshanks usually feed singly. All three species forage with and roost with a wide diversity of other wader species.

Common Redshank



Ruff



Spotted Redshank



COMMON GREENSHANK AND MARSH SANDPIPER, GREATER AND LESSER YELLOWLEGS

Common Greenshank
Adult non-breeding
Tringa nebularia
32 cm



Common Greenshank and Marsh Sandpiper share grey/dark grey upperparts, long greenish or greenish yellow legs, white backs and rumps and long, straight (or almost straight) bills. Superficially, Marsh Sandpiper is a diminutive and lanky version of the Common Greenshank. If the two are seen together, the larger size and heavier build of Common Greenshank precludes confusion. Even without direct comparison, however, these two species are easily separated in the field. The

immediate giveaway is bill structure – that of Marsh Sandpiper is straight, needle-fine and blackish for most of its length, although in some birds there is silvery-grey coloration towards the base of the bill. The bill of Common Greenshank is much more robust, the basal half is usually greyish or dull green and the bill appears slightly upturned. Seasonally, there is relatively little plumage change in Common Greenshank. However, as the breeding season approaches, the head, neck and

upper breast become more heavily streaked. Marsh Sandpiper, on the other hand, has a more distinct breeding plumage which many individuals attain before leaving Africa. The upper-parts become sharply patterned with grey and brown, tinged with cinnamon; the head and neck are heavily spotted and streaked with dark brown, and the flanks are lightly patterned with chevrons. In combination with these changes, a change in leg colour can cause confusion. The legs become increasingly orange and some appear to be tinged with red – this is the time at which confusion with other species is most likely.

In terms of body and bill structure, Marsh Sandpiper most closely resembles the vagrant Wilson's Phalarope

Marsh Sandpiper
Adult non-breeding
Tringa stagnatilis
23 cm



Greater Yellowlegs
Juvenile non-breeding
Tringa melanoleuca
31 cm



Phalaropus tricolor. Wilson's Phalarope forages while swimming or wading belly-deep in water, and Marsh Sandpiper also regularly forages (while wading) in deep water; in these situations the two appear very similar. They are, however, easily distinguished on leg

length (Wilson's Phalarope has short legs), back colour (that of Wilson's Phalarope is dark) and call (Marsh Sandpiper's call resembles a high-pitched, reedy Common Greenshank, while Wilson's Phalarope gives a nasal grunt).

The two yellowlegs spe-

COMMON GREENSHANK AND MARSH SANDPIPER, GREATER AND LESSER YELLOWLEGS

cies are extreme vagrants to Africa, both having been recorded fewer than five times. The most striking feature of both species is their golden-yellow legs. The only species with which they could be confused is Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola* (see Vol. 3(1): 56-57), but that species is smaller, has duller legs and a conspicuous pale supercilium extending well behind the eye. Yellowlegs reaching Africa are most likely to be juveniles. If size comparisons with other waders are possible, **Lesser Yellowlegs** is slightly larger and heavier-bodied than Marsh Sandpiper, but smaller than Common Redshank.

The proportions of **Greater Yellowlegs**, by contrast, are much closer to those of Common Greenshank (with which it shares the impression of a slightly upturned bill). Common Greenshanks or



Marsh Sandpipers with unusually bright legs could, at first glance, be mistaken for yellowlegs. In flight, however, the former two species show white rumps and backs – in both yellowlegs species, only the rump is white. If no size comparison is available for separating the

yellowlegs, bill length is a useful character. The bill of Greater Yellowlegs is obviously much longer than head length whereas that of Lesser Yellowlegs is only slightly longer than head length. Also, the bill of Greater Yellowlegs often shows extensive greyish or greenish colour in the basal half to one third (as does that of Common Greenshank), while the Lesser Yellowlegs bill usually gives the impression of being all-dark (and more delicate) and straight, sometimes with a brownish tinge at the base.

The calls of the two yellowlegs are quite different: Greater Yellowlegs gives a penetrating 'tu-tu-tu', closely resembling that of Common Greenshank, whereas Lesser Yellowlegs has a flatter, single- or double-note 'tu' call.

HABITS, HABITATS AND ASSOCIATIONS

All four of these species are catholic in habitat choice, occurring at a diversity of coastal and inland wetlands. Of the four, Common Greenshank is by far the most likely to be encountered on the open coast, especially on rocky shores where it hunts for fish in shallow pools. Common Greenshank and Marsh Sandpiper forage solitarily or in loose flocks, frequently in association with other waders. □



Lesser Yellowlegs



Greater Yellowlegs