Remarks on the Identification of Waders

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It is of interest to have the opinions of field-workers who have had experience with the various waders—particularly of the unfamiliar forms—and Mr. F. Lawson Whitlock's account in the last *Emu* (p. 438) warrants special attention, as he has had unrivalled opportunities of observing those birds in north-western Australia, where species rare in the south are much more frequently encountered. In view of the status he holds as a veteran field observer and collector some comments and explanations must be made in reply to his criticisms of my paper which appeared on this subject in *The Emu*, vol. XXXVIII, 1938, p. 65.

Mr. Whitlock finds some objection to the plate of plumage patterns by Mr. Roger T. Peterson which accompanied my paper, in that it showed a lack of detail which he apparently finds desirable, and, furthermore, that it gave an exaggerated idea of the contrasts and purity of the plumage in general, which "may mislead an inexperienced student." In view of the reputation of the artist in the portraying of birds in such a manner as to be most helpful to an observer watching the living bird rather than from the standpoint of one examining a skin, it seems rather odd to have to defend him on the charges set out by Mr. Whitlock. And I feel sure that, though he purported to speak from the point of view of the field observer Mr. Whitlock has, quite unconsciously no doubt, been regarding the matter with the outlook of a student of skins, thereby missing the real purpose of the plate.

The whole point of my paper was to get away from the "feather by feather description" attitude which dominated even many field-books in the past, and I considered myself fortunate in obtaining Mr. Peterson's aid in preparing the drawings from the same standpoint. It was not the intention to delineate fine detail such as one would notice in handling a shot specimen, but to illustrate in a simple and easily-grasped form a few of the basic patterns of the relation of the white to the non-white parts of the plumage, and so to guide the observer in picking out quickly just those points, helpful for diagnosis, from the medley of detail he sees when the birds take wing.

As to the criticism of the exaggeration of contrasts and the purity of the plumage in general, I may say that I specifically drew attention to one phase of that when dealing with the Grey Plover (p. 66). In the hand a specimen would, of course, show the white of the rump prominently flecked with grey, but at a distance the rump appears pure white. An observer would certainly not be misled through an artist's showing that part of the bird white in an illustration intended for *field* use. So in many other

instances. The smaller Knot (*Calidris canutus*) has the rump feathers strongly barred with black, but at a distance the white increasingly dominates the effect until at 12-15 yards (I have just tested this out with a study skin) the rump looks quite white. Yet a cabinet man working only with skins would rebel at the idea of referring to this as a white-rumped bird. A similar argument applies, I think, to the Green Sandpiper (*Tringa ochropus*). Mr. Whitlock gives some notes on this species, but his description is more applicable to skins examined in the hand than to birds observed in the wild. The white spots, of which he speaks, are not usually seen in the field and English observers speak of the bird as "looking black, with a white rump." At a distance details are lost and become merged in a general mass of colour.

Mr. Whitlock attempts to minimize the diagnostic value of the black axillaries of the Grey Plover in distinguishing that species in winter plumage from the Golden Plover. He omits any reference to the white rump of the former—also an important character. I have watched both species at Pelican Point on the Swan River estuary, and cannot support the view that the axillaries are apt to be inconspicuous owing to the low flight of the Grey Plover. It is such a striking character, and in conjunction with the rump is so decisive in effecting an identification, that both features are eminently to be preferred to the differences in shade of the upper parts which Mr. Whitlock holds as superior. I may quote here from Rowan* (*British Birds*, vol. XX, 1926, pp. 37-38):

> Literature is full of references to the great difficulty in distinguishing between the American Golden Plover and the Grey. . . . Errors are so frequent that I have found it poor policy to accept any Golden Plover records without examining specimens in support. It seems to be generally unknown that the two species can be told apart in flight by the dark tail of the Golden and the light tail of the Grey. The further they recede the greater the contrast, for the former then looks black while the latter appears to be white. I notice that even the *Practical Handbook* [*of British Birds*], which misses so little that is of any value, fails to draw attention to this fact. Alas, but few waders are so contrastly marked, so completely fool-proof. Anyone who can tell black from white can distinguish them. If they are at rest one has only to put them up to see the glaring labels. In addition the Grey has black axillaries and a conspicuous wing bar, while the Golden lacks the latter and has pale axillaries. Added to this is the characteristic call of the Grey Plover, and what more is needed to make the birds separable in the field one cannot guess.

Our Golden Plover is brighter, of course, than the American race, but even here Mr. Whitlock admits that his test—differences in the upper plumage—depend on favour-

*An important omission from references to literature on the waders in my previous paper is a series of eight papers in *British Birds* between 1926 and 1930, under the general title of "Notes on Alberta Waders included on the British List," by Prof. William Rowan, of the University of Alberta. They are illustrated by a beautiful series of drawings by the author and contain invaluable field information, with a rendering of call notes on the system described by the author in *British Birds*, vol. XVIII, no. 1, 1924, p. 14.

able light conditions, and identifications relied on solely on that character would undoubtedly cause the same confusion here as they have done abroad.

Like myself, Mr. Whitlock finds the Sand-Dotterels a difficult group and he says that the only one he has satisfactorily identified is the Oriental Dotterel. He does not tell us what characters he found of value in this determination. Or did he depend on shooting the bird to effect his identification—as I did on the one and only occasion, to my certain knowledge, on which I have met this species.

I notice that the Dutch ornithologist, Dr. G. J. van Oordt, writing of a recent tour of South Africa in the latest number of *Der Vogelzug* (vol. 10, April, 1939, p. 67), detects a difference in the notes of the Common Sandpiper there from those of the European form, and suggests it might represent a distinct, possibly a Siberian, sub-species. ("Der Ruf der südafrikanischen Flussuferläufer war deutlich verschieden von den westeuropäischen Artgenossen; es handelt sich darum vielleicht um eine andere (sibirische?) Unterart." Has Mr. Whitlock ever received a similar impression?

Birds of the Bunbury District, Western Australia

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The township of Bunbury is situated some 115 miles south of Fremantle, at the northern end of Geographe Bay. Years ago a long massive breakwater was built, protecting the mouth of the Leschenault Estuary which was dredged to form the port. The Estuary is narrow at its entrance, but a mile away to the eastward it expands considerably, forming an almost land-locked lake. It receives the waters of the Collie and Preston Rivers, both perennial streams, but only during the winter rains do they bring down any volume of water. The Estuary is eleven miles in length and varies in width from half-a-mile to a mile-and-a-half. The rise and fall of the tides in these latitudes is small, so that there are not those extensive mud-flats exposed at low water, so much favoured by waders. In places a few mangrove trees may be seen growing on the banks of the Estuary.

The township is steadily growing, and, being the centre of the south-west dairying industry and the port of the saw-milling business, the hinterland is much civilized and there are no tracts of undisturbed country within easy distance. What timber is left standing consists chiefly of tuart (*Eucalyptus gomphocephala*), a tree of massive proportions and spreading habit, and the peppermint (*Agonis flexuosa*), a valuable shade tree when wisely left standing in pasture land. Both are coastal trees. Further inland