

THE PECTORAL SANDPIPER: AN UNUSUAL SPECIMEN

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INTRODUCTION

The Pectoral Sandpiper *Calidris melanotos* breeds in eastern Siberia and North America during the northern summer, and disperses to the coastal regions of lands bordering the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans (Slater, 1970). It is regarded as a rare summer visitor to Australia.

Recent observations have revealed that it occurs regularly in small numbers in South Australia. I have usually seen a few birds each summer since 1970, and others have been reported. Most of these birds have had typical markings of *melanotos*, and corresponded closely with the general description that was given by Slater for identifying the species from its close relative, the Sharp-tailed Sandpiper *Calidris acuminata*. According to Slater, *melanotos* differs from *acuminata* by a "general browner appearance (particularly of the upper-parts); closely, heavily dark-streaked throat and breast with sharp cut-off line from white abdomen; yellower legs; yellowish base to bill; and quite distinct calls." Condon (1969) said that in *melanotos* the "legs are yellow, instead of greenish-yellow," as in *acuminata*.

DESCRIPTION OF A RECENT SPECIMEN

On 16 February 1975 R. Noske, R. Johnstone and I observed an unusual looking wader at Mosquito Point, Lake Alexandrina, South Australia. It was flying when first seen and was suspected to be an example of *melanotos*, but further observations of the bird when it was landed at close range revealed many discrepancies: the bill appeared long, decurved and wholly blackish; the legs appeared blackish; and, while we were unable to obtain a view of the bird front-on, we could not see a sharp demarcation line between the dark breast and abdomen. The back was of an even colour and without pronounced streakings that were present on other *melanotos* that I have seen. While observing the bird for about 30 minutes, we did not hear it call. Eventually we contacted John Eckert, who collected it. Immediately afterwards the legs and bill were cleaned to allow their true colour to be seen. The legs were dark, but had an olive tinge; the bill was blackish with only the extreme base of the lower mandible being yellowish. Neither colour could possibly have been seen in the field.

The specimen is now preserved in the S.A. Museum (Reg. No. B28843). The skull was completely ossified, and the testes were very small and blackish. Thus the specimen was established to have been a male in non-breeding condition. The measurements of the specimen were: culmen 32.6 mm; tarsus 29.2; wing 135, and tail 48.

General plumage characters and comparative measurements ruled out all other wader species except *melanotos* and *acuminata*. Individual breast feathers on the specimen corresponded well with those on six other specimens of *melanotos* that are in the museum collection (two from South Australia and four from North America) and differed from the numerous *acuminata* specimens by being darker, of richer colour and with darker marks about the shafts. A demarcation line between the dark breast and white abdomen is more apparent on the prepared skin than it was on the living bird. The white flank feathers possessed a few darker markings, as did the undertail coverts, but these are inconspicuous and the other specimens of *melanotos* also possess them in varying degrees.

The culmen length of 68 *acuminata* ranged from 21 mm to 27 (average 24.7) while on six *melanotos* it ranged from 25 to 28.8 (27.3). The culmen length of the recent specimen is clearly well outside the range of a large collection of *acuminata*. While also outside the range of the six *melanotos*, it is nearer their size and, moreover, six specimens cannot be considered as a representative sample. It was further noted that the longer the bill in both species, the greater its decurvature.

Dement'ev and Gladkov (1951) said that *acuminata* is "easily distinguished by somewhat elongated and pointed tail, and by retrices with wedgelike tapering tips, with longest lying closest to middle of tail." They said of the tail of *melanotos*, "Retrices usually with rounded tips, except for central pair, which are over 5 mm longer than extreme pair. Pair of retrices second from edge sometimes somewhat shorter than extreme pair, so that tail appears forked."

It was found that the specimens that were available agreed with this description and that *melanotos* had parallel edges to all but the

central pair of retrices, and all except those had rounded tips. This easily distinguished them from those of *acuminata*, which had all the retrices tapering evenly to a point. The recently collected specimen was thus identified as *melanotos*.

REFERENCES

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