

OBSERVATIONS OF A HUDSONIAN GODWIT IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

JOHN B. COX

INTRODUCTION

The Hudsonian Godwit *Limosa haemastica* has a fragmented breeding distribution in Alaska and Canada and migrates to winter in southern South America (Johnsgard 1981, Marchant *et al.* 1986). It is a scarce bird that was once thought to be very rare, but is now known to occur in fairly large numbers in favoured places. More than 10,000 pass through the area of James Bay, Canada, and over 7,000 winter in Bahia San Sebastian, Tierra del Fuego (Marchant *et al.* 1986). As might be expected with such a long-distance migrant, some Hudsonian Godwits apparently stray from their normal range in the New World. Vagrants have occurred in Britain (Grieve 1987, Wright 1987), South Africa (Martin & Martin 1987), Hawaii (Pyle 1987), Galapagos, Fiji and Norfolk Island (Marchant *et al.* 1986), and Falla *et al.* (1981) said the species is a rare but possibly regular migrant to New Zealand.

Considering its almost regular occurrence in New Zealand, it is perhaps surprising that the Hudsonian Godwit was not recorded in Australia until 1982-1983, when one occurred at the Hunter Estuary, New South Wales (Lane 1987). This article documents observations of another bird that stayed in South Australia for lengthy periods from 1986 to 1988.

SOUTH AUSTRALIAN OBSERVATIONS

For some years I have regularly visited the extensive Dry Creek Saltfields, 23 km NW of Adelaide (34°42'S, 138°30'E), South Australia, to study calidridine sandpipers and count other shorebirds.

At least 23 Black-tailed Godwits *Limosa limosa* frequented the saltfields throughout the winter of 1986. Their number had substantially increased by 20 September, but the birds were flushed during a first attempt to count them. When they turned in flight, showing their underparts, one was noticed to have completely blackish underwing coverts that contrasted with the mainly white underwings of the others. As the flock flew around, this bird was also seen to have a smaller white bar across the upperwing

and less white above the tail than the Black-tailed Godwits, and it was identified as a Hudsonian Godwit. When the birds landed 43 were counted, but they flew up again before the Hudsonian Godwit could be picked out amongst them. Subsequent attempts to see it settled were unsuccessful, although it was seen flying several more times.

The next evening D. H. Close and I obtained good views of the Hudsonian Godwit in flight and we saw it settled once, when it was between us and the setting sun. Good views were not obtained until 25 September, when I watched it in good light through 10×50 binoculars and a 15-60× telescope at ranges varying from 25 to 50 metres, for approximately 90 minutes, as it foraged with 56 Black-tailed Godwits in a tidal pool. Detailed notes were written and sketches made of the bird during this time:

The Hudsonian Godwit was not distinguishable by size, although it was one of the smaller birds in the flock. It differed from the Black-tailed Godwits in having a steeper forehead, a more rounded crown and a shorter neck. Also its bill tapered to a more sharply-pointed tip and was slightly but noticeably recurved. The distal half was dark brown, and this colour extended along the ridge of the culmen to the forehead feathering. The rest of the basal half was flesh-coloured, duller than the colour of the Black-tailed Godwits. The legs were dark grey, the irides dark. The crown and rear neck were dark grey, shading paler to the front of the neck. A blackish eye-stripe extended from the bill, through and to a short distance behind the eye. Above it was a prominent whitish supercilium, more pronounced in front of the eye and with a cream-coloured tinge. The chin, throat and ear-coverts were also whitish, shading to grey towards the eye-stripe, with a cream-coloured tinge and merging with the pale supercilium behind the eye-stripe. The upper breast was mid-grey, shading paler to the white belly. Some feathers on the belly and flanks were reddish, those of the flanks overlaid with short blackish bars. The undertail coverts were boldly barred black and white. A few scapulars and mantle feathers were blackish and contrasted with the other uniform grey feathers on the back. The upperwing coverts and some tertials were mid-grey. Other tertials had buff-coloured spots along the margins. The primaries appeared blackish.

The wing and tail markings were often visible when the bird preened or stretched its wings, but their patterning was most striking in flight. The entire underwing coverts and axillaries were blackish or dark grey. The primary and secondary feathers were also

mostly dark, glossy grey. Some inner primaries and outer secondaries had whitish bases that formed a translucent white wing-bar on both wing surfaces. This wing-bar was most noticeable when the bird was flying overhead. On the upperwing it was similar to that of the Black-tailed Godwits, but was less extensive. The black tail feathers had small white tips and above them the white band across the uppertail coverts was narrower than that of the Black-tailed Godwits.

The Hudsonian Godwit stayed in the vicinity of the saltfields for two lengthy periods and it was eventually seen by over 100 people, including visiting bird-watchers from interstate and overseas. I observed it on 57 dates and noted its plumage changes. It was nearly always seen with the flock of Black-tailed Godwits, which occasionally also contained one or two Bar-tailed Godwits *L. lapponica*.

On 9 October 1986 the Hudsonian Godwit had a uniform dark grey back and lacked its previously-noted reddish ventral feathers. The only remaining traces of breeding plumage appeared to be some tertials with buff-spotted margins and the boldly-barred black and white undertail coverts. It was with 86 Black-tailed Godwits.

By 6 November all remnants of breeding plumage had been moulted and the bird seemed to be in full non-breeding plumage. It was then often difficult to detect in the densely-packed flock of, then, 102 roosting birds. A Bar-tailed Godwit also present was easily identified by its streaked brown and buff upperparts, but the Hudsonian Godwit had a uniform grey plumage that greatly resembled that of the Black-tailed Godwits. Nevertheless, when clear views were obtained the different head and bill shape and paler facial area readily identified the Hudsonian Godwit, and it was always easily distinguishable in flight by its blackish underwing coverts. It remained in non-breeding plumage for about four months, associating with a steadily increasing number of Black-tailed Godwits.

On 13 February 1987 the flock consisted of 155 birds. The Hudsonian Godwit had dark reddish blotches on its lower breast and belly, indicating that it had started to moult into breeding plumage.

By 7 March it appeared to be in full breeding plumage and its description was noted:

The basal half of the bill was brighter and redder, although the ridge of the culmen remained dark. It had a dark crown, prominent white supercilium, blackish eye-stripe and a pale face with fine dark

streaks about the ear-coverts. The neck was also pale grey with fine dark streaks, but from the breast to the boldly-barred black and white undertail coverts it was coloured rich maroon-chestnut. Some black and whitish bars overlaid the richly-coloured flanks. The mantle and scapulars were blackish with rich golden-buff markings that formed a barred pattern on the back. The upperwing coverts appeared to be grey with paler fringes.

When flying it looked to be a very dark bird. The blackish underwing coverts and dark belly were very different from the whitish bellies and underwings of the 185 Black-tailed Godwits then present. Many of these also eventually gained breeding plumage; their pale orange-chestnut coloration being mainly confined to the neck. Below, they were whitish with heavy blackish bars on the breast and flanks.

The number of Black-tailed Godwits reached a peak of 231 on 4 April 1987. On 17 April the Hudsonian Godwit was still present with 203 Black-tailed Godwits, but on 25 April only 140 were counted and the Hudsonian Godwit could not be found.

A minimum of 25 Black-tailed Godwits stayed in the area of the saltfields through the winter of 1987. On 20 September, when their number had increased to 48, a Hudsonian Godwit was again found in the flock. It is highly probable that it was the same bird as described above for a year earlier. Similar traces of breeding plumage were initially evident, and after moult was complete it remained in non-breeding plumage for about four months with a steadily increasing number of Black-tailed Godwits. It had regained full breeding plumage (as described above for the previous observations) by 10 March 1988 and was still present when the number of Black-tailed Godwits peaked to 210 on 15 April. After that date the Hudsonian Godwit was not seen again.

Habits and habitat

The Hudsonian and Black-tailed Godwits mainly used the saltfields as a high-tide refuge. They then utilised sapphire-fringed tidal pools on the landward side of a belt of mangroves and small islands in salt lagoons as roosting places. During periods of low-tide they frequented the exposed mudflats seaward of the mangroves. They also occurred at Buckland Park Lake when it was at optimum levels for wading birds. This shallow freshwater lake abuts the saltfields, fills with winter rains, and gradually dries up through the summer months. The godwits frequented the

lake from early November to late January. When the lake was in prime condition they remained to feed from it throughout the day and did not fly to the saltfields or tidal mudflats unless disturbed.

DISCUSSION

In any plumage the Hudsonian Godwit has the striking diagnostic feature of blackish underwing coverts. No other godwit has a blackish underwing. The Willet *Catoptrophorus semipalmatus* also has mainly blackish underwing coverts, but it is a very different bird with a unique pattern on all wing surfaces (see Marchant *et al.* 1986).

Judging by its rich maroon-chestnut breast and belly, the Hudsonian Godwit seen in South Australia was a male bird. Females in breeding plumage have large white bases to their reddish ventral feathers and appear paler or more blotched (Marchant *et al.* 1986).

L. limosa melanuroides is the only race of the Black-tailed Godwit recorded in Australia (Lane 1987). It differs from the nominate race and *L. limosa islandica* by being smaller and darker and by having a narrower white bar on the upperwing and a little less white on the uppertail (Marchant *et al.* 1986). These characters approach some features of the Hudsonian Godwit. Indeed, Marchant *et al.* (1986) pointed out that the Hudsonian Godwit has plain dark grey upperparts not unlike *melanuroides*. These similarities indicate why the Hudsonian Godwit seen in South Australia was often difficult to detect when landed amongst its congeners.

It is possible that Hudsonian Godwits are more easily overlooked in Australia than in some other parts of the World. In England, where only

islandica and the nominate race of Black-tailed Godwit have been recorded, vagrant Hudsonian Godwits were initially detected by being smaller and darker than accompanying Black-tailed Godwits (Grieve 1987, Wright 1987). In New Zealand most Hudsonian Godwits were found with Bar-tailed Godwits (Falla *et al.* 1981).

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John B. Cox: 7 Agnes Court, Salisbury East, South Australia 5109

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