

## Hudsonian Godwit: new to the Western Palearctic

Andrew Grieve

On 10th September 1981, I entered the Xerox hide at the RSPB Blacktoft Sands Nature Reserve, Humberside, at about 07.00 GMT, to check the waders present on the lagoons. A group of six godwits was quickly picked out sleeping in a shallow part of the lagoon and appeared to be five Black-tailed *L. limosa* and a single Bar-tailed *L. lapponica*. The latter was smaller, with a large patch of very dark red plumage on the underparts, covering the belly and extending beyond the legs towards the vent as on summer-plumaged Bar-tailed Godwit. Since the birds were sleeping, few other details could be ascertained, though this smaller godwit was much greyer on the back.

Whilst checking the other waders present, I noticed the six godwits flying off towards the River Humber about half an hour later and was surprised to note that the small godwit showed a similar wing and tail pattern to Black-tailed Godwits, so my initial identification was presumed wrong, the bird on this second sighting appearing to be a small Black-tailed Godwit.

I was puzzled by this bird and checked a few reference books later in the day, but the only American field guide in my possession (Robbins *et al.*, 1966, *Birds of North America*) was not particularly helpful with its illustrations of American godwits, as they were either in full summer or winter plumage, and the bird at Blacktoft was obviously losing its summer plumage, having red underparts restricted to the belly area in the main. The *Guide to the Identification and Ageing of Holarctic Waders* (Prater *et al.*, 1977) indicated, however, that only one other species of godwit was that similar to Black-tailed Godwit, the Hudsonian Godwit *L. haemastica*, but only a few brief identification notes were given. Robbins *et al.* showed that Hudsonian Godwit had a whiter face than Black-tailed Godwit in both summer and winter plumage, which was not the case with the small Blacktoft godwit, and it also showed that Hudsonian Godwit had the summer plumage extending to the undertail-coverts, whereas the Blacktoft bird had whitish undertail-coverts, though it may have lost the red plumage from this area. Prater *et al.* gave measurements of the various races of Black-tailed Godwit,

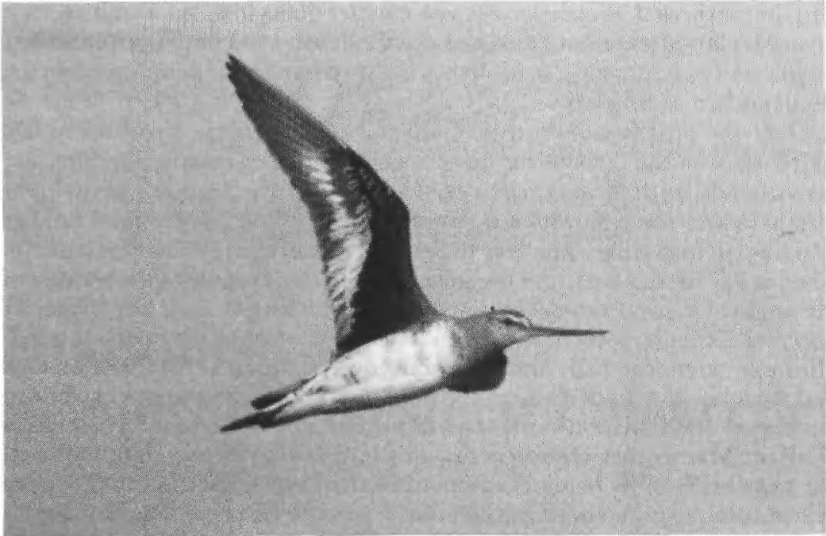
and one of these *L. l. melanuroides*, was smaller than either the nominate race or the Icelandic race, and also had more extensive red underparts and was greyer on the back: thus, it could not be ruled out on the details seen on the small godwit at Blacktoft.

Over the next few days, this small godwit was observed with up to five Black-tails on the lagoons for up to four hours a day, usually sleeping, but occasionally feeding, staying on the lagoons over the high tide period, but absent when the tide was low, presumably feeding out on the Humber Estuary at that time. The few times that it was seen flying were usually when it left the lagoons, and the underwing pattern was not seen because of the angle of flight. Prater *et al.* noted that Hudsonian Godwit has 'axillaries and most of underwing black', but also stated that 'chestnut-red in summer plumage extends to belly and under tail coverts', whereas the Blacktoft bird had mainly white undertail-coverts, and this, taken with the lack of white in the face of the Blacktoft bird, caused me to doubt that it was a Hudsonian Godwit. Many other observers saw this bird during its stay, but, although the possibility of its being Hudsonian Godwit was often discussed, lack of information together with the fact that I was not claiming it as Hudsonian perhaps put others off from claiming it. Many were unhappy about the bird, as I was, but up to this time, the underwing pattern had not been seen, and the eastern race of Black-tailed was still a possibility.

The bird was absent from the lagoons during 21st-23rd September, but returned with higher tides from 24th September. At this time, I paid little attention to it, but the nagging doubts returned, and on 27th September I determined to see the underwing pattern. Again for an hour or so it slept



Fig. 1. Pencil sketches of Hudsonian Godwit *Limosa haemastica*, Humber side, September 1981 (Graham P. Catley)



**223.** Hudsonian Godwit *Limosa haemastica*, probably first-summer, Peru, June 1981 (E. J. Mackrill)

when I watched it from the Xerox hide, but, when it departed, I paid particular attention to the underwing pattern and was able to observe the dark under forewing and black axillaries. At this stage, I discussed this bird with Steve Madge, as I had done earlier, and he was able to confirm, on information just received, that the eastern race of Black-tailed Godwit, which is smaller than the European races, had the same pale underwing pattern of the Icelandic and European races. This removed one of the main

**224.** Hudsonian Godwit *Limosa haemastica* (with Marbled Godwit *L. fedoa*), New York, USA August 1976 (Frank Schleicher)



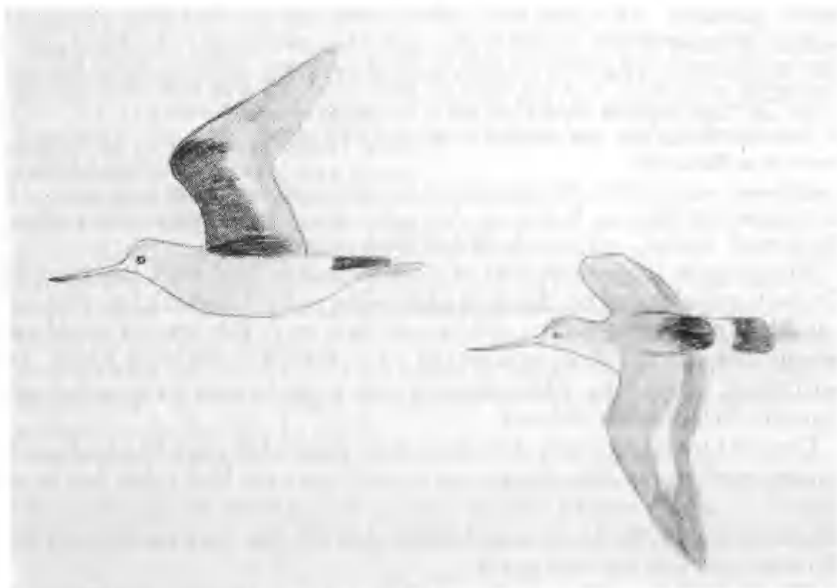


Fig. 2. Pencil sketches of Hudsonian Godwit *Limosa haemastica*, Humberside, September 1981 (S. C. Madge)

problems, and I was now in a position to claim that this bird was Hudsonian Godwit.

On 1st and 2nd October, I spent several hours observing the bird and obtained a more detailed field description, Keith Atkin being present with me on 2nd October.

**SIZE** Intermediate between Bar-tailed and Black-tailed Godwit. When standing next to Black-tailed Godwit, noticeably smaller, and on one occasion that Bar-tailed Godwit also present (though not alongside) it was slightly bigger than that species, so perhaps nearer to Bar-tailed Godwit in size.

**SHAPE** Similar in shape to Bar-tailed Godwit, with same shorter leg length, body size, and length of bill, though slimmer-looking than that species (perhaps due to the wings projecting beyond tail).

**SHAPE IN FLIGHT** Intermediate between Black- and Bar-tailed Godwit, though more similar to Black-tail, with blunter wing tip, but legs projecting beyond tail as on Black-tail, though not so pronounced.

**UPPERPARTS** Mostly dark grey, darker than on adult Black-tailed Godwit in summer plumage. Some traces of summer plumage on sides of back, feathers with black centres.

**UNDERPARTS** Throat buffish, giving way to pale off-white upper breast. Lower breast and belly deep chestnut-red, very dark. This

extended between legs to vent, but gave way to off-white undertail-coverts, with a few faint dark cross bars on undertail-coverts. Sides of flanks off-white, with dark barring running down to be exposed below folded wing.

**HEAD** Generally grey-buffish, darker on crown, but similar to Black-tailed Godwit, with pale supercilium, more prominent just in front of eye and fading out behind eye. Throat buffish, only slightly paler than rest of head.

**BILL** Thinner than Black-tailed Godwit and not quite so long, slightly uptilted from base and coming to finer point than Black-tail. Also thinner than Bar-tailed Godwit, but similar uptilting to that species. Dark along most of length, but pale orangey colour near base.

**LEGS** Black, not so long as Black-tailed Godwit's, similar in length to Bar-tail's, perhaps slightly longer.

**UPPER FLIGHT PATTERN** Very similar to Black-tailed Godwit, with pale wing-bar,

black primaries, black-and-white tail pattern. Wing-bar thinner and less marked than on Black-tail. Tail pattern not quite so striking as on Black-tail, with less white on upper tail. Legs projected beyond tail, more so than on Bar-tail, but did not project as much as on Black-tail.

**UNDERWING PATTERN** Probably most important distinction between Hudsonian and Black-tailed Godwit, with much darker

underwing pattern than Black-tail. Central pale wing-bar noticeable, but rest of underwing sooty-grey, darker on under forewing than hind wing, with sooty black axillaries merging into under forewing.

**VOICE** Largely silent, but on one occasion uttered a soft 'chow chow' in flight, similar to Bar-tail's call, but less strident, and much softer, with no similarities to various calls of Black-tailed Godwit.

The general impression was of a much darker bird than Black-tailed Godwit, accentuated by the dark underwing pattern and the less striking wing-bar and tail patterns. Obviously, however, this species could be overlooked at a distance, as it was to start off with at Blacktoft Sands. In retrospect, I should have been sharper with it, but at least it was sorted out carefully before being claimed.

On 3rd October, hordes of birdwatchers descended upon Blacktoft, and consequently some disturbance was caused when the bird again flew in at high tide, which caused all the birds to fly up from the lagoons. After alighting briefly, the Hudsonian Godwit took off, flew back out towards the Humber and was not seen again.

The bird was considered to be an adult male (or perhaps a first-summer male) on plumage and size: the tone of the summer plumage on the underparts was a very dark chestnut-red, whereas the female lacks this

**225.** Hudsonian Godwit *Limosa haemastica*, New York, USA, July 1981 (*Frank Schleicher*)



richness of colour on the underparts (Bent 1927, *Life Histories of North American Birds*, page 297; and Williamson & Smith, 1964, 'The Distribution and Breeding Status of the Hudsonian Godwit in Alaska', in *Condor* 66: 48). Size is very variable in all species of godwit, but the small size of the bird at Blacktoft compared with Black-tailed Godwit was also indicative of its being a male.

During its frequent visits to the lagoons at Blacktoft, it spent time feeding only for short periods, as it mostly slept. It fed in a similar manner to Black-tailed Godwit, probing deep into mud in shallow water, and caught and swallowed prey at rates of 40-50 prey items per minute, again similar to Black-tailed Godwit. It was only loosely associating with the Black-tailed Godwits, sleeping adjacent to them, but often feeding alone. Whenever it flew off with the Black-tails, they would be more bunched in flight, and the Hudsonian Godwit 'tagged along' a little way behind. It occasionally arrived on the lagoons by itself.

**226.** Hudsonian Godwit *Limosa haemastica*, New York, USA, July 1981 (Frank Schleicher)





**227.** Hudsonian Godwit *Limosa haemastica*, New York, USA, August 1976 (Frank Schleicher)

Normally, Black-tailed Godwits occur in this area in small numbers on spring and autumn passage, the autumn passage lasting until late October, and whilst the Hudsonian Godwit was present there was a passage through of Black-tailed Godwits, with just one remaining in early October. It seems likely that the Hudsonian Godwit moved on in company with Black-tailed Godwits.

Among the hundreds of observers who saw this bird were Graham P. Catley, S. C. Madge and B. G. Pepper, each of whom provided details for the Rarities Committee.

This individual was also seen by Graham P. Catley at nearby Alkborough Flats on 15th September. It—or perhaps another—occurred in Devon seven weeks later, from 22nd November to at least 14th January 1982 (see pages 492-494) and what is presumed to have been the same bird recurred at Blacktoft Sands two years later, during 26th April to 6th May 1983 (*Brit. Birds* 78: 550). These three records (perhaps relating to one individual) are to date the only ones for the Western Palearctic of this North



**228.** First-summer Hudsonian Godwit *Limosa haemastica*, Peru, May 1981 (*E. J. Mackrill*)

American species which breeds in Canada and Alaska, USA, and winters in southeastern South America.

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