

Little Curlew (*Numenius minutus*), a New Species of Bird for Thailand

While studying migrant birds along the foreshore of the Gulf of Thailand, at Ban Chai Thale Rangchan, Samut Sakhon Province 13.27 N; 100.04 E) on 25 September 1988, I found a Little Curlew (*Numenius minutus*). This was a new species of bird for Thailand.

Earlier that morning, at first light, my colleague Uthai Treesucon and I had erected mistnets in *Avicennia* scrub along the foreshore, in order to catch and ring migrant landbirds. Heavy drizzle forced us to furl the nets almost immediately, and we therefore turned our attention to counting waders and terns on the exposed intertidal mudflats.

At ca. 0730 h, I was scanning through the waders, with a Kowa telescope on 20x magnification, counting them and dictating totals to UT who was writing them down, when my attention was caught by an unusually small Whimbrel-like bird amid a loose flock of feeding Curlew Sandpipers (*Calidris ferruginea*). I almost immediately suspected that this might be a Little Curlew and after reassuring myself as to its features, made way for UT so he too could get a look at it through the telescope, meanwhile continuing to study it through 10 x 40 binoculars. The bird remained on the mudflats for about 20 minutes after discovery, during which time we were able to study it thoroughly, exchanging the 20x eyepiece of the telescope for 40x. For most of this period, the bird stood fairly still on one leg, giving us side-on and breast-on views. It also probed in the mud a few times (still while standing on one leg), and preened briefly. The range of observation was an estimated 300 m. After ca. 20 minutes, without any prior indication or warning, the bird suddenly took off and flew westwards along the coast, calling three times. It was not seen subsequently.

Description: Characteristic curlew-like shape, with a longish, curved bill which appeared more or less straight for the basal 2/3 of its length with a pronounced kink downwards towards the tip. The bill appeared noticeably finer than in a Whimbrel (*N. phaeopus*). Size much smaller than Whimbrel, estimated to be approximately that of a Pacific Golden Plover (*Pluvialis fulva*) and certainly smaller than a Grey Plover (*P. squatarola*) which passed nearby during the period of observation. The tips of the folded wings appeared roughly equal in length to the tail-tip.

Overall appearance rich golden-buff-brown, without any obvious whitish areas of plumage. Upperparts golden-brown. (These were not studied in detail, but the feather-patterning appeared uniformly fresh throughout, suggesting that the bird was probably a juvenile.)

Neck, breast and throat uniformly deep buff. Crown with distinctive broad, black lateral coronal bands which were broader than a pale, whitish-buff mesial crown stripe. The black lateral bands met on the forecrown so that the pale mesial stripe appeared to extend only as far as the peak of the crown, or perhaps a little further forward of this. Narrow black eyeline extended behind eye. Broad, whitish-buff supercilium appeared much broader than in Whimbrel, highlighting the eye and dark coronal bands. When preening and when seen in flight, showed a uniformly dark brownish-buff lower back, rump and tail. Underwing (seen when bird took off) was uniformly buffy-brown.

The call was a distinctive three or four note, slightly upward-inflected *di-di-di*, with a ringing Curlew or Whimbrel-like quality.

The only similarly-marked, smallish curlew lacking white on the rump would be a Whimbrel of either the east Siberian race, *N. p. variegatus*, or the North American race, *N. p. hubsonicus*, both of which are easily distinguished by their much larger size, duller brown (less buffy) plumage and diagnostic call. The (nearly extinct) Eskimo Curlew *N. borealis* of North America has a rich cinnamon underwing, while at rest the wings protrude well beyond the tail-tip (HAYMAN *et al.*, 1986).

The Little Curlew breeds in central and north-east Siberia (CRAMP & SIMMONS 1983) and winters in southern New Guinea and northern Australia, chiefly preferring inland grassland, bare cultivated fields and freshwater margins, though occurring rarely on coasts. It has been recorded on passage in Japan, Philippines and eastern Indonesia (HAYMAN *et al.*, 1986). It is also a scarce and almost annual spring and autumn passage migrant in Hong Kong, most records falling between 17 April and 2 June, and 29 September to 25 October (CHALMERS, 1986). This record therefore falls unusually early during the span of autumn passage dates. The bird may have been forced down or displaced westwards by bad weather over the South China Sea.

A previous sighting of Little Curlew, from Ko Libong, Trang Province on 6 December 1984, was reported to the author (R. Bijlsma, *in litt.*; details held on file at Center for Conservation Biology, Mahidol University, Bangkok). At the time, however, the record was referred to independent referees who advised that the details supplied were insufficient to justify adding the species to the Thai list. Perhaps that record should now be re-evaluated.

REFERENCES

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- HAYMAN, P., J. MARCHANT and A.J. PRATER. 1986. *Shorebirds; an Identification Guide to the Waders of the World*. Croom Helm, London & Sydney.

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