A RED LITTLE CURLEW (*Numenius minutus*) OR SOMETHING ELSE ?

Roger K. Hicks and Ian Burrows

The first Little Curlews of the 1989 southwards passage were seen on 6 October on the UPNG playing fields and were seen almost daily, by several observers, until 28 October. They favoured a rugby pitch that was watered regularly. The flock size varied from a minimum of two to a maximum of 18 on 20 October. The "red" Little Curlew was first noted on 16 October amongst a flock of six normally-plumaged Little Curlew and was always seen in their company. From 16 October - 20 October it was observed daily and was last seen on 25 October. The "red" bird was obviously a *Numenius*, having a black bill, slightly decurved near the tip, which was similar in size and shape to other Little Curlew. Its legs were blue-grey. It had a dark crown with a pale central crown stripe and an obvious, broad, buff supercilium, broadest behind the eye. The "face", neck, breast and belly were cinnamon with no strong streaking. This colour continued on to the flanks, which also appeared unmarked, and onto the underwing coverts (noted in flight). The feathers of the mantle and upper wing coverts also had a cinnamon background colour, giving the bird an overall reddish appearance.

The "red" bird was very similar to the Little Curlew with which it associated, but differed in the following ways: The most obvious distinguishing feature was its colour, rich cinnamon, that was strongest on the breast, flanks and underwing coverts, but which suffused the whole plumage. This bird could be picked out with the naked eye across the width of a rugby pitch (c.50m). It stood half-a-head taller than its contemporaries although its legs seemed the same length as other Little Curlew. Its wings appeared to extend beyond its tail when standing and when in flight appeared longer than other Little Curlew. The buff supercilium appeared more pronounced, possibly because the surrounding plumage was darker.

There are only two small Curlews. The Little Curlew breeds in Siberia and winters in Australia (Hayman et al 1986). It occurs annually in the Port Moresby area, usually in small numbers with most records occuring in October and November (Hicks 1990). The Eskimo Curlew *N. borealis* is its North American equivalent, which is on the verge of extinction. There have been few confirmed sightings recently and no records for Australasia (Hayman et al 1986). Naturally, none of the observers of the "red" bird have had any experience of Eskimo Curlew, but all are familiar with Little Curlew. Several features of the "red" bird fit Eskimo Curlew, i.e. its colour, especially the cinnamon underwing coverts, its apparent tallness and long wings. However, comparison with field guides (Hayman et al 1986, National Geographic, 1983) and with photographs of Eskimo Curlew at Galveston, Texas indicate a lack of corroborating plumage features (except colour) i.e. lack of heavy barring on breast and flanks, and also different bill proportions.

We think the "red" Little Curlew was just that, an erythrystic bird, but for a while it had our hearts pounding. And it certainly was an attractive bird.

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THE NEST OF THE MOTTLED WHISTLER (Rhagolagus leucostigma)

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The nest of the Mottled Whister has not been previously described (Coates 1990).On 8 February 1993 I discovered an active nest of the Mottled Whistler at a site about 200m from a helipad, situated 1/2 kilometre distant and downslope from BP's Hides-2 gas wellhead on the Hides anticline in the Karius range, Southern Highlands Province, Papua New Guinea. The helipad was situated at geographical co-ordinates 05° 55' 27.00 " S latitude, 142° 43' 34.60 " E longitude (ascertained by Trimble Transpak GPS). The nest itself was at an altitude of 2270m ASL (measured by Thommen altimeter) in tall, very wet, lower montane rainforest in rugged limestone karst country, with many sinkholes and grikes.

The nest was situated about four metres up in a slender tree, not far from a much larger tree. Due to its position in such a slender tree it would have been impossible to closely examine the nest without destroying either the nest and/or any eggs/young contained therein, so I contented myself with a visual examination only. The nest was a cup, the exterior of which consisted of mossy tendrils with some relatively short wisps of moss hanging down, but no tail as such. The exterior was approximately 10 or 11 cm deep and 13 or 14 cm in diameter (both estimated by comparison with nearby leaves, similar leaves being measurable). The nest was built on the outer part of a relatively small tree and was supported by a total of three branchlets - one on either side and one underneath - the nest material having been woven around them. Some light was just visible through the bottom of the next but I could not discern whether any eggs or young were present.

Both the male and the female Mottled Whistler were seen. The sighting of the female clinched the identification, as the form here seemed relatively drab with distinguishable but poorly defined mottling. However, the orange cheek patches of the female (although these were also subdued by comparison with the photograph in Coates (1990)) enabled positive identification. In connection with the birds' drab appearance, however, it must be added that light conditions were quite poor and I was using only 9x 20 binoculars. No nest material was brought by either bird but at one stage the female entered the nest and sat, not moving until my movement alarmed her. Both birds seemed nervous but persisted in staying either in the nest tree or its vicinity, leading me to believe that the female may well have been due to lay shortly. Both birds occasionally regurgitated small round fruit pits.

The area in which the nest was found is frequently rainy and cloudy and is covered by extremely wet moss forest. A small, unobtrusive track had been cut the day before as access to the helipad area, but had the nest not been there it is doubtful whether I would have noticed the Mottled Whistlers. I was able to briefly visit the nest site again on 13 February and gained the impression that the nest might have been more substantial, but I did not see the birds and could spend no time there.

Although obviously incomplete this observation is submitted in view of the otherwise complete lack of knowledge of the Mottled Whistler, and the general lack of knowledge of the nesting habits of the higher altitude whistlers in PNG.

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