

# First record of Long-billed Curlew *Numenius americanus* in Peru and other observations of Nearctic waders at the Virilla estuary

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Hay poca información sobre las rutas de migración y el uso de los sitios de la costa peruana por chorlos nearcticos. En el fin de agosto 2004 yo reconocí el estuario de Virilla en el dpto. Piura en el noroeste de Peru para identificar los sitios de descanso para los *Limosa haemastica* en su ruta de migración al sur y aprender más sobre la migración de chorlos nearcticos en Peru. En Virilla yo observé más de 2.000 individuales de 23 especies de chorlos nearcticos y el primer registro de *Numenius americanus* de Peru, la concentración más grande de *Limosa fedoa* en Peru, y una concentración excepcional de *Limosa haemastica*. La combinación de esas observaciones y los resultados de un estudio anterior en el invierno boreal sugiere la posibilidad que Virilla sea muy importante para chorlos nearcticos en Peru. Las observaciones, también, demuestran la necesidad hacer más estudios en la costa peruana durante el año entero, no solamente durante el punto máximo de la migración de chorlos entre septiembre y noviembre.

Shorebirds are poorly known in Peru away from established study sites such as Paracas reserve, dpto. Ica, and those close to metropolitan areas frequented by visiting birdwatchers and tour groups (T. Schulenberg pers. comm.). One effect of such spartan coverage is continued uncertainty as the precise migration routes and arrival times in South America of several migrant Nearctic waders<sup>4,9,16,19</sup>. It is possible that previously unnoted, yet important, stopover sites for such migrants exist away from frequently visited coastal areas.

During the latter half of August 2004, I undertook a series of brief surveys of coastal sites in Peru. The main objective was to identify possible stopover sites for Hudsonian Godwits *Limosa haemastica* in their migration between the Nearctic and non-breeding areas in southern Chile and Argentina. A secondary goal was to complement existing knowledge of Nearctic waders in Peru. Here I outline observations from a short visit to the Virilla estuary, dpto. Piura.

## Study site

The Virilla (or Parachique) estuary is in north-west Peru. Most of the estuary and its mouth lie immediately south of Parachique, a small village 20 km south of Sechura and 75 km south-west of Piura. The estuary comprises two main channels: a smaller one to the north that connects with a larger channel heading east c.1 km from the mouth of the estuary at the Pacific Ocean. The village of Parachique is immediately north-west of the confluence. Tidal flats extend 200 m either side of the smaller channel (east and west) and for 300 m adjoining the larger channel (north and south), as well as for c.4.5 km upriver of that channel's mouth. Above the expanse of tidal flats, the estuary is

bordered for a few hundred metres by sand and gravel before low bluffs rise c.30 m. Very little vegetation grows here, although cows, goats and pigs owned by Parachique residents graze the area. Finally, there is a lagoon extending along the coast north of the river mouth and Parachique for a few kilometres. This lagoon shows relatively little tidal fluctuation, with only c.1 m of mud exposed at high tide, and is largely surrounded by low sand dunes.

## Observations

I spent 26–28 August 2004 surveying the Virilla estuary complex for shorebirds: 26 August was spent surveying the shores of the lagoon, which extend several kilometers north of Parachique, and 27–28 August at the tidal flats of the estuary's channels south-east of the village.

The numbers and diversity of shorebirds (Table 1) using the lagoon were relatively low compared with those on the tidal flats: only c.300 individuals of 12 species were counted. Surveys of the main channels on 27–28 August produced 23 species and c.2,000 individuals (Table 1). Numbers of individuals and species composition changed over the two days, with more individuals of most species and three additional species present on 28th.

Of most interest were my observations of a single Long-billed Curlew *Numenius americanus* on 28 August; 55 Marbled Godwits *Limosa fedoa* on 27–28 August; and seven and ten Hudsonian Godwits on 27 and 28 August, respectively. This is the first record of Long-billed Curlew in Peru and the third in South America<sup>2,3,8</sup>. There have been relatively few records of Marbled Godwit in Peru and this is by far the largest concentration ever noted in the country. Hudsonian Godwit is a rare

**Table 1.** Shorebird species and approximate numbers observed at the Virilla estuary, Peru, 26–28 August 2004.

Species	Date		
	26 August	27 August	28 August
Black-necked Stilt <i>Himantopus mexicanus</i>	20	150	100
American Oystercatcher <i>Haematopus palliatus</i>	15	40	40
Black-bellied Plover <i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>		20	100
Semipalmated Plover <i>Charadrius semipalmatus</i>	1	20	60
Snowy Plover <i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>	30	100	100
Wilson's Plover <i>Charadrius wilsonia</i>		3	15
Greater Yellowlegs <i>Tringa melanoleuca</i>		15	20
Lesser Yellowlegs <i>Tringa flavipes</i>	2		1
Willet <i>Catoptrophorus semipalmatus</i>		250	250
Spotted Sandpiper <i>Actitis macularius</i>	20	1	3
Whimbrel <i>Numenius phaeopus</i>	15	250	350
Long-billed Curlew <i>Numenius americanus</i>			1
Hudsonian Godwit <i>Limosa haemastica</i>		7	10
Marbled Godwit <i>Limosa fedoa</i>		55	55
Ruddy Turnstone <i>Arenaria interpres</i>		15	50
Red Knot <i>Calidris canutus</i>			1
Sanderling <i>Calidris alba</i>	100	100	100
Baird's Sandpiper <i>Calidris bairdii</i>	20	6	2
Western Sandpiper <i>Calidris mauri</i>	15	300	350
Semipalmated Sandpiper <i>Calidris pusilla</i>	1	40	40
Least Sandpiper <i>Calidris minutilla</i>		75	75
Short-billed Dowitcher <i>Limnodromus griseus</i>		50	100
Wilson's Phalarope <i>Phalaropus tricolor</i>	50	75	75
Totals	289	1612	1898

**Table 2.** Waterbird species observed at the Virilla estuary, Peru, 26–28 August 2004.

Species	Date		
	26 August	27 August	28 August
Great Grebe <i>Podiceps major</i>	X		
Peruvian Pelican <i>Pelecanus thagus</i>	X	X	X
Blue-footed Booby <i>Sula nebouxii</i>	X	X	
Peruvian Booby <i>Sula variegata</i>	X	X	X
Neotropic Cormorant <i>Phalacrocorax brasilianus</i>	X	X	X
Magnificent Frigatebird <i>Fregata magnificens</i>	X		
Great Egret <i>Ardea alba</i>		X	X
Snowy Egret <i>Egretta thula</i>		X	X
Black-crowned Night-heron <i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>		X	
Chilean Flamingo <i>Phoenicopterus chilensis</i>		X	X
White-cheeked Pintail <i>Anas bahamensis</i>	X	X	
Kelp Gull <i>Larus dominicanus</i>	X	X	X
Grey-headed Gull <i>Larus cirrocephalus</i>	X	X	X
Gull-billed Tern <i>Sterna nilotica</i>		X	X
South American Tern <i>Sterna hirundinacea</i>		X	X
Peruvian Tern <i>Sterna lorata</i>		X	X
Black Skimmer <i>Rynchops niger</i>		X	X

but regular migrant and boreal winter resident in Peru, but my observations involve the second-highest count in the country<sup>10</sup> (T. Schulenberg unpubl. data).

#### Long-billed Curlew *Numenius americanus*

One observed on 28 August feeding within a small group of Whimbrel *N. phaeopus* in a drier grassy area c.30 m above the tidal mudflats. Observed from c.150 m, the curlew was noticeably larger (possibly 4–5 cm taller) than the adjacent Whimbrels and had a long, decurved bill approximately twice as long as that of Whimbrel. The breast, belly, wing-coverts and flight-feathers were cinnamon/chestnut, whilst the head and mantle were darker brown, and the legs pale or flesh-coloured. The crown was unmarked and there was a slight dark eyestripe extending beyond the eye. In flight it exhibited no rump patch or obvious wing markings, only a slightly darker brownish tail. The bill was reddish orange basally, grading to black about halfway towards the tip. I was unable to approach sufficiently close to detect any sign of moult, but observed the bird for c.30 minutes before the tide rose and I left the area. I made notes in the field prior to consulting a field guide to confirm my identification, but it was not possible to document the record photographically. It is noteworthy that the bird was not recorded on 27 August during a survey of the same area.

In addition to the direct comparison with nearby Whimbrels, Bristle-thighed Curlew *N. tahitiensis*, Far Eastern Curlew *N. madagascariensis*, and Eurasian Curlew *N. arquata* can all be confidently eliminated<sup>7</sup>. Bristle-thighed Curlew is smaller and has a bright chestnut rump. Eurasian Curlew has a characteristic white rump visible in flight. Far Eastern Curlew shows strong brown barring on a white underwing and brown flight-feathers, unlike the bird I observed. I possess extensive prior experience with Long-billed and Bristle-thighed Curlews, and Whimbrel.

#### Marbled Godwit *Limosa fedoa* and Hudsonian Godwit *L. haemastica*

On 27 August I observed a group of 55 Marbled Godwits and seven Hudsonian Godwits feeding and roosting along the river channel. During the rising tide, a group of five *fedoa* and two *haemastica* probed the mud along the edge of the channel. As the tide rose, the entire group moved to roost among the Willets *Catoptrophorus semipalmatus* and Short-billed Dowitchers *Limnodromus griseus* on a sand bar 2 km from the river mouth, which I approached to within 20 m. The Marbled Godwits were easily distinguished from the Hudsonian Godwits by their larger size, longer bill, pale brown

plumage and lack of a white rump patch, black underwing-coverts and axillaries, or white upper secondaries and primaries in flight. All seven Hudsonian Godwits were in basic plumage: grey on the back, head and upper breast, white on the underparts, and had a white supercilium. The group was seen again next day. The number of Marbled Godwits had not changed, but three additional Hudsonian Godwits were present.

### Discussion

Virilla estuary, whilst not especially remote, is seldom visited (T. Schulenberg pers. comm.). Based on my observations and aerial surveys during the boreal winter of 1986<sup>14</sup>, Virilla may be of great importance to shorebirds and other coastal birds in northern Peru. In addition to the 23 shorebird species recorded during my visit, a host of other waterbirds was present, including >500 Chilean Flamingos *Phoenicopterus chilensis* and >100 Black Skimmers *Rynchops niger* (Table 2), interestingly well before the presumed peak of migrants arriving from the Northern Hemisphere<sup>10,11,18,20</sup>.

Numbers of many species increased over the two days spent surveying the area and three species—Lesser Yellowlegs *Tringa flavipes*, Long-billed Curlew *Numenius americanus*, and Red Knot *Calidris canutus* were seen only on the second day. Were these new arrivals from the north? And what percentage of the shorebirds present were boreal migrants, or were some either subadults or other non-breeders that spent the boreal summer in Peru? It is possible that the Hudsonian Godwits were subadults that had migrated from central Chile or Tierra del Fuego to spend the boreal summer at Virilla. There are a few other records for Peru of overwintering godwits (T. Schulenberg unpubl.) and such behaviour has also been noted in northern Argentina and southern Brazil, where congregations of subadults occur at this season<sup>1,4</sup>. Could this be the case for all 2,000 birds?

It is probable that the Long-billed Curlew was an extralimital vagrant. The species is a vagrant south of Mexico<sup>3,21</sup> and has only been found twice previously in South America, with both records in Venezuela<sup>8</sup>, in October 1982 and February 1984. The godwits, however, are harder to place. Ridgely & Greenfield<sup>17</sup> listed just two records of Marbled Godwit in Ecuador. Of the 16 other sightings in Peru, all but three were at sites well south of Virilla (T. Schulenberg unpubl.). However, several factors suggest that Marbled Godwits may use Virilla, and possibly the north coast of Peru in general, more regularly than expected by the number of previous sightings: the number of birds; their apparent health; and that the species is regular, if not common, in Panama (G. Angehr pers. comm.), and occasional in western Venezuela<sup>8</sup>. If the species is

regular, even in small numbers, at Virilla or elsewhere in northern Peru, this would mark a significant expansion of the non-breeding range south along the Pacific coast<sup>6,13,17</sup>. All such questions can only be answered by more frequent coverage of Virilla and elsewhere, not only during September–November, but also from early August. If breeding conditions are poor in the Arctic or an individual is unable to breed, failed breeders or non-breeders may return south almost immediately after arriving at higher latitudes in early June<sup>5</sup>. Adults of several species, including Semipalmated Sandpiper *Calidris pusilla*, are observed at staging areas in southern Canada and the northern USA from late June/early July<sup>5,19</sup>, and migrants reach stopover and wintering sites in Panama during the first ten days of August (pers. obs.). Some Semipalmated Sandpipers even reach non-breeding sites in Venezuela by late July<sup>8</sup> and Spaans<sup>20</sup> noted the first large waves of migrants arriving in Suriname by mid August. Boreal migrants almost certainly arrive in Peru very soon thereafter.

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